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Begin to Play: The Case for Play in Community Engagement in Higher Education
Naomi B. Roswell[1]

Although little is written about the role of play in community engagement in higher education, professors and administrators intuitively grasp its value in building trust and democratizing spaces, but use games thinly. This paper acknowledges the challenges of developing effective community engagement partnerships and demonstrates how and why games based in Theater of the Oppressed (TO) deepen and enhance initiatives to dissolve town / gown divisions and enable collaborative knowledge generation. Play itself has been defined as "the power of the imagination to disturb the world" (Henricks 2011, 211), and TO games can welcome the disruption to the field of community engagement in higher education and push it to its potential. Through an analysis of literature reviews and interviews, this paper makes a case for deliberately incorporating games from TO to advance community engagement initiatives by catalyzing trust building, revealing cultural wealth, and promoting democratic values.

INTRODUCTION

Although little is written about the role of play in community engagement in higher education, professors and administrators intuitively grasp its value in building trust and democratizing spaces. Join any conversation about connecting campuses with their surrounding communities, and you'll hear people say, *"Let's play with this idea." "What role does this [stakeholder, decision, tactic] play in our overarching goals?" "How will this [program, initiative, relationship] play out?"* Yet the act of playing is absent from theories of effective community engagement. Especially in the dominant academic and white culture, our bodies are viewed as mere transportation for our mouths and brains to deposit and deliver expertise. As the field of community engagement moves away from paternalistic and deficit-centered community research and service, an invitation for participants to experience play more wholly – through embodied, curated, and debriefed activities – could deepen the integrity and impact of the experience, and

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catalyze understanding of democratic values. This paper acknowledges the challenges of developing effective community engagement partnerships and demonstrates why and how games based in Theater of the Oppressed (TO)[2] deepen and enhance initiatives to dissolve town/gown divisions and enable collaborative knowledge generation.

My interest in this inquiry emerges from personally witnessing remarkable growth and transformation among groups composed of campus students/faculty and community members through playing and debriefing games from the TO repertoire. As a student director of Oberlin Drama at Grafton, a theater program for incarcerated actors, and as a volunteer manager for university service learning students in a public K-8 school, I saw that playing games can shift power dynamics, reveal previously hidden skill sets, and encourage trust building, which ultimately advanced each programs' goals. I sought to understand precisely how the games achieved these effects and in turn strengthen community engagement initiatives on behalf of all participants.

Across institutions and geographies, one common barrier to democratic community engagement is the failure of the university to acknowledge and build on the existing strengths and assets of their community partner (Bringle and Hatcher 2002). Scholars such as Tara Yosso and Eve Tuck use critical race theory to call for a suspension of those beliefs and provide other frames with which communities should be approached. TO games have a role to play in collectively dissolving a paternalistic and extractive orientation to community engagement and replacing it with a reciprocal and collaborative intention to teach democratic values.

METHODS: Part 1 – Overview and Literature Review

Guided by a course on Community Engagement in Higher Education taught by John Saltmarsh at University of Massachusetts Boston, I sought to answer the question: how might an explicit invitation to play deepen community engagement initiatives? I conducted a two tined literature review focusing on 1) the challenges of meaningful partnership between universities and their surrounding communities and 2) the broad merits of play. Then, I interviewed three experienced Theater of the Oppressed practitioners focusing on the mechanics of *how* their work activates those merits of play and *if* the impact they see minimizes the pitfalls of weak community engagement. By placing these in conversation with each other, I constructed a framework for why TO can advance the vision of democratic community engagement (Appendix 1). Finally, I analyzed a key building block of TO, image theater, to highlight the specific processes that participants engage with towards that end.

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[2] Inspired by Paolo Freire, Boal developed games that are designed to democratize spaces and groups of people to offer ways to claim agency in the face of oppressive forces (Boal 2000). These games, which I define here as "play with rules" or "containers," temporarily eliminate power dynamics by being problem-focused and introducing just enough chaos to require flexible thinking, perspective taking, and collaboration.

