

**Short Communication**

# **Experiences of a theatre of the oppressed workshop**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) created by the Brazilian theatre personality, Augusto Boal helps individuals deal with both external and internal sources of oppression. TO workshops are now held in many educational institutions and other settings. TO enables participants to step beyond the walls of the classroom, explore various life situations, improves the skill of both verbal and non-verbal communication, enables participants to experience various oppressors and oppressed situations and formulate strategies to deal with them. The authors describe a three day TO workshop conducted at KIST Medical College, Lalitpur, Nepal from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> April 2012.

**Key words:** Health humanities, Medical students, Nepal, Theatre of the Oppressed

## **INTRODUCTION**

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) was developed by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1960s, initially in Brazil and later in Europe. Boal was influenced by the work of the educator and theorist, Paulo Freire and used theatre as means of promoting social and political change. In TO, the audience becomes active, and as "spect-actors" they explore, show, analyze and transform the reality in which they are living [1].

**History of TO:** Boal said in an interview that the oppression he saw in the lives of workers at his father's bakery motivated him to invent Drama Therapy, now called Theatre of the Oppressed. Being a student of the dramatic arts, Boal used drama to help the workers [2]; this was not drama in the traditional sense

but more a participatory drama conducted among the oppressed themselves. This made things easy to share, providing them with the means to fight against oppression. Drama therapy now uses drama and images, exercises and games to enhance knowledge of oneself and the surroundings. Theatre that was originally conducted among the workers is now popular among all sections of people, mainly because of the oppression that in one way or the other prevails around and within every individual.

**Workshop at KIST Medical College:** Dr. Radha Ramaswamy from the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change, Bengaluru, India conducted a three day workshop on the 'Theatre of the Oppressed' at KIST Medical College, Lalitpur, Nepal from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> April 2012 [3]. The organization conducts regular

workshops on TO for educators in India [4]. She insisted that participants should be present and 'active' during all three days of the workshop. For three consecutive seven hour days medical students along with the teachers who participated learnt to express themselves better and enhance their communication skills.

Before the workshop started we had little idea about TO. After participating we came to realize it was an extraordinary experience, quite different from what one expects from a traditional theatre workshop. After attending the workshop the first author (IS) came to know what Boal actually meant when he said "*While some people make theatre, we all are theatre*" [5].

**Various activities during the workshop:** The workshop used active learning conducted in small groups with many games and exercises. Every exercise provided us with a life lesson and we felt we were using our accumulated life experience to solve the different problems and challenges posed during the activities.

Among all the exercises the first author (IS) found 'Forum Theatre' and 'Image Theatre' to be most effective in bringing one's thoughts and inner oppression to the surface. When one hears the instructions one might think the exercises are just a game, but when one plays it one comes to realize what and how one actually thinks.

**Forum theatre:** This is a form of Theatre where the spectators become "Spect-actors". Forum Theatre was born from "Simultaneous Dramaturgy". It so happened that an audience was unhappy with the way a play was being conducted and an individual spectator became even more frustrated that no one understood him when he gave his opinion, so he went on stage and acted in

place of the original actor and easily expressed what he wanted to say. So spectators now have a way of expressing themselves by means of acting in "Forum theatre" [6, 7].



**Figure 1: Forum Theatre**

The participants are avidly watching the forum theatre scenario dealing with a nuclear family wanting to place their old grandfather in an old age home as they were not able to care for him

Forum theatre presents a common situation occurring in the community in the form of a role play involving two main characters. First is the oppressor, who creates an uneasy and oppressive situation and the second is the oppressed, who is trapped in and has to deal with the situation. Initially the two original actors enact the role-play to familiarize the audience with the situation. Then the play is repeated and the spectators now have a chance to act (so called "Spect-actors") by stopping the action at any time during the role play. They can replace the oppressed person and act out what they would do in the situation. As the role-play proceeds it can be made more complex by spect-actors acting in place of the oppressor. The person selected to play the role of the oppressor is usually a talented actor as s/he has to deal with different scenarios enacted by different spect-actors playing the role of the oppressed and

respond to the different challenges impromptu.



