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## Expanding and Expounding Upon Forum Theater to Engage Spect-actors in Virtual Spaces

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## Expanding and Expounding Upon Forum Theater to Engage Spect-actors in Virtual Spaces

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*In this article, we analyze our experiences joking in online spaces during the pandemic. Our journey traversed the 2020/2021 academic year, engaging in Forum Theater work with a local university and community organization. During our planning, leading, and reflecting on these experiences, themes emerged addressing the efficacy of practicing Forum Theater in an online setting. To conclude, we offer recommendations for TO practitioners who wish to pursue online Forum Theater.*

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Fig. 1: Outcast Virtual Performance May 31, 2020:  
Image Theatre Prompt - Police at the door...

## **Our Purpose and Passion**

While some may remember 2020 for how the CoVid-19 pandemic limited the way we lived, it prompted us to expand the scope of our use of *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) and its influence. It was the last day of May 2020 when our PlayFI club sponsor sent an email inviting the rest of us authors to attend a virtual event using TO. Both intrigue and skepticism washed over me. Having had many in-person experiences with Forum Theatre, I couldn't imagine the virtual platform providing the same level of engagement. Shockingly, the virtual experience, although logistically different in the implementation of activities, where the four corners defined how we moved in and out of spaces, still allowed for the de-mechanization of our bodies within the confined virtual space. On the computer screen, somehow, we (re)imagined the familiar methods of engagement in physical spaces that impacted how we reflected on and articulated forms of oppression. Moved to action by the virtual experience, I re-watched the recording several times after the event plotting the next steps to form a partnership with PlayFL and Outcast. - Tara

At the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic year, a group of jokers (educators, theatre professionals) came together. We reflected on our experiences with Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and considered how to enhance our practice using TO as reflection, catharsis, and activism amidst the myriad challenges that presented themselves during the pandemic. As PlayFL and Outcast Theater Collective, we created two TO projects for a Florida university and an Arizona community organization. We begin this article with a brief summary of our two organizations and our two collaborative projects. The heart of the paper expounds

upon the necessary considerations for expanding TO into virtual spaces and offers themes to engage readers in questions, reflection, and possible new directions for online TO.

### The Origins of PlayFL

PlayFL highlights the open invitation to engage in the transformative art of “play” as a means for exploring how various power dynamics perpetuate inequities. The FL in the name represents the Florida origin of our group and our additional goal as educational leaders who wanted to pay it forward through theatre, thus Play it Forward Leadership: Transformative Theatrics. The two words Play and FL, pronounced “playful,” started on a Florida university campus in 2015 with five doctoral students meeting in available classrooms and conference areas on campus with our sponsor, Dr. Agosto. We gathered with three common purposes: to study Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), explore the application of Augusto Boal’s activities from the book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and create an opportunity for social change through theatre similar to the revolutionary work of Boal. The club allowed us to come together as graduate students and engage in the theory and practice of TO. We read material that validated the arts, theatre specifically, as a medium for educational activism, professional development, and research (Agosto, 2018; Boske, 2011; Meyer & Macmillan, 2003; Meyer & Young, 2013). As we organized to be jokers, we began facilitating Forum Theatre at national and international conferences, university class demonstrations, practice sessions with local youth groups, and crafting publications. Since then, we have dispersed across the United States (Florida, Michigan, and Arizona), with one member currently located in Spain.



Fig. 2. Bratspis, Agosto, Nkrumah



Fig. 3. Outcast Website 2021

### **The Origins of Outcast Theater Collective (as told by the collective)**

Outcast began as a conversation backstage between several actors of color who wished for more professional performance opportunities in a predominantly white theatre market. A few years later, after establishing a professional, artistic presence within the Tampa-area regional theatre community, Outcast used TO as a tool to prepare artists from historically marginalized communities to work their improvisational muscles. We created original material in which Outcast artists made up the majority of the cast. The arsenal of TO helped us establish a core ensemble that we could workshop with on a continual basis. Another goal was also to connect our communities to the stories told onstage in order to change the traditional landscape of these theatres and diversify the area's regional audiences with folks that looked like our artists.