The field of community engagement is in constant development, as is its core terminology. Two key words require definitions:

- **Community Engagement:** An umbrella term to encompass civic engagement (service learning oriented and framed by activity and place) and democratic engagement (more problem oriented, shared initiative design and knowledge generation) (Saltmarsh et al. 2009).
- **Play:** A state of engaging in planned or spontaneous activity that involves one or a combination of physical, cognitive/strategic, or emotional/imaginative creativity.

CONTEXT: Part One – Challenges of Community Engagement

When colleges and universities nurture reciprocal partnerships with communities through service, research, and collaboration, there is enormous potential for renewing our broken democracy, naming, exposing, and addressing injustice, and challenging neoliberalism. At its best, community engagement in higher education can foster win-win partnerships that distribute resources, generate and disseminate knowledge beyond ivory tower walls, and promote civic skills and values such as dialogue, inclusion, collaboration, consent, and justice.

Community engagement scholars have posited that these ideals are only possible when there is active alignment between 1) the home campus's mission, culture, and polices, 2) course pedagogy, 3) understanding of epistemology (how knowledge is generated), and 4) the approach to reciprocal partnerships (Saltmarsh et al. 2009). In practice, alignment would manifest a university system that holistically prioritizes graduating critical and engaged citizens – not just employable minds (Najmabadi 2017) and faculty rewards would support and incentivize community work in addition to publications (1) (Saltmarsh et al. 2009). Curriculum created by faculty would push outside of a neoliberal frame that perpetuates inequality and instead problematize consolidated power and inequality. Integral to that pedagogy would be personal reflection and experiential learning (2). The culture of the university would acknowledge that the university is not the sole creator of knowledge to be brought to communities and funding allocation would reflect the multi-directional flow of knowledge. Challenges in communities are systemic complex and therefore require transdisciplinary collaboration not only between departments and across fields, but within and outside of university walls (3 & 4).

Combined with strong and long-term leadership, a shared vision across these realms of community engagement can lay the foundation for reciprocal partnerships between universities and their surrounding communities. Ideally, community engagement initiatives are co-created and co-designed by campus and community leaders to ensure a mutual benefit (Glover and Silka 2013). However, the institutional and transdisciplinary alignment described above and needed to achieve ideal community engagement is ambitious and

daunting. Too often, across paradigms of charity, service, and advocacy, the interactions and relationships between universities and their partners lack integrity and depth (Morton 1995). In such programs, college students may, for example, be exposed to extreme poverty, pushed into a place of discomfort and decide to meet an immediate need, or attend a town hall meeting. Without guidance to personally reflect on and interrogate the structures creating such need – and synthesize them together – students are extracting learning from their community partners and contributing little to community itself or the public good. Meanwhile, community engagement initiatives are evaluated based on contact hours as opposed to goal completion or participant evaluations, and community partners feel trapped in a cycle of uneven power and resource dynamics with ivory tower professionals (Glover and Silka 2013).

This extractive and unbalanced dynamic, while pervasive in campus culture, pedagogy, and orientation to partnerships, can be interrupted when colleges and universities reimagine how knowledge is made. Until community engagement programs reject that knowledge is made in the university and deposited into communities for their wellbeing, these initiatives will never move beyond first order change towards transformational change. Saltmarsh (2011) calls for collaborative scholarship, which legitimizes knowledge gained from experience, undermines a hierarchical preference for ivory tower research, and activates community assets. Even the National Institute of Health, while outside the field of higher education, promotes this same Principle of Community Engagement in its task force: "*Community engagement can only be sustained by identifying and mobilizing community assets and strengths and by developing the community's capacity and resources to make decisions and take action"* (NIH, 51).

Systemic preference for white, Western, and academic forms of knowledge can obfuscate community assets and strengths and apply an overly narrow lens that lends its way to deficit thinking, seeing communities only for what they lack. This perpetuates harm and weakens the potential for justice-oriented community engaged scholarship and programs.

