

STUDENT, PLAYER, SPECT-ACTOR:  
LEARNING FROM VIOLA SPOLIN AND AUGUSTO BOAL:  
THEATRE PRACTICE AS NON-TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGY

by

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Student, Player, Spect-actor: Learning from Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal: Theatre Practice as Non-Traditional Pedagogy

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This thesis explores the possibility that by adapting a model of disciplined improvisation, the secondary classroom will become an engaging learning environment where a wider variety of student learning preferences and styles will be honored and cultivated. I believe that effective pedagogical theory and structure aligns with that of improvisational theatre models and by examining these models more closely and by comparing them with the theories of predominant educational theorists and psychologists, we will find both commonalities and effective teaching models and strategies. The theory and practice of Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, supported by the theory of Lev Vygotsky and of Paulo Freire, respectively, provide two examples of non-traditional pedagogy for the secondary classroom.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: From Teacher-Focused to Student-Focused; Theatre Practice in the Classroom.....	1
Chapter One: Lev Vygotsky and Viola Spolin.....	22
Chapter Two: Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal.....	40
Chapter Three: Spolin and Boal in Action.....	54
Chapter Four: Conclusion: The Promising Potential of a Spolin/ Boal Pedagogy.....	72
Works Cited.....	80

## **Introduction:**

### **From Teacher-Focused to Student-Focused: Theatre Practice in the Classroom**

**“Thinking and Learning are not all in our head”**

**-Carla Hannaford 11**

The theatre practices of Viola Spolin and of Augusto Boal are proven as effective theatre models. Each model, grounded in improvisation and physical expression, has been both influential and transformational in their original contexts. The models suggested by each of these revolutionary artists may have another, largely unexplored, potential as pedagogical tools and models. These theatre practices adapted as pedagogical models could provide a timely aid for public school educators who are interested in shifting from a teacher-focused classroom to a student-focused learning community.

Criticism of the American public school system is widespread. There are countless varying opinions regarding how our children should be learning and how they should be taught. Over time, there have been many attempts to improve, increase, or alter the style, and often the quantity, of education that American children receive, but there is still no firmly and commonly accepted method or approach to reach this goal. As early as 1856, there is published criticism of the traditional, recitation style methods of teaching that were predominantly used in American public schools (Franciosi 7), but a traditionally teacher-focused education approach is still the most widely practiced classroom model. Again, in the 1950's, research was conducted with the intention of proving that creativity was an essential factor in intelligence, and therefore should become an important factor in our classrooms (Shallcross 4). Despite the fact that this type of

research has continued over time, however, our public school system is sorely outdated. In a video adapted from a talk given by Sir Ken Robinson to the RSA, the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, he discusses the development of public education. While the RSA is based in England, Robinson discusses public education in a global context. He identifies that our public education system is rooted in the cultural and societal values of the Industrial Revolution. Our schools are still structured and based on a factory system; bells indicate subject and classroom transition, children are processed on a metaphorical conveyer belt; divided by age and ability, and deposited with universal and predetermined content (Robinson). In the United States, our schools are even still influenced by agricultural cycles. Students attend school during the winter when, historically, the agricultural work - load was less and are on school break during the summer when labor was historically needed on farms. In Northern Maine, students still take “harvest recess,” a school break in the fall historically designed as an assist for the potato harvest.

The American public school system has recently come under intense political scrutiny and in 2002, President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law. Designed as an attempt to ensure that every American child would receive a quality education, this law instead merely puts pressure on schools to provide and to attain arbitrary test scores and statistics in order to maintain funding. Teachers have found, in most cases, that this type of legislation has only put high stakes pressure on them to “teach to the test” rather than to provide a quality education that develops higher learning skills in their students.

The United States, as a nation, is recognized as a world superpower and as an imposing force in the global economy largely because of our ability to produce leaders that can access both creativity and intellect: we value those who can think outside of the box and make money with

those ideas. But as Kathleen Richards Hopkins points out in *Teaching How to Learn in a What-to-Learn Culture* (2010), “If we downplay innovation and creative thinking at the expense of performing well on standardized tests, we will not only lose our creative teachers but also lose our credibility as a superpower” (25). As important as our global economic and political status may be to politicians, educators are, or should be, concerned with providing an education for students in as high a quality as possible. And this education may not occur as the result of arbitrary legislation, in fact, as Leonard and Willis write, “Resistance to the domination of education by belief in the facts revealed solely by mandated standards and standardized testing must be practiced on many fronts, none of which is more fundamental than the imagination, which is the source of all versions and visions of the natural and cultural world” (Leonard and Willis 1). Our traditional education approach may not be what is best for our students.

Some educators believe that investing in creatively based pedagogy may be the key to producing learners that are highly skilled problem solvers. A creative pedagogy seeks to expand student horizons and to invest in interdisciplinary thought and behavior (Beetlestone 6) as well as to create a web of interaction between the context or subject, the learner, and the educator (Beetlestone 16). A creative pedagogy accesses multiple intelligences and focuses on not just cognitive, but on physical interaction. Carla Hannaford, author of *Smart Moves: Why Learning is Not all in Your Head* (1995) states in the first chapter of her book, “The notion that intellectual activity can somehow exist apart from our bodies is deeply rooted in our culture . . . Thinking and learning are not all in our head. On the contrary, the body plays an integral part in all our intellectual processes from our earliest moments right through old age” (11). While a traditional teacher-focused model is currently the predominant pedagogical model in the secondary

classroom, it is proven that it is not as effective as a collaborative and inquiry based, student focused model.

