

# Democratizing the Classroom: Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as a Critical Pedagogical Tool

Chitra Seshadhri

## Introduction

This paper is thoroughly experimental in designing various activities to suit the students who hail from the underprivileged sections of the society as well as those students who internalize a sense of oppression whenever it comes to learning English. Democratization of the classroom leads to the participation of all the students to not only communicate in English, but also to start speaking a few words. Students who are first generation learners internalize a fear when a teacher talks continuously in English. They feel alienated, and the words uttered become mere incomprehensible sounds to them. In this scenario, the English teacher's role is to first take his/her class into confidence. *The Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal comes as a critical tool in breaking the ice in such classrooms.

English often afflicts the audience/students. And yet, they have to communicate in English, and this develops an ambivalence among them. In this scenario, the technique of the Brazilian theatre director-cum-social activist Augusto Boal is likely to have a therapeutic effect on the audience. Boal was raised in Rio de Janeiro, and was formally trained in Chemical Engineering. He attended Columbia University in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Although his interest in theatre began at a very young age, it was after he finished his degree at Columbia University that he was asked to return to Brazil to work in the Arena Theatre in Sao Paulo. His work at the Arena Theatre led him to experiment with new forms of theatre that would have an

extraordinary impact on traditional theatre practice. The present argument, and the activities proposed thereafter are structured on the concept of the spect-actor developed by Boal.

## The spect-actor

Prior to Boal's experimentation, audiences were invited to discuss a play at the end of performance. In so doing, according to Boal, they remained mere viewers and 'reactors' to the action before them. In the 1960s, Boal

*Students who are first generation learners internalize a fear when a teacher talks continuously in English. They feel alienated, and the words uttered become mere incomprehensible sounds to them. In this scenario, the English teacher's role is to first take his/her class into confidence.*

developed a process whereby audience members could interrupt a performance, and suggest a different action for the character who was experiencing oppression; the actor playing that character would then continue with his performance incorporating the suggestions of the audience. But in a legendary development, a woman in the audience once was so outraged when an actor could not understand her suggestion that she came onto the stage and showed what she meant. For Boal, this was the birth of the spect-actor (not spectator), and his theatre was transformed. He began to invite audience members with suggestions for change onto the stage to demonstrate their ideas. In so

doing, he discovered that through this participation the audience members became empowered not only to imagine the change, but to actually practise that change.

In overcoming inhibition, performative pedagogy is always expected to create greater impact than narrative pedagogy. Therefore, most of the activities developed here are based on the techniques of Boal and the main focus will be on social issues at the local, regional and national level. Teachers must choose issues that the students are familiar with, can react to and are able to participate in.

Some of the steps involved in Boal's technique are: A script should be prepared and enacted by a group of students. There should be a joker/facilitator to mediate between the actors and the audience. The teacher himself/herself can play this role. The audience may be allowed to interrupt at any point to perform any role, or their suggestions may simply be taken into account and the original conclusion of the script be changed. Interchange of roles between the student performers and student spectators is also allowed.

### Activity 1

The following activity is based on a scene that everyone can relate to.

Theme: In a bus during peak hour

Make 10 students stand in two rows of five each, not facing each other, with one student performing the role of the conductor. Let them slightly sway to and fro to mimic the movement in a bus. Let one row represent men, and the other women, both of varying age groups. The driver brakes suddenly; while all the women hold on to the rails and maintain their balance, three out of ten men fall on their women counterparts, leading to a heated exchange.

College girl student : Are you not ashamed to fall on me like this?

Man : As though I don't have any other work. It is because of the sudden brakes.

College girl student : All the passengers were subjected to the sudden brakes. Did they all come and fall on this side?

Man : Oh! You are such a beauty queen; that is why I fell on you. Ugh

Second Man : Sir, don't create a problem.

College girl student : Don't talk too much. You did it wantonly that is what I mean.

Second Woman : These men degrade women on purpose.

Man : All these college girls carrying bags and travelling by buses, wanting to become collectors and doctors. We know how you roam around.

College girl student : Mister! Don't talk too much. We are not of such character. What you did was wrong, just accept that. Don't slander college-going students. Better shut your mouth... Or else...

Second Man : Please, both of you keep quiet. It's getting late for work.