As our ensemble grew and became more proficient TO practitioners, we began preparing to showcase the work. We were two weeks out from our first public TO presentation when the Covid-19 pandemic hit. We realized we needed to adapt and evolve the work to a virtual format. We presented an online virtual event a couple of months later and streamed it simultaneously via social media. Having been alerted by their professor, Tara happened to catch that performance, and seeing the potential in TO online, approached Outcast about collaborating with PlayFL. Through the cross-pollination of educational scholarship and professional theatre practice, Outcast and PlayFL have explored ways of ensuring practice stays connected to larger anti-oppressive theories while making sure that theory works in practical settings, created opportunities to deepen discussions around difficult topics without losing the immediacy of the experience of Forum, and enriched the creation of scenes with an eye to outcomes measurable by the techniques used in educational research.

## The University Three-Phase Professional Development Series

The first project was a Florida university professor-led initiative working in collaboration with members of Outcast Theatre Collective and PlayFL. She organized a three-phase professional development interactive series that occurred during the spring 2021 semester.

1. Phase 1 (1/29): Graduate student testimonials on opportunities to talk about racism.
2. Phase 2 (2/26): Walking (in students' shoes) around race/racism with faculty.
3. Phase 3 (3/26): Institutional/ized Racism and Faculty Search Processes

Phase 1 allowed the jokers to collect stories and use them later for Phase 2 Forum. Between Phase 1 and Phase 2, graduate students were encouraged to attend the joker planning meetings with PlayFL and Outcast to assist in building the forum scene and assume formal roles for the Phase 2 forum.

During Phase 2, faculty viewed the graduate student forum and served alongside the graduate students as spect-actors working through solutions to the presented challenges. The student forum was a foundational piece to assist the faculty, as Phase 3 transitioned to a focus on race/racism experienced by the faculty, capturing current faculty testimonials. Dr. Agosto noted the following as her framework for Phase 3 work:

Philomena Essed of *Everyday Racism* (1991) provided a framework for the systematic analysis of institutional racism: The context, the complication, the explanation, the argumentation, and the reaction. *The Context*: The actors performed a scripted scene focused on the Faculty Search Process and the post-initial interview conversation. *The Complication*: Participants (spect-actors) were encouraged to note the subtle, covert, or coded language that created or sustained the conditions for institutional racism to be perpetuated. They examined language use and considered the link between language and (institutional) culture to ask what was wrong, unacceptable, or problematic. *The Explanation*: They considered the implications of what occurred in the search committee scene and explained how the scene expressed institutional racism, and provided evidence from the scene/script. *The Reaction*: In breakout rooms, participants discussed how other institutionalized practices, policies, or processes led up to that point in the search process or would further create the conditions for racial disparities to accumulate. Some guiding questions were: How do we change the culture, so it does not foster the conditions for racism to continue? What are the steps we need to take to confront the issues?

Phase 3 resulted in collective problem-solving, intergenerational and interdisciplinary conversations, and resolution/action planning and performing. The participants offered two areas for further racial justice work in the College of Education: Scenario 1: Dean Search – Transparency in the process and diversity of committee members; and Scenario 2: Adding Community Engagement Statements that address investment in diversity. Each group crafted their rationales for these requests, used *argumentative/rhetorical strategies* to explain the situation, initiate change (i.e., prompt a reaction), and then communicated them in a 5- to 7-minute performance. Dr. Agosto closed by providing spect-actors with a set of reflective prompts through which to view the performance and beyond to incite institutional change: How can you get involved? In what additional training do you need to participate? Who else needs to be involved? What initial barriers do you anticipate needing to overcome?

### **The Arizona Community Organization Theatre Thursdays (as told by the collective)**

The second project, led by our Arizona-based joker, connected us to community leaders, allowing us to pair with an Arizona community organization whose mission focused on eliminating racism. As a result, we engaged in TO work in a 5-week Theatre Thursdays workshop format (See Appendix A). Our original conversation with the community organization specified the development of a Forum Theatre piece focused on racism as a public health crisis. The majority of workshop participants were white women; two identified as Latin/Hispanic descent, one also identified as LGBTQ.