In my own experience, I have found that the traditional teaching model is not appealing to students or beneficial to their learning. As an undergraduate, I accrued many hours in high school and middle school classrooms in order to fulfill field experience requirements for a degree in Secondary Education (English Concentration). I spent many hours watching students try to listen to lectures, complete worksheets that were essentially just a regurgitation of information, and become disengaged and bored. Most teachers were taking a teacher-centered approach and the learning of the students seemed to happen only despite this format, not as a result of it.

I was simultaneously working towards a major in theatre, with a strong interest in performance. My theatre training and experience seemed to suggest to me that there could be a better way to engage students and to increase their learning. One of the most fundamental and, I think, important elements of the theatre experience is the development of ensemble and community that can build among a group of artists. It seemed to me that it might be possible to build this type of environment and community in a classroom, where the learning preferences and styles of each unique student could be honored and where students would be more consistently engaged in the process of their learning.

I believe that by adapting a model of disciplined improvisation, the secondary classroom will become an engaging learning environment where a wider variety of student learning preferences and styles will be honored and cultivated. I believe that effective pedagogical theory and structure aligns with that of improvisational theatre models and by examining these models more closely and by comparing them with the theories of predominant educational theorists and psychologists, we will find both commonalities and effective teaching models and strategies. The



theory and practice of Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, supported by the theory of Lev Vygotsky and of Paulo Freire, respectively, provide two examples of an excellent foundation and model for the secondary school classroom.

The roles of teacher and student in the classroom are both interconnected and interdependent in nature, but the relationship between the roles and the way in which they function is important in achieving an understanding of learning efficacy. In the traditional classroom, the focus is primarily on the teacher and the performance of the teacher figure. This type of classroom may also be referred to as a scripted instruction, a direct instruction, a teacher-focused, a monologue based, or text based classroom. This model is also defined as a capital-intensive classroom as any changes or investment in this type of learning model is supported and fed by financial support in the form of text books and “scripted curricula” (Sawyer 17). An alternative option to this traditional classroom model, and one that is advocated for in this thesis, is a creative classroom that is focused on students and student performance. This alternative classroom may be referenced as constructivist, student focused, inquiry based, dialogic, collaborative, multi-vocal, or project-based. Also, this type of classroom is considered to be labor-intensive as the investment in this type of learning model is driven by the labor of “investing in teacher training and professional development” (Sawyer 17).

In order to fully understand the nature of a creative classroom model, it is necessary to explore the definition of performance and the performance role of teachers and students in the classroom. The term “performance” can be interpreted in many different ways and holds great meaning in the classroom environment. Often, this study of performance in the classroom is referred to as critical performance pedagogy. Theatre practitioner and educator, Monica Prendergast, writes clearly and succinctly about this pedagogical theory in, “Teacher as

Performer: Unpacking a Metaphor in Performance Theory and Critical Performative Pedagogy” (2008). She looks at critical performance pedagogy through the lens of several performance theorists in an effort to create a frame of reference for the study of performance in the classroom environment.

Initially, she discusses the work of sociologist, Bert O. States, and his study of performance as life experience. His analysis of life as performance provides a lens to examine “teaching as acts of: social behavior, social conflict, appearance/ disappearance, presence, restored or twice-behaved behavior, transformation, and pleasure/desire” (5). While Prendergast warns that this interpretation of performance can easily become too broad and free, she notes that this theory suggests “that we as teachers are always performing the way we see the world through our own lived experiences, for and with our students” (5). This view of performative behavior provides a leaping point for examining the teacher role, but certainly needs to be focused more clearly.

Prendergast continues with a discussion of the work of theatre artist, Richard Schechner. Schechner’s marked contributions to the field of Performance Studies are noted in the theatrical world, but are also useful in an education context. Schechner studied performance as a function of human role-play as well as “the interconnections between play, games, sports, and sacred and secular rituals as forms of performance” (7). He also focused on the transformational power of performance, or the power of performance to grow or change a social structure. In the classroom, the performance of teachers, and of students, will hopefully change or grow the learning of the students.

Finally, Prendergast examines the work of Jon Mckenzie, who, through the lenses of culture, economics, and technology, examines performance as a “grand theory.” It is integral to

his theory to consider performance as a function of challenge and as a vehicle for efficacious change. He considers performance to be a behavior that, by its very nature, is interconnected and interdisciplinary; the performance of a human being concerns all three lenses: culture, economics, and technology. Prendergast states, in relation to this theory,

If young people can learn to perceive and interpret the world and themselves in it as an interconnected series of performers, spectators, and performances at multiple levels of society, is there then a possibility for them to gain more agency to resist the powerful forces that push them to perform for military-industrial, consumerist, and technocratic ends? (9)

She also applies the definition to teachers: “teachers are charged with producing and reproducing performances of efficiency and effectiveness, both in themselves and in their classrooms” (9). McKenzie’s “grand theory” provides a more comprehensive definition of performance than either States or Schechner and also provides a clearer gateway for examining the performative teacher role.

Prendergast then studies performance from a pedagogical stance. While she pays service to pedagogical theory, she is clear in her assertion that most explorations of critical performance pedagogy is focused on pedagogy rather than on performance theory, which she feels is a disservice to the field. She identifies Peter McLaren as a pioneer in the field and discusses his three theoretical positions: teacher-as-liminal-servant, teacher-as-entertainer, and teacher-as-hegemonic-overlord. The first of the three identifications is the closest ideal for the creative, or nontraditional classroom, as it is a model where the teacher is able to explore material *with* their students. This type of teacher serves as a guide for student learning. On the opposite end of the

spectrum is the teacher-as-hegemonic-overlord where the student plays an extremely minimal role and the teacher delivers information as if it were an object.