Identifying and mobilizing community assets requires a complete understanding of cultural capital. Tara Yosso (2005) applies a critical race theory analysis to types of capital and unveils "community cultural wealth" – all the assets and resources of a community beyond financial wealth. Forms of community cultural wealth include aspirational capital (a tenacious vision for a better future), navigational capital (the ability to maneuver between and around systems and institutions), resistant capital (behavior that opposes and challenges injustice), social capital (networks between peers), and linguistic capital (communication styles) (Yosso 2005). A more complete understanding of and respect for all forms of community cultural wealth could create the conditions for "thick" community engagement – with depth, integrity, and a holistic orientation across the realms of institutional culture

and mission, pedagogy, and partnerships.

CONTEXT: Part Two – Merits of Play

The value of play is most often assessed through a lens of child development and social integration. Within those fields, evolutionary, psychological, and cultural scripts help us understand play, but there is limited literature on play for social change. An evolutionary perspective reveals that play originates as a way to emulate and avoid engaging in serious or dangerous conflict (Schechner 2017). It follows that people may play as an alternative to, or as rehearsal for, conflict with high stakes. In both scenarios, play strengthens and protects players when faced with dangerous consequences.

A second window into play is as a tool for identifying, expressing, and mitigating emotion. Sutton-Smith (2008) shows that fear is a major motivator in risk-taking games, disgust is motivating for contra-team games, sadness motivates many playful festivals, and happiness and satisfaction come from the chance of winning (116). Play and games, then, help us understand, cope with, and process emotions.

Analyzing types of children's play across cultures shows that play also teaches lessons about the cultural loci of power and control. Sutton-Smith (2008) noted "teasing and hazing are typical forms of play in cultures with hierarchies and initiation rites of passage while games of chance are more common in societies with devotion to spiritual figures" (116). When children play games that emulate the power structures of their communities, they are building their skillset and toolbox for navigating life outside their games.

Each theory above describing the merits of play (physical protection, emotional regulation, cultural assimilation, and skill building), shows that play is a reliable method of reconciling, understanding, and gaining a sense of control over our present environment.

> Put more simply, play as we know it is primarily a fortification against the disabilities of life. It transcends life's distresses and boredoms and, in general, allows the individual or the group to substitute their own enjoyable, fun-filled, theatrics for other representations of reality in a tacit attempt to feel that life is worth living. In many cases as well, play lets us exercise physical or mental or social adaptations that translate – directly or indirectly – into ordinary life adjustments (Sutton-Smith 2008, 118).

Many faculty and partners in the community engagement field already know this and have begun to include icebreakers and games to launch a semester or project together. Often these games are used thinly and fall short of translating embodied experiences from the game into meaningful extensions of the work at hand. Community Engagement practitioners need a clearer understanding of how and why games enable participants to gather the benefits Sutton-Smith (2008) explains. Playing TO games lets participants practice the physical, mental and social adaptations that can be extrapolated to deepen community engagement to its fullest potential.

Benjamin Sheppard writes about the intersection of the merits of play and their role in transforming social

structures. Shepard, an author and the Deputy Director of the South Bronx Syringe Exchange and Harm Reduction Agency, identifies five elements of play that facilitate social change (Shepard 2005). The first one is culture, rules and norms. Play offers culture as a variable to be manipulated so people can temporarily exist in a realm outside of customary expectations. Second is creativity, improvisation, and inductive reasoning. A third element, play as performance, is about using stages and audiences to reveal or promote political and social critiques, such as agitational propaganda theater. The fourth, "serious play" involves stakes, risk, and repercussions. The fifth element Shepard offers is therapeutic play, which allows for processing of interpersonal communication. Shepard (2005) wrote "At the core of this playacting is a series of experiments in democracy, the aim of which is to expand a political dialogue between spectators and actors" (60). This 5-element framework provides a lens with which to assess the role of the Theater of the Oppressed and the concept of the spect-actor in shifting community engagement towards justice-oriented ideals and dialogue.

