# ENHANCED FORUM THEATRE: WHERE BOAL'S THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED MEETS PROCESS DRAMA IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper examines an innovative adaptation of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed that was developed over nine years of action research into the use of drama to address conflict and bullying management in a large number of schools in two different states of Australia. The paper documents the development of Enhanced Forum Theatre and analyses its functioning and its impact in the research projects.
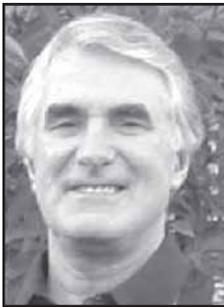
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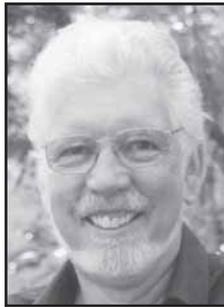
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By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) had become a major international theatre form. Significantly, this occurred not in traditional performance work in mainstream theatre but in Theatre for Development in Africa and Asia and in Theatre in Education and classroom drama in a number of countries including England, Norway, Canada and Australia.

The most commonly used form of Boalian theatre in all these manifestations is Forum Theatre. Because it is interactive, allowing the audience to intervene and take on roles in the play, Forum Theatre has proved particularly useful for addressing a range of issues in the developing world. Theatre for Development practitioners, particularly in Africa, use Forum Theatre to empower rural villagers and the urban poor to understand and address the problems which confront them, including poverty, lack of essential services such as water, the scourge of AIDS and social and political injustice in all its forms. Idoko (2001:28) acknowledges that the forms of Theatre for Development that have become a dominant theatre genre throughout Africa are all deeply indebted to Boal's work.

In Theatre in Education (TIE), Forum Theatre is widely used to encourage young people to recognise and attempt to address the social and political issues which confront them. In the drama classroom, Forum Theatre is taught both as an important theatrical form and as an ideal dramatic vehicle for exploring issues. In Australia in particular, the study of Boal's work is specified in the drama curriculum at levels five or six in most states. At senior secondary level, Theatre of the Oppressed is widely studied in World Theatre and is often used as the performance style in the student projects which are found in a range of senior curriculum documents across the country.

Certain limitations inherent in Boal's model have led to Theatre for Development practitioners, TIE companies and classroom drama teachers to increasingly make major adaptations to the form to improve its theatrical quality and its impact. In Africa for example, traditional storytelling and dance are frequently woven into Theatre for Development performances to increase the aesthetic impact of the work and to integrate the traditional culture of the audience into the performance. Furthermore, instead of the one-scene performance structure of Boal's theatre, Theatre for Development often uses a number of scenes and a range of performances over time to fully explore the issue being considered. Workers in community settings, such as Celia Moon working with Indigenous communities in far North Queensland, have also modified Forum Theatre to suit their particular needs as, in fact, has Boal himself in his more recent work (1995: Chapter 5) dealing with psychological rather than physical oppression.

In the drama classroom, teachers frequently adapt Forum Theatre and integrate other Boalian techniques such as Image Theatre into Forum performances to increase the value and impact of the work. In middle school, Forum Theatre techniques are often subsumed into studies of Dramatic Storytelling and Collage Theatre. Teachers of senior drama classes sometimes find the aesthetic limitations of Forum Theatre a problem in exploring its use in a World Theatre unit and combine the study of Boal with an exploration of Brecht's work in units entitled 'Political or Ideological Theatre'.

One particular adaptation of Boal's work that has proved especially valuable in both addressing issues in the classroom and in developing a sophisticated understanding of the form is Enhanced Forum Theatre. It has been developed by the authors as part of an

ongoing research project into conflict and bullying management in hundreds of schools in NSW and Queensland. Funded by Australian Research Council Linkage Grants, the research has continued over nine years and through three phases. During this time the use of Forum Theatre has been continuously modified and enhanced and used in conjunction with peer teaching to enable students at every level from Year One to Year Twelve to understand and manage their own conflict and bullying issues. The outcomes of the research in both states have consistently demonstrated that Enhanced Forum Theatre is highly effective as a vehicle for empowering students to deal with conflict and bullying. (O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett, 2005)

The Development of Enhanced Forum Theatre

The first phase of the research, which led to the development of Enhanced Forum Theatre, was the DRACON project from 1997 to 1999. This was an international research effort involving Sweden, Malaysia and Australia, focusing on the use of classroom drama to address cultural conflict in schools (Lofgren and Malm, 2005). Students were taught basic concepts about the nature of conflict and conflict management and then used drama to explore the possibilities.