The third categorical label, teacher-as-entertainer, serves a teacher-student relationship where the teacher performs *for* students with a result where students may be entertained but do not necessarily learn from the encounter. This type of relationship is more clearly and explicitly examined in the Dr. Fox lecture experiment as discussed in “The Doctor Fox Lecture: A paradigm of Educational Seduction,” in the *Journal of Medical Education* (July 1973). In this article, the researchers discuss an experiment testing the efficacy of an educator that delivers big on personality and entertainment without necessarily the educational content to match. To test their theory, they posed a professional actor as a bogus expert lecturer for a body composed of “a group of highly trained educators” (2). The actor, posing as the bogus, “Dr. Fox,” was instructed to deliver a meaningless lecture “with an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiters, and contradictory statements. All this was to be interspersed with parenthetical humor and meaningless references to unrelated topics” (2). Not one participant identified “Dr. Fox” as a charlatan. The researchers found, that even though the audience, or the learners in this case, were educators themselves, that they were unable to detect the fraudulence and were “seduced” by the behavior of the actor. This study debunks the easily assumed notion that the true aim of a creative, or inquiry based, classroom, is that of teacher-as-entertainer.

While Prendergast’s article is helpful in understanding the teacher as performer metaphor, it is also important to more closely explore the specific type of student-focused classroom that would be most closely supported by the theatre practitioners discussed in this thesis. Keith Sawyer, a theatre practitioner and educator, writes about a classroom environment grounded in “disciplined improvisation,” in his article, “Creative Teaching: Collaborative

Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation” (2004). He argues that while scripted instruction is easier to assess, that creative teaching “emphasizes learning for deeper understanding, rather than mastery of lower-order facts and skills” (12). He also identifies that our current economy and societal structure demands workers who have mastery of the type of higher thinking skill that creative teaching engenders.

Sawyer’s definition of a “disciplined improvisation” based classroom stems from an exploration of the nature of a dialogic learning environment. His argument is founded in the claim that “effective classroom discussion is improvisational, because the flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all participants, both teachers and students” (13). He finds that the adjective “disciplined” further clarifies his position because teaching “always occurs within broad structures and frameworks” (13), essentially there are always rules and guidelines that teachers will need to perform within.

In this classroom of disciplined improvisation where students and teachers work together to form collective knowledge, “the teacher does not evaluate any given answer, but instead facilitates a collaborative improvisation among the students, with the goal of guiding them toward the social construction of their own knowledge” (15). In this type of classroom, Sawyer identifies that teachers must be highly trained in their content area as well as in techniques that encourage collaboration, which can prove to be quite difficult for some educators. He compares this type of environment to a performing ensemble: “Improvising ensembles are similarly heteroglossic, as the voices of the performers meld together through a give and take whereby intersubjectivity is collaboratively emergent” (16), and he also notes that this type of ensemble learning experience can only take place when the teacher has not preplanned or scripted the outcome, but has provided a truly improvisational experience.

Prendergast's exploration of "teacher as performer" paired with Sawyer's discussion of a "disciplined improvisation" learning environment creates and establishes a solid foundation in which to discuss and explore the usefulness of theatre techniques and methods as pedagogical tools. Through examining and adapting the practices of theatre practitioners, Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, it is possible to create a learning model that is grounded in disciplined improvisation and that is less focused on the performance of the classroom teacher and that is more focused on the learning process of the students.

Spolin and Boal provide an excellent lens for examining the potential of theatre practice as a pedagogical model. Both artists' philosophy is grounded in improvisation, an essential ingredient in the type of classroom advocated by Sawyer and supported by Prendergast. Each theatre practitioner is also interested in physical bodies and using the body to clarify and to facilitate communication between members of a community. The games and exercises developed by both Spolin and Boal are easily adaptable for classroom use and are potentially useful in a variety of contexts and to a variety of learners.

It is also important, for the purpose of this thesis, to understand the definition of whom the "student" or "learner" is. In this paper I am concerned with the predominantly traditional pedagogical model being practiced in American public schools and the potential of a creative model to significantly impact and increase learning. Because private schools, in most cases, do not rely on government funding they have greater freedom to experiment with and to implement creative or nontraditional pedagogies in their classrooms. Due to this increased freedom, private schools may enjoy classrooms where some of these philosophies are already in place. It is also true, that the majority of our nation's students attend public school, and thus, advocating for change in this forum has the potential to impact a larger population of students. While I am

personally very interested in the secondary classroom, the models that are suggested by Spolin and Boal and that are discussed in this thesis are adaptable for either elementary or for secondary education classrooms. The learners or students discussed in this paper are learners that would normally be subjected to a traditional teaching approach in our public schools, whether they are elementary, secondary, or otherwise.

Viola Spolin's improvisational training model closely aligns with the educational philosophy of prominent educational psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. Both of these educators draw on the power of play as a powerful motivator and impetus for learning. They also both advocate for a communal learning environment. While Spolin's model was originally intended for the training of actors in an improvisational performance ensemble, her theatre game system is not only adaptable for, but potentially a very powerful classroom tool.