METHODS: Part Two – Interviewing Theater of the Oppressed Practitioners

I conducted three interviews to advance my understanding of how Theater of the Oppressed can contribute to the goals of effective democratic community engagement. I spoke with my Theater of the Oppressed mentor, Hector Aristizabal, a student of Boal's who founded ImaginAction, "a community of socially engaged artists who hold spaces where the participants can become who they are: creators. In our processes, we invite the participants to access their imagination and embodied knowledge to regenerate themselves, the community and the Earth." Arisitizabal has decades of experience facilitating Theater of the Oppressed around the world, and often partners with universities and colleges. He shared firsthand anecdotes of the merits and outcomes of integrating Theater of the Oppressed into community engagement initiatives.

The second interview was with Yvonne Montoya, Professor of Communications at Colorado State University-Pueblo. In her article in the fourth volume of this *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal,* "Creating Talk & Texts: Taking the Classroom to the Community," (2019) she and her students analyzed the value of two specific workshops her class of college service learners facilitated at El Centro, a community center for mutual learning and benefit. She noted that participatory theatre methods help empower participants from the university and from the partnered community center to critically analyze and examine systems of power along with their own ability to promote social change (Montoya et al. 2019). Her course "required undergraduate students to showcase their knowledge, skills, and abilities to communicate across contexts, cultures, and with a variety of stakeholders" and she developed the syllabus and evaluation metrics based on the educational and theatrical theories of Freire and Boal (Montoya 2020). Workshop participants, El Centro staff members, college student

facilitators, the site coordinator, and the 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 embodied many ideals of democratic community engagement theory from shared goal creation to collaborative epistemology and desire-centered engagement. In our interview, Montoya generously shared with me further reflections on the games they played throughout the semester.

Finally, I spoke with Akhila Khanna, a visiting professor at Middlebury College and a TO joker in Delhi, India who added clarity on the mechanisms of TO games that strengthen community building. Together, we teased apart how TO games allow "the personal" and "the political" to intersect and inform each other, and distinguished cooperative play from competitive play and their respective merits for catalyzing trust building.

FINDINGS

The interviews I conducted helped link the antidotes to challenges of community engagement that scholars such as Yosso and Saltmarsh promote to the mechanisms by which play can facilitate social change. My analysis reveals that the deliberate inclusion of Theater of the Oppressed games can deepen campus community engagement because 1) games reveal community and cultural wealth outside of western academics, 2) embodied, fun games teach democratic values and, 3) playing games catalyzes and expedites the trust building process between partners.[3]

TO games precipitate all five elements of play that Shepard posits are needed for social change. All games necessitate a new set of cultures, rules, and norms, which sets the activity apart from reality. The seclusion of the game from reality provides protection and enables an embodied experience of something other than the norms that participants on both sides of higher education and community partnerships may initially hold. Shepard (2005) explains, "An essential element of play is its use as a route outside of everyday experience, if only for a moment. [In a game], actors are free to observe a different set of rules" (50). The new or unfamiliar form of governance – the rules and norms of the game – has three major effects on participants relevant to deepening community engagement. First, the rules of a game level the playing field for all participants. Second, the separation from reality can unleash self-consciousness, inviting Shepard's second element of play for social change: creativity and improvisation. Together, these experiences enable participants to question real rules and norms and begin to engage in social critique, the third of Shepard's elements.

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[3] Undoubtedly, not all games achieve this; parents and schools commonly report adverse and violent effects of video games and unchecked competition. Games based in TO, however, do not run this risk, due to their design and their facilitation or moderation by a "Joker," a term chosen by Boal because of the neutral role of a Joker in a deck of cards. The Joker, in addition to using their discretion to offer the right game at the right time, offers a guided reflection or debrief after each game that allows participants to discuss what just happened, decompress, and deepen and discover meaning based on the experience of the game.

Many of the games in TO could be called "icebreakers" as they often work to seemingly melt tension in a room of strangers or even people who have reason to actively mistrust one another. However, the dynamics and mechanisms of these games pose an apparent contradiction: many of the games actually *create* tension. To fabricate and unveil tension, some TO games require collaboration, others are competitive, and some deliberately replicate systems of power to shed light on them and sensitize participants. The set-up of the games often temporarily compromises or overwhelms people's senses, bestowing chaos on all players, and then creating opportunities for verbal, physical, humorous, and strategic responses. The joker, or neutral facilitator, then offers a structure to hold the discomfort and engage it (for examples, see Appendix 2). TO games operate just outside of reality under the guise of a new culture made of rules - but they always return to reality with generative dialogue through debriefing once the game is over.

