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## Creating Talk & Texts: Taking the Classroom into the Community

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## Creating Talk & Texts: Taking the Classroom into the Community

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Creating Talk & Texts: Taking the Classroom into the Community**

Yvonne Montoya,<sup>1</sup> Vera Coleman, Robert Fitzpatrick, Kevin Cano, Alison Gervais, KayLynn McAbee, Devon Miller, Alec Portillos, Eliana Taylor<sup>2</sup>

*This project report highlights a partnership among Communication & Rhetoric university members and staff and students from El Centro del Quinto Sol which is a community recreation center. We describe the context and background of our project, workshops that employ Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) techniques, and provide some reflections and pictures documenting this joint learning experience.*

Freire (2000) notes that a “banking concept of education” in which an instructor teaches, and students are taught results in oppressive systems where students receive, file, and store deposits versus create and engage in knowledge production (p. 72). Allowing for student co-creation of curriculum and activities, reflection, and recognition of their agency to create change helps move away from this model (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Moreover, participatory theatre methods help empower participants to critically analyze and examine systems of power along with their own ability to promote social change (Boal, 2000). The “Creating Talk and Texts project, which began as a part of Dr. Montoya’s Communication &

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<sup>2</sup> The co-authors are all students at Colorado State University-Pueblo.

Rhetoric (COMR) seminar at El Centro College – a course which required undergraduate students<sup>3</sup> to showcase their knowledge, skills, and abilities to communicate across contexts, cultures, and with a variety of stakeholders – was developed to put into practice the educational and theatrical theories of Freire and Boal. Workshop participants, El Centro staff members, college student facilitators, the site coordinator, and professor contributed to the overall curriculum, workshop dynamics, and outcomes. No one group was presumed the sole bearer of knowledge. Instead, teaching and learning occurred as an integrated process. This project summary includes: 1) background on the project; 2) an abridged description of each workshop’s purpose; 3) expanded examples of workshop dynamics; 4) reflections on activities; and 4) pictures documenting the project.

### **Project Background & Partnership**

Dr. Montoya sought a community partnership by contacting the coordinator for El Centro del Quinto Sol, Jessica Plascencia. Ms. Plascencia aided with project development, participation, and facilities management. El Centro del Quinto Sol (Figure 1) is a community recreation center on the east side of Pueblo, CO. Since many of the community members who utilize the facility face challenges such as poverty, racial profiling, non-citizen status, and substance abuse, we wanted to keep the focus on community empowerment through the co-creation of spaces and shared learning.



*Fig. 1. El Centro del Quinto Sol*

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<sup>3</sup> The term “students” refers to students taking the COMR 493 seminar course; we label the people with whom we conducted the workshops as “participants.”

After initial discussions with Ms. Plascencia about the center's needs and participants' interests, students toured the facility and met the coordinator, staff members, and participants. A site visit prior to developing the full program was critical. Students and the professor used individual disciplinary backgrounds, experiences, and interests, related to the participants', staff members', and coordinators' suggestions to develop a series of workshops. Our program titled "Creating Talk and Texts" was developed and pitched to the coordinator and staff members in early spring, 2017. Program changes were made based on the feedback of the coordinator and her staff.

Workshop creation included mindfulness activities recommended by Midha (2010) that were related to theatre of the oppressed (TO), such as having workshop facilitators take part in the activities, establishing trust, using different forms of learning, providing time to journal or do art, and debriefing. Some workshops took place in the gym and multi-purpose room at the facility, but most were conducted in the learning center. Workshop participants ranged in age from 4-16 with an average age of 10. The number of participants in each workshop differed, ranging from 6 to 14 participants per session with an average of 8 participants each. Even though the workshops were advertised on posters at the center, and open to the public, no one was required to attend. We did not ask participants to provide an ethnic identity, but for those who shared, eighty-percent were Hispanic and twenty-percent were Caucasian. Over a six-week time period, we conducted a total of 11 hands-on workshops.

### **Workshop Descriptions**

Despite the variation in workshop activities, the central theme remained the same. Our goal was to create an environment in which voices of the oppressed were valued and participants were able to practice a variety of skills they could use in everyday situations. Freire (2000) stresses the importance of the learner as a co-creator of knowledge. In an effort to provide a space for this co-creation of knowledge to occur we used liberatory pedagogy in each workshop. Liberatory pedagogy "provides a space for productions of

knowledge to be born, to be nurtured, and to mature” and requires that people be aware and accountable for their impact on social and natural dynamics (Harris, 2019, p. 84). From discussing topics like bullying and depression, to valuing the importance of teamwork, participants were able to express their individual opinions, share their worldview, and shape outcomes. Participants and facilitators were “spect-actors” who both observed and created meaning through their participation (Boal, 1993).