Augusto Boal's theatre model, most clearly characterized in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, is heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In these models, participants and learners gain control of their experience and learning. Both of these practitioners are interested in deconstructing traditional oppressive power structures. Boal's original intent was to restructure theatre performance in an effort to create a tool that might free spectators from their oppression and provide an opportunity for them to act: both in the performance and in their lives. This model is not only useful as a theatre tool for social change, but as a pedagogical tool in the classroom.

Due to the similarities in pedagogical thought between the theatre artists and education philosophers, it seems clear that these theatre models not only have merit as theatre training methods, but that they provide a strong pedagogical framework for classroom teachers. Because of the close correlation between the philosophy of each theatre artist and the education

philosophers, and due to the way in which each theatre model supports the collaborative and inquiry based classroom model, I believe that these theatre models can provide a new and effective pedagogical model for student learning in the public school classroom.

Work and research in the area of learning styles and learning preferences, such as Gardiner's multiple intelligences, is important and helpful, but rather than furthering this research, I am more interested in providing examples of potential structures or frameworks for learning that can honor each of these learning styles. The improvisational theatre models that I am interested in studying, those of Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, provide equal opportunity for various styles of learning while also engendering a communal learning environment.

While there is source material about the practices of both Spolin and Boal, there is very little evidence of their attempted use in a classroom. Likewise, there is very little scholarship available on creative pedagogy as a practice, which is surprising due to the potential to significantly increase student engagement and learning in public schools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This serves as a selective review and survey of available scholarship regarding critical performance pedagogy, the practice of Viola Spolin, the scholarship of Lev Vygotsky, the practice of Augusto Boal, and the theory of Paulo Freire. While not all of these sources are directly referenced in this thesis, each source is important in establishing an appropriate context. The review begins with sources that directly pertain to pedagogy and to educational models. It continues with sources of and relating to the work of Viola Spolin and Lev Vygotsky and moves on to works of and relating to the work of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal have been chosen as a focus for this thesis for several reasons. Both of these theatre artists use improvisational technique as the foundation of their practice, which as



discussed is a useful framework for reimagining the structure of the traditional classroom. In my work with the techniques of both artists, I have found that the techniques are also highly adaptable to unique and individual classroom needs. In addition, foundationally, their philosophies are aligned closely with those of leading education theorists.

In Monica Prendergast's "Teacher as Performer: Unpacking a Metaphor in Performance Theory and Critical Performative Pedagogy" (2008), she very thoroughly makes a connection between performance studies and educational pedagogy. The article examines the metaphor of teacher as performer in the context of performance studies scholarship and it ultimately defines the roles of teachers as "interpretive performers of curriculum" and "as critically interactive spectators in their students' performance of learning" (17). This resource provides a broad overview of many different perspectives in the teacher as performer metaphor as well as provides a helpful list of further source material.

In Keith Sawyer's article, "Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation" (2004), we are provided with a more specific look at the practice of teaching as an improvisational performance. It also outlines the use of improvisational techniques within realistic educational scenarios. The article also discusses questions of teacher training and the possible value of training teachers to use collaborative and creative methodology in the classroom. This piece is extremely helpful in contributing to creating a definition for the disciplined improvisational classroom model.

"The Doctor Fox Lecture: A Paradigm of Educational Seduction" (1973), by Naftulin, Ware, and Donnelly is an article written about the notorious "Dr. Fox Lecture." This is an experiment involving an actor posing as an expert and delivering a lecture of which he had no knowledge of the subject content. The experiment examines the influence of a "performative"

teacher. The audience, a mix of graduate students and professionals, believed and devoured the content of this bogus lecture and thus raises the question of the possible clouding of subject matter when a teacher is entertaining and engaging.

Bob Jeffrey's "Creative Teaching and Learning: Towards a Common Discourse and Practice" (2006), is an investigation of creative teaching methods being utilized in Europe. The article gives examples of creative teaching elements as well as how the methods seem to influence learning.

Jere Brophy and Stefinee E. Pinnegar's *Learning from Research on Teaching: Perspective, Methodology, and Representation* (2005) tackles some tough questions about the quality of teacher education. It approaches it from the perspective of pre-service (teachers in the process of learning how to teach) and in-service teaching professionals (teachers currently in the profession).

Patricia Cooper's *The Classrooms all Young Children Need: Lessons in Teaching from Vivian Paley* (2009) is an investigation of Vivian Paley's pedagogical approach to teaching. Called the pedagogy of meaning, it is about using creative methods to access content, which ultimately has the goal of teaching a broad concept. Paley frequently uses such creative methods as storytelling and dramatization to do this. Although Paley's work is focused on younger children, the work is still relevant to all public school classrooms.

*Smart Moves: Why Learning is not all in Your Head* (1995), by Carla Hannaford, explores the importance of a students' physical body in the role of learning. This is an important aspect since most creative pedagogies involve movement and interactive methodologies.

*Room 109: The Promise of a Portfolio Classroom* (1997) provides a close look at one teacher's portfolio based classroom model. Richard Kent's model is one that embraces non-

traditional teaching and learning methods. This source is important as an example of a successful learner directed curriculum model. The book not only includes suggestions of creative and learner directed lesson plans but affirmations from former students. This also provides a potential solution to questions regarding assessment in a creative classroom.

In *Teaching as a Performing Art* (1999), Seymour Sarason uses a lifetime of personal experience as a teacher and a student in the classroom to make a case for change in teacher training and in teaching methodology. He suggests the goal for American schools should be to develop a culture where students are motivated to be self directed learners. Sarason suggests that the most effective way to do this is to study the act of teaching as an art form and to use methods that will not only entertain their audience but that will stimulate and energize their learning.