At the start of a game, each person is equally vulnerable – no person or skillset is advantaged. Montoya noticed this amidst the partnership between her university students and the students at El Centro. She observed that at the beginning of a game, "You're all thinking 'I don't know what to do here, but we're all in that same boat.'" The game has become an equalizing force – in the chaos, people are stripped of their assumed power. That moment is pivotal, because until that collective helplessness is felt, people stay in their "theoretical rut" (Shepard 2005, 50), deferring to ivory tower credentials or to perceived privilege and power. (See Appendix 1)

Once the shared uncertainty is acknowledged, however, "then, you can release any fears and inhibitions" (Montoya, 2020). At that point, someone will be the first to take a risk and either temporarily succeed, or temporarily fail, activating Shepard's second element, improvisation and creativity. Theater of Oppressed jokers press forward, by either ignoring or celebrating the risk to normalize it. Others in the group follow suit. As participants try different challenges – physical, mental, creative – participants notice and appreciate that different people are better at different elements, shining a light on community and cultural knowledge and skills that university cultures so often overlook and dismiss.

The inclusive TO games, which can be shaped by tricks, speed, creativity, outsmarting, patience, and adaptability, make space for people to use, and therefore demonstrate and share, Yosso's forms of community cultural capital. Participants, protected by the new rules of the game, can disrupt and de-mechanize the status quo, and provoke people into noticing each other's unique contributions. Play itself has been defined as "the power of the imagination to disturb the world" (Henricks 2010, 211), and this disruption is key to finding value in others that we may have mislabeled or dismissed in racist and deficit-centered thinking (Yosso 2005, Tuck 2009).

Montoya reported this unveiling of community cultural capital through her university partnership with El Centro, a local community center, in which all stakeholders played TO games. She reflected, "It was through games

where we all saw that the children at El Centro knew things that we didn't know and when *they* saw that, it was awakening" (Montoya 2020). Montoya described that when community partners saw college students failing, a professor failing, or their own director failing at some games and nailing others, "it generally cultivated a willingness to pay attention to someone." As individuals respond to game stimuli in different ways, participants can notice myriad approaches and practice honoring additional ways of knowing outside their own customary approaches. Through paying attention to one another's contributions, racist thinking was challenged and collective knowledge was built as participants combined their approaches and strategies within a game.

As much as games attune people to one another's strengths, they also remind individuals of their own agency and power to change circumstances. In TO games, each person's contribution (or, brilliantly, their non-contribution) has a visible, and often immediate impact. In this way, games can reveal what Montoya described as the "value of one's own knowledge that doesn't come from textbooks or degrees, and show you the gifts that you have already." Aristizabal said this another way, pointing to the self-reflection that emerges through games. "When we play games, we are who we are and we are who we are not" (Aristizabal, 2020). The tendencies and patterns that emerge through creative improvisation when we are stripped of our protections from the real world show us the importance of collaboration and shared epistemology, which can be named and referred to throughout a university and community partnership.

Exposing each person's own ability to change the course of a game is a crucial tool of democracy. In most TO games, the stakes and repercussions of action and inaction are acutely felt. Aristizabal said, "The future can only be created in the present. Games are a door to imagination, and a door for the future to meet the present." Dewey was a strong proponent of fostering imagination on a pathway for revitalizing democracy (Beck 2001). The creativity, improvisation, and inductive reasoning that emerges through games is integral to democratic engagement because "direct democracy is about 'originating' ideas as much as it is about 'approving' them" (Ewald 2003 *cited in* Shepard 2005, 60). Furthermore, many TO games such as Image Theater are iterative, in that one person's contribution to a game gets built on by another's (See appendix 2). This way, personal stories become collective stories as participants contribute and respond. Participants can build their collective originating muscle to lean into shared epistemology and move away from extractive community partnerships towards democratic, process oriented, egalitarian partnerships.