In the first two sessions, after using a series of TO exercises to create a sense of ensemble and jumpstart conversations related to oppression, a participant shared a story about their experience of white fragility that had resulted from the Theatre Thursday work. While this story appeared unrelated to the original theme of racism as a public health crisis, it dominated the participants' attention. It created an organic opportunity to discuss the need to confront white fragility in efforts to eliminate racism. The jokers were surprised how quickly the group determined that white fragility was the issue they wanted to address,

shifting the focus of the last three sessions and the final Forum to emphasize white fragility as experienced by one staff member. Something unique about this experience occurred for the collective. Working with the community organization to help them confront the white fragility in their ranks forced us to confront the aspects of white supremacy in our operations that we had not previously considered.

### **Dismantling the Master's House**

Before delving into our findings, it is important to acknowledge the philosophical challenges inherent in using a virtual platform — a for-profit company, reinforcing capitalist oppression — as a venue for our anti-oppressive work. Technology, by default, is not inclusive. Only those who experience a certain level of privilege have access. By extension, virtual platforms are not built as liberatory platforms to engage in activist discourse about world transformation. Was this a case of trying to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house, or could we re-purpose this tool to meet our social justice goals (Lorde, 2007)? The pre-constructed virtual walls of the virtual platform narrowed our attempts at anti-oppressive work. Still, our ability to scrutinize the inner-workings and reimagine their use led to themes of challenge and success. We present our findings as a work in progress, chipping away at various walls in the house and recommendations for further deconstruction.

## **IDENTIFIED THEMES OF SUCCESS AND CHALLENGE IN FORUM THEATRE ONLINE**

### **Setting The Stage – Tech Support!**

Our theatre collective possessed the creativity, knowledge, and skills to create a designated performance space using tools such as “hide non-video participants.” Occasionally a scene might have a random face due to a latecomer or a technologically challenged participant, but it was often successful. The transition from Forums only showcasing the actors and spect-actors who entered the scene to open discussions in “gallery view” allowed all participant boxes provided a juxtaposition of performance and whole group time.

In addition to virtually setting the stage, we collectively created scripts that included specific prompts for the various kinds of devices that participants could use to participate, whether phone, tablet, laptop, etc. We considered these considerations during practice as the various members experimented with the different kinds of technology to troubleshoot potential challenges and created the language to be used with participants to ensure successful participation with their technological devices. We anticipated lag time and re-connection issues and reduced their interference by assigning multiple co-hosts, allowing one permission to manage the show while another managed the guests (i.e., admitting, muting/unmuting, and troubleshooting questions in the chat area). The greatest creative flare came in the jokers' ability to use image theatre to familiarize the participants with the video operations and the mic, as they created images and practiced proximity with the screen and sounds to accompany their images.

### **Culture/Community Building**

Ingrained in TO work is the idea of community and communal trust, which is often established through games or exercises that physically manifest our interrelatedness. Nelson (2020) acknowledges the challenges presented in real life and online communities during the past year:

COVID-19 has heavily affected theater practice by forcing us to redefine what community connection looks like. We cannot touch each other or meet in person. We cannot talk intimately. When we see others in person, our faces are covered, and when we meet virtually, our bodies are obscured. Many Theatre of the Oppressed exercises require physical touch as a method of ensemble building or de-mechanization. But the breadth of the practice allows practitioners to reexamine the core goals of these exercises and rethink them for the virtual sphere" (p. 1).

As TO practitioners, we had to consider the evolution of experiences online that would elicit similar community dynamics to those felt face to face.

## **De-mechanization**

Boal (2002) asserts, “by always carrying out the same movements, each person mechanizes their body to execute these movements as efficiently as possible, thus denying themselves the possibility of original action every time the opportunity arises. The worker becomes an extension of the machine,” and de-mechanization is necessary to break the body free of its self-imposed prison, from removing the social masks affiliated with cultural expectations and partaking in social conditioning for thinking and acting (p. 29).

The virtual platform is currently the machine many use for professional meetings or academic learning, a space for professional mechanizations. We were asking our participants to free their bodies in a space that was made for talking heads and remove their masks and free their minds, in an attempt to bring emotions and sensations to the forefront, in order to think and feel with the characters, and step into the role of spect-actors. While we started with images and games, very few participants were willing to allow multiple body parts to enter the frame. Similarly, it is important to remember that some TO games favor body over voice. Interrelatedness was easier for some to accomplish in a face-to-face space where you do not need to talk to communicate. Instead, we were in a virtual space that favored voice-over body, requiring us to be more attentive to words and limited body language.