As the title suggests, *Myths and Misconceptions about Teaching: What Really Happens in the Classroom* (2006), explores the “myths,” as Vicki Snider sees them, of the teaching practice. Snider argues that teaching should be viewed as a science rather than an “art.” Ultimately the book presents the argument that creative pedagogies are valuable, but only in good measure with a respectable curriculum and certainly not at the expense of the solid provision of subject matter. This source also contains a valuable discussion of the issues inherent in American education practices.

Chronicling the teaching career and applauding the creative teaching methods of Albert Cullum, the film, *A Touch of Greatness* (2004), directed by Leslie Sullivan, highlights the traditional attitudes of American educators and the positive influences that creative pedagogies can have on students. Using, what Albert Cullum refers to as, “Cullum Theatre Technique,” he embraced creative and learner directed methodologies to engage students in self directed learning. He later taught pre-service teachers, people earning an education in the art of teaching,

these methods. The film includes powerful affirmations from former Cullum students of the successful use of the method.

Beetlestone's *Creative Children, Imaginative Teaching* (1998), Herbert's *Pedagogy of Creativity* (2010), Craig and Deretchin's *Cultivating Curious and Creative Minds* (2010), Preiss and Sternberg's *Innovations in Educational Psychology* (2010), and Leonard and Willis' *Pedagogies of the Imagination* (2008) are all education texts that question traditional pedagogical methods and suggest alternative ways of teaching as well as using science to support the claims.

*Improvisation for the Theater* (1963), *Theater Games for the Classroom* (1986), and *Theatre Games for Rehearsal; a Director's Handbook* (1985), by Viola Spolin, are primary sources that explain and detail Viola Spolin's strategy and philosophy behind actor education. While *Improvisation for the Theatre* is the most helpful as a descriptor of her Improvisational system, *Theatre Games for the Classroom* provides examples and potential instructions for use of her theatre games system in a classroom setting.

The Spolin Center website is also particularly helpful, not only for subject content, but as a reference work that links directly to articles and other sources regarding Spolin's work.

*Social Group Work* (1937), by Neva Boyd, is an example and a look at the type of work done by Ms. Boyd. This is helpful, as Neva Boyd was Viola Spolin's mentor and Spolin attributes many of her foundational principles to her.

*Vygotsky and Creativity; A Cultural-Historical Approach to Play, Meaning Making, and the Arts* (2010) provides a description and some applications of the work of educational philosopher and scientist, Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's theories regarding the process of learning are very closely aligned with those of Viola Spolin. Vygotsky will be examined in this project as

a prominent educational theoretician that supports the theory and philosophy behind Viola Spolin's Theatre Game system. *Vygotsky at Work and Play* (2009) and *Lev Vygotsky; Revolutionary Scientist* (1993) are also sources that will help illuminate the work of this scientist.

In the *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), Augusto Boal deconstructs the power structure between performer and spectator. He draws clear lines from Aristotle and discusses the traditional performer as an oppressive force on the people. Boal suggests a theatre where the spectator becomes an involved and equally powerful spect-actor and where the people can have a "rehearsal for revolution." Through Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, the people are able to experiment, converse, and experience problem solving for problems and issues that are directly relevant to them. Through this process, they are activated to make social change rather than deactivated through a traditional cathartic moment. Other books by Boal that play in a discussion of his theories and methods include *Games for Actors and Non Actors* (2002) as well as *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* (2006) which he co-authored with Adrian Ward Jackson.

The following secondary sources discuss Boal's work; Duffy's *Youth and Theatre of the Oppressed* (2010), Schutzman and Cruz's *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism* (1994), and Frances Babbage's *Augusto Boal* (2004).

*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) by Paulo Freire, served as primary source material for Boal's theatre model. Freire examines a traditional educational model and describes it in terms of oppressor and oppressed. He uses the metaphor of "banking" to describe the teacher-focused model of education: a teacher depositing a content laden script into the student vessel. His philosophy is very closely aligned with my own thoughts regarding effective pedagogy and also provides the foundation for the Boal improvisational theatre model.

The following secondary sources examine Freire's pedagogical model: Gadotti's *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Work* (1994), Roberts' *Paulo Freire in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Education, Dialogue and Transformation* (2010), Collins' *Paulo Freire, His Life, Works, and Thought* (1977), and Taylor's *The Texts of Paulo Freire* (1993).

Chapter Three of this thesis is a literature review of available case studies that examine the use of Boal and Spolin technique in classroom contexts.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### **Chapter One:**

Chapter One focuses on the theories of Lev Vygotsky, specifically those concerning the importance of imagination and power of play on learner development and the Zone of Proximal Development. These ideas and theories are particularly helpful in a discussion of not only the theory and practice of Viola Spolin and her Theatre Games model, but the potential power of using her model as a pedagogical classroom tool.

Play is not only essential to human beings that are part of developing an acting ensemble, however. As has been suggested, play is an essential human act that educators can engage and that seems to be lacking from our traditional educational institutions. Noted educational philosopher, Lev Vygotsky, had similarly held beliefs. It was his observation that in the Western world, play was deemed unimportant for any but the young child. Vygotsky also notes the attitudes that adults commonly have regarding creativity in young children. As children grow, he asserts, adults put less and less value on creative play or creative behavior in general. He explains that creativity exists in the human being as a tool for problem solving, but societally it is not valued or encouraged. It seems, based on such held opinions, that Spolin's development of

workshop exercises that depend on extended play behavior, may have an important and necessary place in the traditional classroom.