It was during this phase that the use of peer teaching was introduced and, in combination with Enhanced Forum Theatre, this has proved particularly successful in empowering the students. Once a class has learned about conflict and bullying from their teacher and used drama to explore ways of understanding and dealing with these issues, they in turn act as peer teachers for classes of younger students, usually two years their junior. These students in turn teach younger classes again, so that the program can spread from a Year Eleven class at a high school all the way down to Year One at the local primary school. Alternatively, primary schools are increasingly introducing the program into their own schools and running the peer teaching all the way through the school over a period of two to three years. The outcome has been that students really learn about the concepts of conflict and bullying when they teach it to others. They also become mentors for the younger children they teach and this greatly reduces the possibility of bullying.

It was also during this phase that the Australian researchers began to develop Enhanced Forum Theatre. We found that process drama was extremely effective in exploring issues of conflict and bullying, particularly when initiated and controlled by the teacher, but it was too complex and problematic for the students to use autonomously or to teach to others. Traditional Forum Theatre on the other hand, with its simple one-scene structure and its focus on audience intervention, proved clear and manageable for students of all ages. However, having only one scene and allowing the audience to intervene only as the protagonist proved to have limited value addressing issues as complex and problematic as conflict and bullying.

As a result, the use of Forum Theatre was enhanced during the second phase of the project — **Cooling Conflicts** — in NSW between 1999 and 2001. A range of improvisational approaches and process drama techniques were integrated into the Forum Theatre performance work to make the exploration of conflict and bullying more sophisticated and more realistic (O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett, 2005). The result is a flexible and complex theatrical form which allows students to not only investigate different conflict and bullying scenarios but also develop performance skills that enabled them to address these issues authentically.

The current **Acting Against Bullying** phase (2003-2006) of the research in Queensland now makes full use of Enhanced Forum Theatre and the research outcomes of this phase clearly indicate that the form is particularly useful as a means of exploring issues and for developing performance skills. It has also become increasingly apparent that Enhanced Forum Theatre can extend the students' understanding of drama itself.

The Nature and Impact of the Enhancements

During the course of the action research aimed at constructing an effective model for using drama to address conflict and bullying in schools, we found the need to make at least four major adaptations to Forum Theatre for educational and aesthetic reasons. In each case, the impact of the enhancement was recorded and, once evaluated as effective, was incorporated into the next action research cycle.

Conflict and bullying are complex behaviours that escalate through a number of identifiable stages (Glasl, 1999), and often need a complex process of identifying appropriate ways of dealing with the conflict (e.g., Fisher, 1981; Winslade and Monk, 2000). The 'classic' Forum Theatre single-scene cannot incorporate all the relevant contextual factors nor depict the escalation process of a conflict. For the first enhancement we therefore re-structured our initial performance into three scenes, depicting in turn one of the three stages of the conflict's escalation. The second enhancement involves audience members being invited and encouraged to intervene during any one of these phases as any one of the characters in the play. The possibility of a fourth scene was also incorporated into the structure to allow both the actors and audience to further explore ways of dealing with a conflict or bullying situation which had proved impossible to manage within in the three-scene structure.

As well as these alterations to the structure of Forum Theatre, we also inserted a number of participatory techniques from process drama into the theatrical performance — permitting the audience to stop the action and find out what the character was actually thinking at any point and even inviting the audience to interview characters placed in a 'hot seat'. This fleshes out for the audience their contextual understanding so that their interventions can be better informed and more aware of pitfalls. Boal too has moved to this kind of added improvisation in some of his allied therapeutic theatre work — including the idea of putting the protagonist and the antagonist in the hot seat (1995:123).

Enhancement One — three scenes, not one

Enhanced Forum Theatre involves the creation of a realistic play in three scenes, rather than the single-scene structure of Boal's version. The action of the play occurs over a period of time and the conflict or bullying escalates during this time, as it does in reality. Throughout the action research, three identifiable stages of escalation in conflict and bullying (Moore, 1996) have been taught to the students both conceptually and through the drama work. These stages are defined as latent, emerging and manifest and, in the planning and structuring of their Enhanced Forum Theatre performances, students are encouraged to develop each scene to represent a specific stage in the escalation of the conflict they are exploring. They are also encouraged to make sure that days or weeks elapse between each scene so that there is a genuine development of the plot, the characters and the issue being explored.