Second Woman : Do these men not have sisters? They insult women far too much.

Man (teasingly) : What will you do madam? Let me see. Let me see. (Coming closer)

Conductor (intervenes) : Hey you, I will stop the bus and you will have to get off.

Man : Oh! You are the security guard for women, is it? You think you can get away with whatever you want to do?

Conductor : Driver, take the bus to the police station.

College girl student : Yes, that is the right place for this man

The Man : What did you say ? (Shouts angrily)

The facilitator/joker may allow the activity to be interrupted at this point, and ask the audience for their opinion. He/she may:

- I) Ask for different ways of handling the situation (at least 5).
- II) Ask for solutions to the problem from different students (at least 5).

The students may be allowed to recommend suggestions/solutions in their native tongue. The suggestions should be translated into English by another student, and then repeated by the first one. Based on the suggestions, a new script with a different set of exchanges may be prepared and performed by another group of students. During the course of the performance, the facilitator may ask the students to switch roles. Hence interchange of role even within a group is possible.

## Activity 2

### Newspaper theatre

In this technique, Boal suggests that a script be written around any interesting news item. The following activity is based on the news item *Green Guardians*, which appeared on the first page of The Hindu Metro Plus dated 26 April 2011.

Student 1 : Today I am going to tell you all the story of how a grief-stricken man turned into a green-guardian.

Student 2 : What green guardian? I am not able to understand (looking at her friends). Can one of you tell me the meaning of green guardian?

Allow at least five student spectators to interact between themselves. They may try and guess what the green guardian is.

Student 1 : Okay! That's fine. I will tell you the meaning of green guardian; it means a person who protects trees and plants to make our earth a greener place.

Student 3 : But you said that a grief-stricken man turned into a green guardian. What is that?

Student 4 : Let me continue. Yes, that is a sad story. It is about a farmer called Mullaivanam,

from Sriperumbudur. In 2006, he lost his wife Dhanalakshmi to cancer.

Student 5 : Oh! That's really sad. What happened to him after that?

Student 6 : He must have become heart-broken and sad. It is difficult to overcome such grief.

Student 3 : But she said that he turned into a green guardian. Wait wait let us hear the entire story.

Student 4 : Mullaivanam emerged from his despair through fresh commitment to a social mission.

Student 7: Oh! That's really great. I think it must be through the trees and plants that he must have found solace. Am I right?

Student 8 : Exactly. I am going to ask you all a question.

Actors/spectators : Yes ...

Student 8 : Blood saves lives; hence there are blood banks similarly...

Student intervention : Trees save lives, hence there are tree banks.

Student 1 : Yes, good. Now can anyone continue?

The facilitator may suggest someone, or leave it to the students to volunteer.

Student 9 : That's fantastic! Blood banks and tree banks. You know Mullaivanam founded the Tree Bank of India in 2008.

Student 10 : Yes, this has given a massive boost to social tree planting. Can you guess what its activities are?

(At least five reactions from the student/spectators are required.)

Student 3 : Almost all of you have guessed it right. The Tree Bank gives free saplings to anyone who cares to ask.

Student 4 : Yes, tree lovers in a district are elevated to leadership roles.

Student 7 : How is that possible? Please explain.

Student 4 : The tree lovers run the Green Ribbon club. The volunteers who work under them are assigned three different roles and they are awarded three different coloured stars.

Student 8 : Wait wait. Let me tell them. I did not get a chance to speak so far.

Student 4 : Yes, go ahead.

Student 8 : The three differently coloured stars are: green for planters, yellow for nurturers (of the plants and trees), and white for the distributors of saplings.

Student 9 : Hats off to this man. His positive attitude towards life and his social mission are truly inspiring. What do you say?

Allow as many reactions as possible, even if they are negative. Another script could be prepared based on these reactions.

Student 10 : The story is not over. Please sit down. The Tree Bank also trains teams in the essentials of tree service. They collect seedlings, prepare makeshift bags, grow plants in them, transfer them to the ground and protect them with tree guards.

Student 9 : According to Mullaivanam, his team goes all across India to train people. Those who require their services just need to pay for the tickets to their place. The services are free.

Student 8 : What are the reasons for environmental degradation?