Viola Spolin is often referred to as the “mother” of improvisational theatre. In partnership with her son, Paul Sills, she helped to train and to develop the original Second City ensemble. While this is notable and important to theatre and comedy history, her contributions have a potentially far wider scope. In 1963, Spolin published her notable work, *Improvisation for the Theater*, which contains her most complete compilation of acting games and exercises. This publication would be followed by several other collections of games and exercises. The development of her theatre game system of actor training has proven to be useful not only in the development of improvisational acting ensembles but in other contexts as well.

Spolin’s theater games were originally developed as a theater education tool, but progressive classroom teachers will find that her exercises and games developed for actors are also useful in developing classroom community. Spolin’s philosophies regarding the power of play, the communal group experience, and the reservation of judgment are all qualities that are equally as attractive in the classroom as they are in the theatre ensemble. Her methodologies that she developed to achieve her philosophic goals not only produce acting results, but they are easily accessible and adaptable for the classroom. Spolin, herself, was aware of this potential and wrote *Theatre Games for the Classroom* in 1986.

## **Chapter Two:**

In Chapter Two, I will examine the work of Paulo Freire, focusing on his seminal, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). While this is not his only text of pedagogical importance and merit, it is his most noted and is also the work that Augusto Boal would model his *Theatre of the Oppressed* after in 1974. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire examines the power dynamic

between teacher and learner and, while identifying the traditional pedagogical model as a “banking” system of learning, advocates for a classroom community where students become the focus and are capable of and encouraged to create and benefit from a community discourse.

I will then compare Freire’s pedagogical theory and philosophy with that of Augusto Boal, a theatre practitioner that created and developed theatre techniques intending to give voice to the oppressed and to provide a forum that encourages revolution or change. Boal’s goal in creating the Theatre of the Oppressed was to provide a theatrical forum that people could use to explore conflict, oppression, and problem solving. Three of the foundational exercises explored in Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*, include Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, and Invisible Theatre. These exercises are not only valuable in the political context that Boal intended them for, but they can also be successfully and usefully utilized in an educational context.

### **Chapter Three:**

Chapter Three offers a brief selection of potential adaptations of Spolin and Boal’s exercises for classroom use. It also serves as a literature review of case studies where Spolin’s and Boal’s techniques have actually been used in a classroom setting. While there seems to be a dearth of examples where this has occurred, the available examples are recommendations for their practice. In each case, educators identified positive learning results and the development of strong classroom community and dialogue from the practice. In some cases, examples are provided in how one might adapt the techniques to a classroom setting.

The theatre practices of Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, though developed for widely different purposes and varying in their specific structure and makeup, are also similar in many ways. Both models are potentially useful as pedagogical tools and share foundational theory and



philosophy with respected education philosophers. The models suggested by Spolin and Boal could support a student-focused classroom grounded in creative pedagogy.

## **Chapter One: Lev Vygotsky and Viola Spolin**

**“The fear is not of the unknown, but of not knowing,”**

**“Change is not enough. This body of work asks more: transformation.”**

**-Viola Spolin, *Improvisation* xiv and xv**

Viola Spolin (1906-1994) is often referred to as the “mother” of improvisational theatre. In partnership with her son, Paul Sills, she helped to train and to develop the Second City ensemble. While this is notable and important to theatre and comedy history, her contributions have a potentially far wider scope. In 1963, Spolin published her most notable work, *Improvisation for the Theater*, which contains her most complete compilation of acting games and exercises. This publication would be followed by several other published collections of games and exercises. The development of her theatre game system of actor training has proven to be useful in the development of improvisational acting ensembles but is potentially useful as a model for a secondary education classroom as well.

Spolin’s philosophy and theory is well regarded in the world of improvisational theatre but it is actually similar in many ways to the theory and work of noted education philosopher, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934). His work is regarded as seminal in the world of education philosophy and educators often draw on his writing to justify and develop education systems and reform. By comparing Viola Spolin’s theatre game system to the work of Lev Vygotsky, I hope to make a clear argument for the value of modeling secondary education classrooms after her system of games and instructional philosophy.

Born in Russia in 1896, ten years before Viola Spolin, Lev Vygotsky would become an important figure in the field of educational psychology. Drawing on influences from such contemporaries as Karl Marx and Ivan Pavlov, he also showed a strong interest in the correlation between learning and the arts. In fact, his dissertation at Moscow University was focused on the psychology of art and used Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as example and inspiration.

Due to multiple translations of Vygotsky's work, and the fact that much of his work was not available until long after his death, his work has been interpreted and analyzed in varying ways. It is also widely noted that his thinking transformed and developed throughout his lifetime. While it has been argued that Vygotsky may have been initially driving towards a teacher-centered educational approach, the theories and concepts in his writing, particularly in his later years, are particularly supportive of creative and nontraditional pedagogy. Some of his most important and prominent work focuses on the importance of imagination, play, and what he labeled the Zone of Proximal Development (the influence of a community of peer learners) on the process of learning. These ideas are central to a creative pedagogy and also reinforce the philosophy and foundations of Viola Spolin's theatre game system.