The ability to imagine and originate new ideas, individually and collaboratively, advances play to Shepard's third element of play: social critique. New culture and norms defined by the game's rules provide some distance between personal, communal, and political motivations. In the game, participants may think they are just merely playing. When someone tries something creative, however, even when it means abandoning self-consciousness,

they actually enable group discovery. Their contribution may seem to have been solely a personal choice, but in a debriefing conversation with the Joker, personal, communal, and political motivations are reunited once more (Khanna 2020).

After extrapolating the sensations and experiences of the game, participants are ready to investigate the repercussions of those feelings in their own present reality (the university / community partnership at hand) catapulting them into Shepard's fourth element of play for social change: Serious play. Shifting the attention from the game back to the content and process of the partnership can catalyze an aim of democratic community engagement: relating the teaching and the partnership to systems of power and injustice in the wider world. The reunification of personal embodied experience and broader social and political values is crucial for deepening community engagement beyond charity (Morton 1995) to engagement with deep integrity, self reflection, and a critical approach to the systemic problems of society.

In this way the activities become what Sutton-Smith described as "rehearsal" for existing in a democracy. The games are inherently inclusive; people of all movement abilities, languages, and education levels can play, and interactively contribute. In group strategy games, as well as during debriefs, participants must use and practice deep listening, deliberation, and compromise, and in many cases, make group decisions. TO games not only let participants rehearse *process-oriented* skills, they can actually inform the content at hand, providing avenues for the community engagement partnership itself. Even as games strip people of assumed power, the participants' reactions to outcomes of a game reflect patterns of power, and often provoke a desire or path for change. A skilled joker can tease these dynamics apart and return to the goals at hand, be they securing funding for community engagement, passing policy inside a campus to include community engagement metrics in faculty incentives and evaluation, or developing a collaborative research project between a professor and a community leader.

Khanna wisely noted that "you can never play the same game twice." Different settings, different people, and different circumstances guarantee new discoveries. Because of this, games teach us, and let us practice, responding and reinventing based on changing circumstances – a challenge of community engaged partnerships that any experienced stakeholder can speak to.

Theater of the Oppressed games employed in higher education community engagement settings precipitate the first four of Shepard's elements of play for social change and, in turn, advance the goals of reciprocal and democratic justice-oriented engagement by revealing cultural community wealth and creating spaces to practice using democratic values. However, perhaps the most important element of Shepard's framework is the fifth: interpersonal connections. TO games are not only strategic for practicing values; they are fun, silly, embodied, and ultimately create connections between people.

Engaged scholars and community partners alike speak to the long trust building process and the difficulty of building mutually beneficial and multidirectional avenues for support, knowledge, and resources between universities and their partners. (Furco 2010, Boyer 1996). Bringle and Hatcher (2002) point out that every partnership is built on individual interpersonal relationships that are each strengthened when each stakeholder's terms of engagement are developed clearly and healthfully. Glover and Silka add that the scope and tone of the partnership depends greatly on who initiates the partnership – the community partner or the university partner (2013). Games can expedite the trust-building process, as a companion to other communication tools, in part because they make people laugh and they invite silliness. This breakdown of formality and seriousness facilitates connection. Professor Montoya said after her course partnering with El Centro: "Play allows people to get to know multiple aspects of each other, the funny parts, vulnerable parts, competitive parts."

Montoya explained that trust is built when we recognize the complexity and unique strengths of partners, and this in turn makes dialogue possible and enables stakeholders to take risks outside of the game space. Just as the evolutionary theory of play explains, Montoya's relationship with the director of El Centro changed after playing games together. She said, "When you trust people more, you're more willing to take risks, even if you're not sure how it will be taken so even if it offends you or you're taken aback by it, you won't dismiss me, but you may challenge me." It follows that games help foster a culture of dialogue in which partners are attuned to one another's strengths and desires, and understand and value each other's, and their own, agency and impact.