## **The Wave and the Undercurrent**

As our means of communication narrowed, less body, more voice, our attention to conscious and unconscious communication intensified. We studied our frames for what Boal (2002) refers to as the wave and the undercurrent of human interactions, noting we are able to send and receive a myriad of messages at the same time, some that we are conscious of (the wave), and others that we are not (the undercurrent). Because this community was just as much about taking risks as it was feeling safe, we checked in with our spect-actors either whole group or via private chat to ensure they were feeling safe and supported.

Remember, we had lost our ability to physically move and use proximity to check in with our participants. We did not always have cell numbers or emails, plus we wanted a timely follow-up. This required co-joking, with some of us having the sole responsibility of scanning faces and checking in. We were silent jokers who worked the chat to check-in and to encourage spect-actors to elaborate on their ideas or bring voice to comments they had dropped in the chat.

### **The Power of the Chat**

Our theatre collective again showed keen insight into using the chat to increase engagement and deepen discussions. Whether image or Forum Theatre, the chat feed was active. Some image prompts encouraged spect-actors to drop word or phrase responses to prompts in the chat feed. These responses transitioned into image theatre activities that led to another series of chat replies as spect-actors posted their responses to the presentation of various images. As we transitioned to Forum, the chat was another means for spect-actors to share in the discussion and pose questions and strategies. There was some concern that the chat would limit the amount of verbal participation and belief that the chat created a safe space for those who process and communicate better in writing, were too shy to speak, were in public or private spaces with background noise, or those with speech impairments or other communication related disabilities. However, this did mean that we had to have someone joking the chat in addition to the primary joker. As previously mentioned, sometimes we reached out to our participants to assess needs and encourage participation.

### **Cameras On or Off**

Many of us who have participated in virtual platform meetings have found a mix of faces and blank boxes only occupied by names leaving us to contemplate the unseen. When the empty box was accompanied by a voice, some of our concerns were alleviated as we took verbal participation as a sign of listening, thinking, and active participation. But when there was no facial or verbal communication, questions arose.

Were those of us with our cameras and/or mics on at a disadvantage because of this inactive participant? Was the participant at a disadvantage? Should we not extend this opportunity to all and allow them to engage at their level of comfort? Had we missed an opportunity to engage? While there was the appearance of a “casual observer,” we could not confirm the degree of internal processing or even group processing that could be occurring beyond the blank box.

Again, our Boal scholars pointed us to the literature, “In a Forum Theatre session, no one can remain a ‘spectator’ in the negative sense of the word. It’s impossible. In Forum Theatre, all the spect-actors know that they can stop the show whenever they want... Even if they stay on the sidelines, even if they watch from a distance, even if they choose to say nothing, that choice is already a form of participation” (Boal, 2002, p. 274). This was exceptionally beneficial to our continued reflection about what was and was not acceptable within the Forum. If it was to be for the people and by the people, we had to be careful about attempts to limit their means of participation. We also understood that while some felt brave and emancipated in the virtual space, maybe because they were not using their real name, or they were using their real name, but in a community of strangers, others may have felt a layer of vulnerability. Maybe their current space or the people in their space did not allow them to engage and share in the way that they would have liked. Maybe they needed to be the fly on the wall absorbing information, or maybe they were concerned with over-exposure. While we were trying to foster a community of trust, we also knew that people could take screenshots or unauthorized recordings and repost them with poor intentions. Considering these challenges, any level of participation was emancipatory.

### **Breakout Rooms**

The utilization of breakout rooms stemmed from our desire to engage more spect-actors in the scene. We thought smaller groups might encourage additional voices. We noted that in the whole group discussion, conversations were stunted and seemed to flow through the joker; they were more centralized than

collective. They seemed to favor an individualized approach to alternatives, and therefore, reinforced the idea of individual power, individual choices, “by focusing on a way in which social mediations cannot be adequately represented, Augusto Boal not only seems to exaggeratedly inflate the potentialities of the subject and his decision-making capacity, but also to proportionately reduce the strength of systems of oppression” (Boal, 2019, p. 297). We wanted spect-actors to explore the individual and the collective experiences. We thought smaller groups might assist each other in a more collaborative approach to strategies for the spect-actors as they enter a scene.