This also means that the audience can intervene early in scene one or scene two in a conflict or bullying situation before it has become critical. Boal's traditional structure of a single scene is appropriate for his purposes in focusing very tightly on an instance of oppression and on what means are directly at hand to deal with the oppression. However, it means that even the most complex forms of oppression are portrayed only very briefly, without any exploration of the history or context of the issue, and audience members are encouraged to intervene in-role and 'solve' the oppression immediately through a dramatic action. At the same time, the intervention has to be apparently realistic and true to the situation — it cannot use 'Magic' to solve the problem.

In the initial phase of the research when conventional Forum Theatre was being used, students were reluctant to intervene in the single scene of the play, most often because they did not feel they understood enough about the causes and nature of the issue and the interventions that did occur were frequently ill-conceived and inappropriate. With the introduction of the three-scene enhancement there was a significant increase in effective interventions, particularly during the latent and emerging scenes of the forum.

Students as young as Year Three have found no difficulty in remembering the terminology of latent, emerging and manifest, and in being able to describe the nature of each stage and discuss its representation in specific scenes. Questionnaires over the past two years have recorded a rate of over ninety percent in students' ability to remember and define the three stages of bullying and identify these stages in their own drama work. A clear outcome of the research has been that almost all students recognise the need to intervene in a conflict before it becomes manifest.

Enhancement Two — multiple interventions

In Boal's original model, the actors normally perform a single scene that dramatises a particular instance of oppression, with the protagonist as the oppressed person (Boal, 1992:20). The scene is then replayed, with audience members invited to intervene in the scene only in the role of the oppressed person, seeking to alleviate or counter the oppression. For Boal's purposes this is very appropriate:

> The oppressed person himself or herself is the artist that creates images through which to rehearse ways of liberation. (Boal, 1996:48)

For our purposes, we wanted to remove the stigma of blame from conflict where there is not necessarily oppression, just a clash of interests, rights or power. We also wanted to remove that value-stigma from bullying situations which are clearly oppressive, of course. We wanted to allow the participants to explore the situation coolly and discover that all parties — in conflict the protagonist and antagonist and in bullying all three parties (bully, bullied and bystander) have some agency and potentially some power to resolve or alleviate the situation. This meant widening the possibilities of intervention to permit the audience to take a role as any of the characters depicted in the dramatic scene and make interventions as often as they wished. This is particularly important when exploring conflict and bullying situations because very often it is the bystander or an outsider who can most effectively modify what is happening, and a range of interventions are needed to address the problem. It also allows the participants to use their interventions to explore the concept of mediation, a core concept in conflict and bullying management (Rosenberg, 1999), and to experiment with the use of mediation in practice within the drama.

The questionnaire and interview data has consistently revealed that students feel that they are able to empathise with both the bullied and the bully when they have the opportunity to experiment with these roles and to intervene in role as both parties. Furthermore, the majority of students involved in the **Acting Against Bullying** project over the past three years have identified the role of the bystander as crucial in a bullying situation, and students intervene more often as bystanders in Enhanced Forum performances than as bullies or bullied.

Enhancement Three — the fourth scene

Boal's classic model seeks to raise consciousness in his audience and, by highlighting an instance of oppression and giving a brief opportunity for them to directly counter it in the safety of fiction, to stimulate the audience:

> . . . to say 'OK, that's the way things are but not the way things should be, and now I'm going to create an image of how I want the world to be.' . . . This is empowering. We have changed the image in the fiction of a theatre but we are not fiction. We are in rehearsal for the real world, when the aesthetic space disappears and people go home. (Boal, 1996:49)

However, working with young people in conflict management, the needs are different. For one thing, basic conflict resolution and counselling practice and its handbooks (e.g., Glasl, 1999; Folger, Poole and Stuttman, 1997) caution that simplistic intervention in conflict, especially intervening in the heat of angry confrontations, can do more harm than good. It is basic police procedure, when called to a 'domestic' or a neighbourhood brawl, firstly to identify and separate the key protagonists and get them to cool down apart before trying to mediate in their quarrel**.** By inviting the audience to intervene in scenes of direct confrontation, far from helping them to manage conflict and mediation effectively, we might be actively giving them poor models of mediation practice to follow.

Accordingly, we have devised a quite new extension to the Forum Theatre — a 'scene four'. Firstly, we give the audience the opportunity to try out some direct interventions in any of the three scenes. We then invite them in groups to try and identify who has a stake in mediating or resolving the conflict, and is the most likely to be in a position to do so, and also to identify within the fictional context a better place and time than any of the three scenes depicted when this character might be able to take action with one or more of the antagonists to de-escalate or resolve the conflict.