Ultimately, community engagement initiatives are stymied by deficit thinking and ivory tower paternalism. Theater of Oppressed games can advance the field's goals of democratic engagement for transformative change by catalyzing trust building, knowledge generating, and values teaching processes. With a deliberate inclusion of TO, democratic community engagement in higher education could continue on its trajectory of creating transformative change through reciprocal partnerships characterized by deep integrity.

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APPENDICES

For someone unfamiliar with TO, the mechanics of how games simultaneously reveal unseen skills and strategies, catalyze trust building, and teach democracy may be uncertain. In the table below, I show how a game "Image Theater" precipitates each of Ben Shepard's elements of play for social change, and how it advances the goals of democratic community engagement. Below, I describe how I facilitate Image Theater (inspired by David Diamond's technique, Theater for Living) to tease out and uplift Shepard's elements.

Table 1. A framework for including Theater of the Oppressed games in Campus/ Community Engagement Partnerships

Ben Shepard – Five Elements of play for social change	Integral to Democratic Engagement b/c...	Advancing the Ideals of effective Community Engagement in Higher Ed	Catalyzes Trust Building by...	Activated through Image Theater by….
1. Cultures, Rules, and Norms	"Playing gets us out of our theoretical ruts" (Shepard 2005, 50)	Setting universities' aims, purposes, and priorities. (Saltmarsh et al. 2009)	Transparent process lead by "Joker" or neutral facilitator, rules and norms are different from both campus and community norms *"You're all thinking 'we're all in that same boat.'" (Montoya 2020)*	Invitation to play, stand in a circle - all have same power, introduction to rules of game, and separation from reality
2. Creativity, Improvisation, Inductive Reasoning	"Direct democracy is about 'originating' ideas as much as it is about 'approving' them" (Ewald).	Desire based, shared epistemology, challenge deficit thinking, celebrate cultural wealth	Laughing together, creating something new together, experiencing interdependence *"Then, you can release any fears and inhibitions" (Montoya 2020)*	Celebrate goofy, embodied, additive contributions, engage multiple perspectives. "Gather collective intelligence" (Aristizabal 2020)
3. Performance for political and social critique	Play, when public, breaks through barriers to shift public opinion and create change.	Second-order change, taking on wider responsibilities as neighbors and citizens. (Saltmarsh et al. 2009)	Embracing shared risk, claiming a stance *"It generally cultivated a willingness to pay attention to someone" (Montoya 2020)*	Emphasizing spontaneity and improvisation; and the interpretation of all other participants by spect-actors
4. Serious Play - Repercussions and Stakes	Brings attention to the content and process of the partnership itself and community / university needs	Relating teaching and learning to the wider world, renewing democracy (Saltmarsh et al. 2009)	Enables practice "rehearsal" for disagreement. *"When you trust people more, you're more willing to take risks…" (Montoya)*	Reveals opposition, dissonance, and power differentials
5. Therapeutic - interpersonal communication	Without spaces for community to grow, it is difficult for democracy to thrive (Shepard 2005).	Relationships Oriented; the back-and-forth dialogue between researchers and practitioners (Saltmarsh et al. 2009)	The breakdown of formality and seriousness facilitates connection. *"Play allows people to get to know multiple aspects of each other, the funny parts, vulnerable parts, competitive parts" (Montoya)*	

2. Deeper Dive.

Image Theater is a foundational element of Theater of the Oppressed. All TO productions and projects draw on scores and forms that Boal developed such as Rainbow of Desire, Forum Theater, Legislative Theater. Image theater is integral to each of these extensions in part because images are frozen shapes, silent and symbolic, leaving them highly interpretable. I first experienced this way of facilitating with David Diamond at a joker training in 2015. When I facilitate this activity, we stand in a large circle. As the Joker, I enter the circle and take a shape, with one leg off the ground, knee bent and both hands presented forward like a mime. The words I speak are in italics.

Introduction

We are about to play a game called Image Theater. You don't need anything other than your body. Let's meet in a big circle.