**Figure 2: Forum Theatre**

The forum theatre scene where one of the spect-actors is playing the role of the son of the oppressor and is telling his father that he will also arrange a place for his father in an old age home when he gets old and will no longer be active

**Image theatre:** Here a person expresses himself not by words but by using his body. The body language is used to express one's thoughts, emotions and oppressions – a language that everyone can understand, but is often misunderstood.



**Figure 3: Image Theatre**

The participants with their eyes closed, assume different images in response to a particular phrase or scene narrated by the facilitator

There are different exercises under Image Theatre. A person uses his/her body to depict what s/he thinks of the given situation. People are also subdivided into small groups and they form group images representing the situation. Image is a powerful tool; it says more than words and sometimes expresses what words could never mention. But the magic of the Image Theatre is “Difference in Perception”; about how the same situation can be interpreted in many different ways. One of the assumptions made by Boal which led to TO is that dialogue is common among human beings. But when dialogue gets reduced to a monologue, oppression ensues and theatre becomes the tool to transform monologue into dialogue.



**Figure 4: Image Theatre**

The group is provided a scene or a phrase and the individual in the red checked shirt had assumed a pose to represent the scenario and the other members of the group then reacted with various body images of their own choosing

**Cover the space:** One of the exercises that was simple and yet provided the first author (IS) a lesson she will never forget is “Cover the Space”. At first we were asked to cover the space in the room but we had to walk along the same path every time. Afterwards we were allowed to walk however we liked to cover the space in the room. The exercise was fun. While doing the exercise, the first author

(IS) felt the first phase was boring but she felt secure since she knew where to go. During the second phase, she kept on bumping into other people, got in their way, and had no idea where she was going to reach but the energy and the enjoyment was nearly double compared to the first phase.

**Glass cobra:** The second author (PRS) liked the game 'Glass cobra' the most. Here participants formed a tight circle and palpated the head of the person in front, remembering every small anatomical detail. Then you were asked to close your eyes and walk away from each other so that the circle was broken. Then the group members with eyes tightly closed had to walk around the room and using only the sense of touch locate the head of the person in front of them so that eventually the circle reformed. He says, "I was amazed when the dispersed beads of the glass cobra reformed again as if by magic!" After the exercise we sat in a circle and discussed what we felt. This was done after every exercise.



**Figure 5: Glass Cobra**

The beads of the glass cobra (individuals) have been dispersed and the participants with their eyes closed are searching for the person who was in front of them to reform the original

We think such workshops should be conducted frequently in medical colleges and

other educational institutions because they provide people a space to laugh and learn and broaden their way of seeing things. It serves the purpose of refreshing and renewing oneself but also enhances one's communication skills.



**Figure 6: Discussion at the end of the exercise**

There were debriefing and discussion sessions at the end of each exercise. Participants shared what they felt about each exercise, their emotions while playing various roles and what they learned from the exercise. Participant sat in a circle on the floor directly absorbing energy from Mother Earth

TO helps medical students and future doctors to deal with internal fears, and inhibitions. Though originally designed to deal with external oppression TO was later broadened to also address internal oppression and fears. Poor socioeconomic conditions plays an important role in causing disease and doctors should be aware of how social change can be a powerful instrument to promote health. TO also may help in better understanding of body language and its important role in patient-doctor communication.

Many of the games are played with eyes closed and allow players to directly experience what it means to be blind and the limitations and challenges imposed by the condition. TO brings one face to face with one's fears and oppressions and then challenges one to go beyond them. We feel TO

should be an essential part of education in medical schools!

## CONCLUSION

TO help students and future doctors deal with internal fears, and inhibitions. TO can introduce medical students and doctors to the important role played by socioeconomic factors in health and disease. The workshop can improve the communication skills of doctors and enable them to better understand the 'patient perspective'. TO is increasingly being used in health professions schools.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

**IM-** was involved in writing the article, collecting the photographs and revising the manuscript for critical intellectual content; **PRS-** helped in writing the article, describing the photographs and revising the manuscript for intellectual content. Both the authors have read and approved the final published version of the manuscript.

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