Learning from and building upon each workshop proved valuable for this project. The first two workshops were intended as meet and greet ice-breakers (Figure 2) where participants learned about other members of the group, built trust, and played games fostering teamwork and communication.



*Fig. 2. Participants playing games.*

Workshop number three allowed participants to collaborate on writing a story, leading to an understanding of the thoughts and opinions of others. The goal of the fourth workshop was to have participants draw, describe, and defend their personal depictions of a hero and villain. Our fifth workshop highlighted the importance of body language and using life skills in different contexts as participants played basketball. Following this, participants were emboldened to plan for their lives by learning about college. Our seventh and ninth workshops focused on mental health issues; participants learned communication tools for navigating issues like bullying, depression and suicide. The objective of workshop eight was to engage participants in verbal, nonverbal, and written communication based on persuasion, information, and special occasions. Our tenth workshop taught participants how to negotiate with others by acting out scenarios and trying different strategies each time. Our final workshop was a radio broadcast session in which participants

learned about becoming a DJ and received awards for all of their hard work and dedication to our program. Each workshop provided opportunities for students, participants, staff members and the professor to learn from one another. Below we expand upon two workshops to illustrate how PO and TO were employed.

### **Expanded Workshop Examples**

In the workshop on combating bullying, students were able to analyze bullying in meaningful ways. Bullying at school happens fast and little time is available in the moment to analyze how a situation could have been handled more effectively. Educational institutions are representative of systems of power that help control how issues such as bullying are addressed or ignored. We began with a worksheet that provided a variety of scenarios and we asked the participants to determine if they felt each situation was reflective of bullying or conflict and how they differentiated between the two. Additionally, this workshop used Forum Theatre to allow participants to identify, analyze, and create knowledge that would help them in real life situations. For example, participants acted out various encounters in which a participant was bullied. Then we asked participants to intervene and showcase how the situations could be altered. Typically, bullies want to attack those whom they perceive as vulnerable and weak so interventions that displayed strength in numbers were emphasized. Participants used verbal communication such as compliments and positive messages to encourage the protagonist. Non-verbal displays such as giving someone being bullied a hug or a high-five when they stood up for themselves showed that we are all capable of supporting others. Theatre of the Oppressed has been used to help people transition from a state of consciousness and concern to one of action (Baer, Salisbury & Goldstein, 2019; Taylor, Klein & Boal, 2019). Bullying affects people differently and often people who become bullies have also been victims (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Acting out different scenarios is incredibly valuable in highlighting avenues for change. It was also important that we focus not just on the roles of a protagonist and antagonist but also discuss how schools, community members, and social media, etc. contribute to this problem. Combining

theatre methods with emancipatory and social transformation discourse helps reveal more complex systems of power and accountability beyond the individual (Erel, Reynolds, & Kaptani, 2017). Moreover, one person's bully can be another person's hero as is evidenced in the workshop discussed below.

The workshop on creating heroes and villains involved participants creating and constructing storylines with unique characters based on their own imagination. Participants drew both heroes and villains, then acted out or discussed why they were selected and aspects of their character. Exercises like this are an engaging way to illuminate issues of justice, oppressed voices, and emotions that are often not verbalized. For example, one young man's super hero was "El Chapo." Formally known as Joaquín Archivaldo Guzmán Loera, "El Chapo" is known as the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, a murderer, and the world's largest drug trafficker (Keefe, 2014). However, to the participant in our workshop, he was a hero. When explaining his choice, many of the other workshop participants initially dissented at the thought of El Chapo being considered a hero. He noted on the picture he drew (Figure 3) that El Chapo's super powers included helping people cross through the border and no one could kill him because he was invisible. He chose not to write a weakness. Once the artist explained his picture showing El Chapo's vehicle transporting immigrants away to safety, whereas the police vehicle was filled with immigrants being taken back to Mexico, we all understood his frame of reference and why he felt that someone who helps immigrants and is pro-Mexican is a hero regardless of what else he/she does. Theatre of the Oppressed provides opportunities for participants to construct counternarratives that challenge the status quo (Schroeter, 2013). In this case, the status quo related to a socially accepted identity placed upon El Chapo and assumptions about his character and worth. This picture led to a deeper discussion of what it means to be an immigrant in the U.S., a Spanish-only speaking immigrant, or to be the child of immigrants whose rights and opportunities seem limited. For some of the workshop participants these issues are their everyday realities. Understanding participants' realities and perspectives promoted growth for all involved.