Vygotsky offers us some definitions and appropriate applications of the concepts of play and imagination that will be helpful in our examination of Viola Spolin's Theatre Game system as well as in a discussion of the potential beneficial use and application of her methodologies in the classroom. Spolin's practice has a particular emphasis on these concepts and Vygotsky also held an interest in and believed in the power of the two. While it may seem that the concepts of play and of imagination are so similar that they may be discussed as the same idea, this would actually be a disservice to both Vygotskian theory and to the later principles and foundations of Viola Spolin's theatre game system. The concepts are certainly interrelated and depend on one

another for both comprehension and application, but they must be examined separately to achieve a full understanding.

For Vygotsky, imagination is central to learning development. In an effort to understand the implication that imagination has on Vygotsky's analysis of play behavior, we must examine his definition of imagination. In his lecture, "Imagination and its Development in Childhood" (1987), he advances the analysis of imagination from the work of prior psychologists. He discusses the relationship of imagination to memory and the collision of imagination with cognition of reality.

While Vygotsky readily agrees that imagination is closely related to an individual's actual experience and to their memories of their experiences, he is adamant in his assertion that imaginative behavior is due to an individual's ability to mesh these remembered experiences into new and fantastical concepts or ideas. Previous psychologists believed that "[n]ew combinations of elements appear in creative imagination. The elements themselves, however, are not new" (Vygotsky, *Collected Works*, 340) and any new combination of these elements, though they might occur, were purely accidental in their formation. Vygotsky uses the theories of both Freud and Piaget, however to unseat these theories. He claims that imagination and development of imagination in children is directly linked to their verbal abilities, and thus, becomes a directed and intentional practice. He states, "The development of imagination is linked to the development of speech, to the development of the child's social interaction with those around him, to the basic forms of the collective social activity of the child's consciousness" (*Collected Works* 346). He uses a discussion of utopian fantasy to support the theory of directed and intentional imaginative thought.

Finally, Vygotsky writes about the relationship of imagination to reality. He discusses the emotional life and feelings of the subject as the bond. He states that “realistic thinking calls to life much more significant emotional experiences than imagination or day-dreaming” (*Collected Works* 347) while also identifying that an individual may feel real emotions as a result of their own imagination. He concretizes the importance of the relationship with the following: “The processes of invention or artistic creativity demand a substantial participation by both realistic thinking and imagination. The two act as a unity” (*Collected Works* 349). By accessing the child’s ability to imagine, while simultaneously linking the imagined experience to a realistic one that accesses the child’s emotional being, the child is able to fully realize the developmental power of the play situation.

Vygotsky asserts that play stems from a child’s facility with imagination. He claims that all play is based in an imaginary situation but is structured through rules and the players’ acceptance of the rules. Newman and Holzman suggest, “far from being free in play, it is in play that the child exhibits the most self-control” (Newman and Holzman 96). This relationship of play to imagination and the omnipresent existence of rules in the play situation is important on a number of levels. First, Vygotsky is clear that play cannot exist without imagination which is central to creating a definition of how play behavior functions. Secondly, the existence of a strong rule system and control of players in the imaginary play behavior somewhat justifies or denotes the learning and developmental potential of play behavior aside from purely social or non-academic growth.

Vygotsky asserts in a lecture originally delivered in 1933, that play behavior had previously been underrated in education theory. He discusses how previous analysis of play had viewed the behavior as purely pleasure based and imitative in quality. He noted, however, that

this is obviously inaccurate as not all play is pleasurable (ex. A player's feelings due to a lost sporting event or game) and not all pleasure is play (ex. An infant sucking on a pacifier provides a pleasurable sensation for the baby, but would not be classified as play) (*Mind in Society* 92). In addition, he recognized that play was always grounded in rules: no play situation is possible without inherent rules that exist due to the imaginary world created by the player. He writes,

What would remain if play were structured in a way that there were no imaginary situation? The rules would remain. Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules - not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game but ones that stem from an imaginary situation. (*Mind in Society* 95)

These rules govern and structure the play and provide a platform for later learning development.

While the existence of rules provides structure for play, they do not constrain the player. In fact, Vygotsky discusses the importance of play behavior as an opportunity and necessary activity to encourage children to explore potential action that may not be immediately indicated by given circumstances. In other words, he believed that play behavior was the key to teaching children to be creative and divergent thinkers: to think out of the box. He explains the natural inclination of children to react to given circumstances in a way that is determined by the physical reality or characteristic of the situation. For example, if a child is presented with a closed door, their natural inclination is to open it (*Mind in Society* 96). It is his assertion, however, that play experiences encourage children to see beyond given circumstances and to imagine alternate behavior. Not only might the child do something other than open the door, they gain the ability to imagine that the door may represent more than just a door. He comes to this conclusion

through a discussion of verbal development where he identifies how young children, and similarly, how patients with mental illness do not “have the ability to act independently of what they see” (*Mind in Society* 97). They are unable to identify objects or situations as other than they actually are. Through play, children are able to gain this ability. He describes the use of objects as playthings as a strong example of this: how a “piece of wood begins to be a doll and a stick becomes a horse” (*Mind in Society* 97), and continues with “[t]heir meaning in play, becomes the central point and objects are moved from a dominant to a subordinate position” (*Mind in Society* 98). From this discussion of childhood development through play, it is easy to see how play experiences can provide a rich and fertile platform for learning and development.