Allow at least five reactions.

Student 6 : We have a very important duty, of saving our planet Earth. Social tree-planting is the best way for achieving this.

All together : The Earth would be a better place to live in.

### Activity 3

#### Forum theatre

This activity is based on the Forum Theatre technique of Boal, which begins with the

enactment of a scene (or anti-model) in which a protagonist tries, unsuccessfully, to overcome a form of oppression relevant to the audience. The joker then invites the spect-actors to replace the protagonist at any point in the performance, where they can imagine an alternative action that could lead to a solution. The scenes are replayed numerous times with different interventions. This results in a dialogue about the oppression, an examination of the alternatives, and a 'rehearsal' for real-life situations. This activity caters to higher-level learners.

Theme: The anti-corruption campaign of Anna Hazare and the Lok Pal Bill.

Student 1 : Oh! The Indian society is doomed. Even God cannot save it. Look at the scandals and the corruption that one reads about in the newspapers every day. It's sickening.

Student 2 : Why are you so disheartened? Don't be so pessimistic. This is how it is in *Kaliyug*.

Student 3 : What? You are talking like an old person.

Student 4 : What he/she says is true. According to the Puranas, it is believed that the dark power *Kali* occupies only the material space on this earth.

Student 3 : What do you mean by material space?

Student 4 : Material things such as land, money, gold, gambling, alcoholism, etc., which ultimately leads to the deterioration of the society.

Student 3 : I can't understand this logic.

Student 4 : The *Kali Purush* is an embodiment of all these dark spaces, and he tempts the people of this world to commit sins in order to attain these things.

Student 2 : That is why people run after real estate, gold, platinum, crores of rupees etc.

Student 1 : It is crass materialism that leads to such attitudes. The attitude of people should

change. They are ready to flout ethics and morals to become millionaires.

Student 3 : So you mean to say that it's not just politicians who are greedy and corrupt but even the common man is like that.

Student 4 : Then in that case you are not in favour of the Lok Pal bill that investigates and convicts corrupt politicians.

Student 5 : Maybe he means that a mere Lok Pal Bill cannot cleanse this society of its sham. A change should occur in the individual consciousness.

Student 6 : Okay then let me throw this discussion to the audience.

(Get as many views as possible and encourage the students to express them freely, and based on their views, change the set of actors.)

Similarly, other activities may be evolved by the teacher to involve the students. This would be the first step towards making them communicate in the classroom, which should not be monopolized by the better students. Boal's Theatre allows participation but not marginalisation, thus democratizing the classroom.



Augusto Boal conducting a workshop.

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto\\_Boal\\_nyc5.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto_Boal_nyc5.jpg))

A teacher may even make his/her students sit around the performers rather than in the conventional mode. This creates a friendly atmosphere.

## References

- Biswas, Benil (2009, January 24) Theatre & performance: A link between theory and praxis. [Web log post] Retrieved from <http://rangamancha.blogspot.com/2009/01/theatre-of-oppressed-augusto-boal.html>.
- Boal, Augusto (2008). Theatre of the oppressed at Riverside Church in New York City. Retrieved from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto\\_Boal\\_nyc5.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Augusto_Boal_nyc5.jpg).
- MacDonald, Susie & Rachel, Daniel (n.d.). Augusto Boal's FORUM THEATRE for teachers: (Notes from a workshop at Athens conference 2000). Retrieved from <http://organizingforpower.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/games-theater-of-oppressed.pdf>
- Paterson, Doug (n.d.). A brief biography of Augusto Boal. Retrieved from <http://www.ptoweb.org/boal.html>
- Ross McKeehen Louis (2002). Critical performative pedagogy: Augusto Boal's theatre of the oppressed in the English as a second language classroom (Doctoral dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, LA) Retrieved from [http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0413102-182717/unrestricted/Louis\\_dis.pdf](http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0413102-182717/unrestricted/Louis_dis.pdf)

**Chitra Seshadhri** works as Associate Professor, Department of English, Bharathi Women's College Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. Her areas of interest include translation, Cankam Tamil literature, women's writing, theater, Vaishnavite Alwar hymns and English language teaching.  
[chitranaresh@gmail.com](mailto:chitranaresh@gmail.com)