These groups were utilized in our work with the university. In one meeting, they allowed participants to further analyze the Forum scene. We hoped that the breakouts would allow our participants time to contemplate the complexity of what was desired by our protagonist and what necessary action(s) was needed to acquire it. In a follow-up session, the breakout rooms allowed participants to move beyond who and what, consider their connection to the stories based on the experiences of their students and faculty, and then explore opportunities for individual and collective action as the diversity and inclusion team.

## **Time**

A constant topic of reflection was whether our limited amount of time with the participants was used in the most effective way to dismantle oppression. We repeatedly asked ourselves how we felt about the conclusion of the forum session. Had enough possible solutions been presented to assist participants in thinking and planning beyond the moment for potential experiences with injustice? Our Boal scholars reminded us of his words:

I believe it is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution because, in my view, the thing which incites the spect-actors into entering into the game is the discussion and not the solution which may or may not be found ... Debate, the conflict of ideas, dialectics, argument, and counter-argument – all this stimulates, arouses, enriches, prepares the spectator for action in real life" (Boal, 2002, p. 259).

It was important for us to remember that the solutions may not come at that moment. We were responsible for facilitating anti-oppressive dialogue, creating constructive conflict, stimulating the action, and reminding participants that the purpose was preparation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION OF FORUM THEATRE ONLINE**

While our experiences practicing Forum Theatre through video conference had their challenges, there was also a myriad of opportunities. Although a few of us had not been together in the same physical space in years, the increased reliance upon online platforms for communication allowed us to reunite, build new partnerships, and create new social justice-oriented projects. Our work was with our universities and community organizations. Still, we may have reaped the greatest benefits, regularly engaging in arts and reflection, using it as a lens for processing the world around us in a historic year. Now that we transition back to some semblance of normalcy, we continue to see the potential for online Forum Theatre for both TO performers and participants. We ask interested parties to consider the following:

### **Recording the Scenes – Living Beyond the Moment**

When our group first came together, we saw our online Thursday meetings as an opportunity to deepen our understanding of TO theory and practice. We studied websites, watched interviews and older Forum Theatre recordings of our mentors, and read articles and book chapters to increase our understanding of TO. We then looked for opportunities to practice and grow as jokers. When we joked the first series of forums, they happened to be recorded. While we were not okay with them being posted to websites for

public consumption, we did secure permission to use them for our reflection and training, as well as future work with the different groups that participated.

### **Joker Reflection**

We decided to analyze our recordings section by section. The most obvious observations were related to technology glitches and necessary preparation for the next Forum. We gauged the level of engagement in our games and discussed which games made for better transitions into the forum topics and translated best into the online environment, as well as what additional accommodations would be necessary to improve the audience's experiences. We devoted the most time to the Forum analysis. We analyzed our words, initial prompts, and follow-up questions to the audience. We looked for missed opportunities to invite spect-actors into the scenes. We discussed means for varying our joking, increasing conflict and engagement, and de-escalating overly tense moments. The recordings allowed us to relive the moment from a different angle and study ourselves with our group's additional knowledge and experiences as we planned our next Forum.

### **Participant Follow-up**

Both of our projects included multiple meetings with the same groups some of which we recorded. In reviewing them, we noted the challenges that come with time. For instance, sometimes people were just warming up to their ideas and opinions, as we concluded. However, once they had more time to reflect on the Forum and their personal experiences, they often had additional thoughts and learning to add to the conversation. We have considered planning follow-ups with groups that would allow us to capture isolated moments from the Forum for further discussion and as possible catalysts for new pieces. The recordings then serve as building blocks for our participants in future collaborations and possibly independent reflection.

### **Opportunities and Constraints of Technology**

Equitable use of technology for social justice-minded online experiences involves the alignment of skills and knowledge and multiple critical perspectives in the planning and organizing of Forum Theatre.

Feenberg (2009) speaks to technologies as tools that serve and shape a particular socio-political order.