In groups, the audience discuss and plan this fourth scene which takes place in another time and/or place and includes other characters whose involvement in the conflict or bullying might mean that it is handled better. They could be outside mediators brought in to address the problem or one of the characters who can intervene in the situation and is least emotionally involved but has authority, such as a teacher. The audience groups can then perform this fourth scene themselves, taking on the characters from the original play or they can brief the actors who performed the first three scenes and ask them to perform the fourth scene This invariably brings out new material for discussion and debate — the articulation of the new understandings gained through the theatre work that, for us as for Boal, is the most important outcome of whatever variant of Forum Theatre we are using:

> 'Oppression exists when a dialogue becomes a monologue . . . so whenever there is a dialogue that has become a monologue, we want to restore the dialogue' (1996:47).

Over the nine years of the research in more than one hundred schools, students have very seldom been able to 'solve' serious conflict and bullying situations within the three scenes. This is hardly surprising when bullying in particular is one of the most persistent and intractable behavioural problems faced in schools. (Rigby, 2002). In the majority of instances where the fourth scene has been incorporated, the situation has not been fully resolved either. However, in a significant number of cases recorded by the researchers, the actors and the audience have constructed authentic and realistic scenarios which offered effective and sometimes very sophisticated possible strategies for addressing the particular issue. In essence, the fourth scene allows the participants to demonstrate their developing confidence and competence in dealing with conflict and bullying, and this sense of empowerment has been the major outcome of the research at every year level and in every school.

Enhancement Four — process drama additions

Finally, Enhanced Forum Theatre also uses some of the specific process drama techniques in common use in drama classrooms (O'Neill, 1995) to make the performance and the situation more realistic, more authentic and more complex. In the early stages of the work, when the students are improvising bullying scenarios, they are encouraged to use a Role Circle, where each student can add a fictitious but authentic detail to the construction of the characters and the scenario. This also allows the students to distance the bullying from its source in the group if they are using someone's direct experience of bullying. Using a Role Circle means that the original story is fictionalised and the whole group takes on ownership. This protects the original storyteller and also allows the group creating the play to make it their own.

Many of the stories of conflict and bullying which have provided the contexts for Enhanced Forum Theatre performances over the past nine years have come from the students' own experiences. However, the use of Role Circle and other improvisational techniques which distance and fictionalise these stories have made them safe for the participants. Only one student out of thousands has ever indicated on a questionnaire that the use of his bullying story had negative repercussions for him in leading to him being teased by other students. The overwhelming majority of students whose stories have been used have felt that this benefited them, either by helping them to see the experience in perspective and/or making them feel more confident to deal with similar issues in future.

In the structure of Enhanced Forum Theatre performance itself other process drama techniques are also integrated. These include Thought Tracking, where any member of the audience can stop the action and ask any of the actors to speak aloud what is in the mind of their character at that moment — a kind of stream of consciousness for the character. At the end of a scene a Hot Seat is conducted, where a chair is placed in front of the audience who are invited to question one or more of the characters in the play. The characters take it in turns to sit in the seat and the audience cross-examines them to find out more about the motivations, attitudes and emotions that are responsible for their behaviour. Hot-seating can be a very effective technique for exploring conflict and bullying, and students will often ask perceptive and profound questions of the characters in the hot seat (Bolton, 1992). Students performing these roles are equally capable of thoughtful and sophisticated responses, including elaborate justifications of their behaviour

and sometimes the host or MC (Boal's 'Joker') who controls the Forum will have to demand that the absolute truth is spoken. One of the features of this form of Hot Seat is that it generates intense debate amongst the audience, often involving the actor as well, about the issue being explored.

Hot-seating has been identified by the students as the most effective and engaging drama technique used on the research. Sustained observation of Enhanced Forum Theatre performances consistently record significant improvement in the students' ability to understand the causes of the behaviour being enacted in the performance when hot-seating is used, and in the ability of the audience members who intervene to make valid and authentic changes to the behaviour of those involved in the conflict being represented.

Conclusion

Enhanced Forum Theatre works by making the structure of the forum play more complex and sophisticated and by weaving in the use of key process drama techniques. These enhancements allow students to explore serious issues such as conflict and bullying in depth and at the same time make the form itself more challenging and engaging theatrically. As a result, the research has shown that Enhanced Forum Theatre is extremely successful in empowering students to manage their own conflict and bullying issues. It has also become increasingly apparent that Enhanced Forum Theatre can provide a valuable and innovative way for students to learn a whole range of key content and skills in the drama classroom.

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