The basics:

I am going to take a shape here in the center of the circle. It could be anything – what do you see? People popcorn out: "A bear." "A person peering out of a window." "A person climbing a ladder." "You're protecting yourself because you're about to get beat." "No, you're about to smack someone else!" I like to wait until there are two opposing interpretations to welcome another participant into the circle for the same exercise. As the onlookers share their interpretations, it becomes evident that there are multiple truths, that each person perceives the same thing differently, and that those differences are something to celebrate. I listen and uplift for moments of agreement ("Oh yeah, I see that") and moments of dissent ("What? No way"). *It sounds like Dominic wouldn't have seen it that way if you hadn't said something. You're right; this frozen shape could have entirely opposite contexts! Great, now someone else, please replace me. Take a shape (don't overthink!) and we'll share what we see. Great, hold that. What do you see?* (If the person is in a ball on the ground: are they sleeping, resting, praying, examining something on the ground? Did they lose their earring?) I have two or three participants make a solo shape inside the circle.

When the participants have become comfortable with this exercise, I move them into "Complete the Image." *I like what I'm hearing. This time, I want you to stay in this position, and someone else will enter the circle and take a shape next to them that tells a new story, that completes the image.* Now two people are in the circle each holding a shape in relationship to each other. Participants offer ideas and situations for several rounds. Then one person exits while the other stays holding their shape. Another person enters to "complete the image" or "tell a new story."

Once participants are comfortable, we move into making images and stories about the topic at hand. *Now, I'd like us to focus on what we've actually come together to discuss, [working together to tutor students in under-resourced schools] [reducing violent crime] [researching harm reduction in this neighborhood].* As people from across the university/community divide offer physical and silent representations and their interpretations of

them, stories, assumptions, fears, and biases are exposed.

The first steps of Image Theater remove language from the playing field inside the circle. Akhila Kanna reminded me that language is a major indicator of class education level. Therefore, when people see a silent image before hearing an explanation, multiple perspectives are revealed. This game catalyzes trust building and promotes democratic values as it requires perspective taking, it allows people to notice one another's actions, and feel the impact of their own contribution as their shape is interpreted by all other participants. As people trade in and out of the silent images, they participate in collaboration, inclusion, dissent, and transformation. Further extensions below can be used when played initially, or at a subsequent gathering depending on the group's needs.

Extension 1: All of us

To demonstrate that each person has a role to play, instead of swapping out people inside the circle, add more and more bodies to the tableau. Zoom out of this scenario. *This time, instead of replacing someone, add to the shape. Now we have three bodies. How does this change the story? Who has the power here? Great, someone else join in. Eventually all of you will enter this story. Let's zoom out. Who else is around? How do new positions add to the story?* There are some very typical positions people take, such as a reporter, a photographer, someone else ignoring the scenario all together. Make sure to ask: *What was missing before, that now is clear? There is a role for each of us.*

Extension 2: Animation

When the group has arrived at a powerful tableau – one that exhibits tension or strong emotion – stop. Provoke each person by asking them to simply and quickly, without overthinking it, share their fear, their desire, and their secret thought. *In this position, you have become a character. Feel this position, this character. When I tap you on the shoulder, finish the sentence "I want…" Finish the sentence "I'm scared of…" Tell us the secret thought you are having but that you could never say out loud.* As participants share these inner thoughts, the frozen shapes become animate and an opening for responses to the topic at hand emerges.

Debrief:

This is a slower game than many TO games, so debriefing questions can be asked throughout. At the close, however, I ask, *What was this activity like for you? What is inside of this game? How does it relate to [topic of the partnership/meeting].* Often, there is a specific shape that resonates with people, or there's a moment of tension that hangs even as the game closes. I will ask: *It seemed like a lot of people were touched by the shape with Swetha and Jonathon. What did you notice about that moment? About yourself, and others?*[4]

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[4] Hector Aristizabal once encouraged me to provoke rather than to facilitate or "make easy" – to *difficultate*. If the Joker is confident in their ability to contain and process what is said, they should not shy from asking pointed questions to or about specific people.