Acknowledging this power dynamic, Agosto et al. (2021) argued that “the critical pedagogical roots of theatre of the oppressed can also temper the optimistic view of technology as a salve to remedy the ills of education.” Therefore, we invite readers not to take for granted the goodness of a virtual platform and yet consider reimagining “the role of spatiality and materiality in the constitution of community, reassess the possible sites for subaltern politics, and reconsider the role of digital epistemologies in everyday discourse and public pedagogy” (Hill, 2018, p. 289).

Those using similar platforms should reflect on how to best navigate these technologies to pursue socially just forums. This can come from proactive analysis of potential limitations (i.e., favoring voice) and plan how those limitations impede the work of deconstructing oppression, creating community, and imagining possible solutions and applications of Forum Theater.

### **De-mechanization in the Virtual Space**

The virtual platform presents a challenge to the de-mechanization process. Boal asserts this is an essential step due to the desensitizing process that we experience in the world. What is ironic is the influence of technology aids in desensitization. So, how then do we use a tool associated with disengagement to re-engage participants in meaningful interactions, knowledge acquisition, and the unification of the physical and psychological? Games are often the tools for de-mechanization. How do we determine which are most beneficial for de-mechanization in a virtual space and what adaptations may be necessary to increase their effects?

## **Give Yourself Permission to Reimagine**

All of us first practiced Forum Theatre in a physical space. Our memories are solidified in not just one sense but multiple senses. For those of us with kinesthetic ownership, the limitations of the virtual space may seem daunting or inappropriate. We simply ask that people open themselves to the possibilities of reimagining and expanding Forum Theatre to virtual spaces. While the virtual platform-mediated Forum was an adjustment for us, participants were still highly engaged and positively impacted by the experience. As previously mentioned, some of our participants before COVID restrictions did not have access to live TO experiences. As such, our events offered them a rare opportunity in a virtual space.

Similarly, some participants were hesitant to participate in face-to-face TO experiences but were willing to take the risk in a virtual space and enjoyed and grew from the experience. Is this not another opportunity to expand the TO community, “to encourage autonomous activity, to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity, to change spectators into protagonists” (Boal, 2002, p. 275)? Noy Meir and Larcher (2020) reflect on the various opinions during and after the Joker Exchange Online events, expressing how some were optimistic while others were lost in the online world of square screens. They noted, “Internet technology, like theatre, is made by people for people, and like theatre it is not about what we do, and what names we give what we do, it is about how we do what we do and what meaning we are willing to give and put into our actions” (p. 17). Boal acknowledges art as a medium for provoking the transformation of the world, we argue that this would include the virtual world and the possibilities inherent in virtual spaces.

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**APPENDIX A: Arizona Community Organization April/May 2021 Session Schedule**  
Theatre Thursdays: Racism as a Public Health Crisis – 5 Sessions

Session 1:

1. Scope of the Project (10 minutes)
2. T.O. Intro (10 Minutes)
3. Getting Zoom Instructions Out there (5 minutes)
4. Games
  - a. Grover's Game (10 minutes)
  - b. Story telling (25 minutes)
  - c. Opposing Objectives - Breakout Rooms (30 minutes)
    - i. Your job is to do more than say no. Try different ways to get what you want.
    - ii. Road trip - one wants to stop/one wants to keep going (6 minutes)
    - iii. Swap partners 2 minutes
    - iv. Customer wants discount/sales rep wants to win sales competition (6 minutes)
    - v. Swap partners 2 minutes
    - vi. Observing Racist Action - one wants to intervene/one does not (6 minutes)
    - vii. Swap partners
    - viii. Opportunity to share with big group

Session 2:

1. Warm Up
  - a. Image - Racism, Public Health, Structural Oppression
  - b. Image part 2
  - c. Real, ideal, transitional
2. Story Sharing (1 hour)
  - a. Breakout rooms (30 minutes)
  - b. Big room (30 minutes)
3. Identify Central Conflict for Forum

Session 3:

1. Warm Up - Environment
2. Begin rehearsing Forum
3. Get emails of performers
4. Record the scene

Session 4:

1. Warm Up
2. Finish rehearsing Forum

Session 5:

1. Final Show and Tell