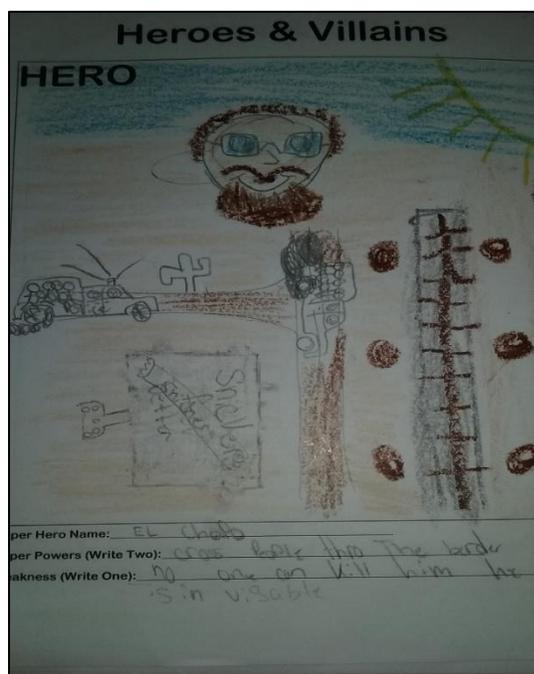


Figure 3: Participant drawing of "El Chapo" as a hero.

## Reflections and Outcomes

One strong point of this project was allowing college students to create workshops that they felt were important and still met the participants' requests/needs. Creating workshops kept college students engaged, focused, and accountable. Furthermore, reflection and discussion after each workshop was crucial. We were able to identify what worked, how approaches could be changed, and whether knowledge was retained. These reflections helped shape subsequent workshops.

Teachers and students both take part in learning as they question and navigate social situations. We encourage future facilitators to be open-minded and willing to leave their comfort-zones. Planning activities based on personal strengths is useful but may not be what is most valuable to participants. As such, facilitators have to be willing to adapt, be prepared, yet willing to change course, and be open to

giving up power. It may feel uncomfortable but the willingness to follow others fosters courage and recognition of one's true abilities. As one student noted,

I am starting to see the value in taking control of your education and I believe that it has multiple benefits. I am setting academic goals that I would have never thought of had it not been for me having to step up and produce original work. –R.

Students, the professor, participants from El Centro del Quinto Sol, staff members, and the coordinator expressed gratitude and excitement at having learned from the experience. We had not planned to create an art piece, but the idea emerged organically, and you can see our handprints and reference to being “a pack” as representative of the closeness developed (Figure 4).

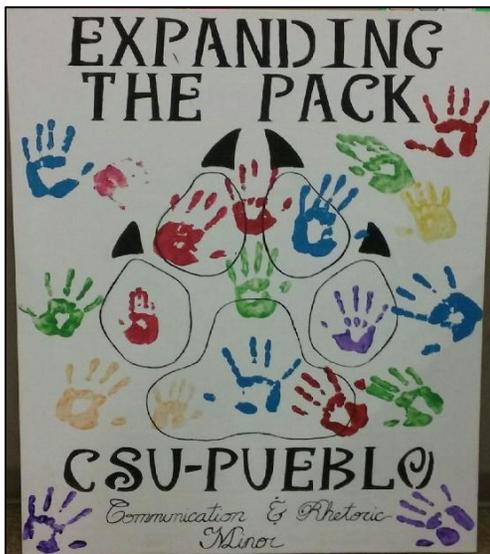


Figure 4: Painting created for Creating Talk and Text Program

### **Conclusion**

All stakeholders involved in this project were able to come together to teach and learn from one another. In this way we were able to let go of old styles of teaching that focus on a lecture format where an expert talks and audience members listen and embrace an engaged context of intercultural and

intergenerational learning where the classroom extends beyond the confines of a campus and children teach alongside adults.

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