In conclusion, Vygotsky is convinced that play advances a child’s development not only due to the previously stated reasons, but also because in play behavior, children are able to perform at a level that is developmentally beyond them, they “always behave beyond their average age, above [their] daily behavior” (*Mind in Society* 102). Play allows the child to make meaning and to allow meaning to predominate over any actual given circumstances. The player learns to make conscious decisions and choices that are not bound by their actual given circumstances. In this way, play leads the development of the player and provides an opportunity for advanced learning that the child may not have the opportunity to experience in their daily activity.

Vygotsky’s work with imagination and play is helpful in understanding the value of Viola Spolin’s theatre game system, as will be discussed later, but of equal importance is his development of his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. One of his most interesting and widely studied principles, the ZPD represents a range of potential learning and the relationship of learning to development within a human being. Vygotsky asserts that the ability or the potential

of a child to learn a concept is somewhat separate to any learning that has already taken place. In other words, any learning that can be regurgitated by a student represents development that has already occurred and does not indicate the potential of future learning, nor any learning that is currently taking place.

Understanding Vygotsky's stance on the relationship of learning to development is primary in understanding the importance of the Zone of Proximal Development. Central to his theory of the ZPD is the idea that the process of learning leads development rather than follows it. Vygotsky believed that the process of learning produced development rather than occurring as a result of it. As Vygotsky scholar Holzman states, "the zpd [sic] points to the dialectic of human life (being/ becoming) in that it entails relating to people as capable of doing what they do not yet know how to do and what is, therefore, beyond them, . . . [t]hey construct zones that allow them *to become*" (Holzman, *Vygotsky at Work and Play*, 30, original emphasis). Similarly, Holzman and Newman introduce the ZPD in the following way: "In investigating the relationship between learning and development, Vygotsky made the common sense (but no less significant) observation that if we determine the child's level of development from observations of what he/or she can do independently (of others), then we are in fact considering what has already matured" (56). Vygotsky clearly describes the ZPD in "Thinking and Speech" (1934), by giving an example of two children who are identified as mentally developed at the same level. He continues to examine the children's intellect and learning development through studying their problem solving abilities. Each child is hypothetically given tasks to accomplish that are beyond their current developmental level and are given assistance and collaboration from an adult. While both children are currently identified to be at the same level of development, one child is able to perform new tasks at a level that is far more proficient than the other child. Thus, we are able to



more accurately assess the Zone of Proximal Development based not only on the current abilities of each child but also in their potential ability to perform tasks and to solve problems. The ZPD is the “differential between his performance in independent and collaborative work” (*Collected Works*, 209). Newman and Holzman expand this theory, “Central, then, to the discovery of the ZPD was Vygotsky’s concern with the character of the relationship between ‘matured’ and ‘maturing processes’ and, what seems plainly related, . . . the relationship of what the child can do independently and in collaboration with others” (56). While each child was currently developmentally matched with the other, their potential for growth in a collaborative situation determines their ZPD.

Perhaps more exciting than the mere existence or discovery of the Zone of Proximal Development is the implication and indication that the development of higher learning skills is best accomplished in collaboration with others; both peers and instructors.

This tenet is a foundational thesis for Vygotsky: “with collaboration, direction, or some kind of help the child is always able to do more and solve more difficult tasks that he can independently” (*Collected Works*, 209), which, if taken out of context or on its own might indicate very little. After all, it seems like common knowledge that a human being might be able to accomplish greater things with the assistance of other human beings. However, Vygotsky expands this thought and places it in the context of the existence and importance of the ZPD. He continues,

We said that in collaboration the child can always do more than he can independently. We must add the stipulation that he cannot do infinitely more [...] there always exists a definite, strictly lawful distance that determines the

differential between his performance in independent and collaborative work.

*(Collected Works, 209)*

It is here, that he clarifies and strengthens his theory about the nature of collaboration and the impact that it has on development. He explains that collaboration not only increases a learner's potential on a specific task, but that the collaboration also increases and advances the development of the learner and will become part of the scaffolding process for that learner. In other words, the collaboration provides a learning experience that will impact future learning and development that would not be available to the learner in an independent learning situation.

Vygotsky also positions this theory within the context of formal education: "Instruction would be completely unnecessary if it merely utilized what had already matured in the developmental process, if it were not itself a source of development" (*Collected Works, 212*). He campaigns for educators to continue *developing* the student rather than focusing on processes that the student has already mastered. In stating, "what the child is able to do in collaboration today, he is able to do independently tomorrow" (*Collected Works, 211*), he suggests that educators should continue to focus on the use of structured collaboration among both the learner's peers and between the learner and the instructor rather than on independent study.

Across the globe, in Chicago, Viola Spolin was working to develop her theatre game system, although it was not initially intended as an actor training system. The importance of play is a foundational element of the development of Spolin's theatre games and the influence of Neva Boyd on this Spolin philosophy is unmistakable. Although Spolin desired to be an actor and spent time training with the Group Theatre in New York City, her fate was not to become a performer. Faced with financial struggles in New York, she was offered a position as a "settlement worker," an occupation that serves the occupants of settlement homes, by early

sociologist, Neva Boyd, at Hull House in Chicago (Sweet Web). Boyd was intensely involved with the operations of Hull House, a settlement house created to serve European immigrants, as well as in the development of the modern social work movement. Boyd's background in early childhood education and her commitment to providing formal education opportunities to the underserved led her to develop progressive theories about the importance of group play on individual and social development.

Spolin worked closely with Boyd at the Neva Boyd School of Creative Drama that operated mainly out of Hull House. It was here that Spolin began to specifically develop exercises and activities that grew from Boyd's theories concerning the importance of play. In an essay, Boyd said the following,

The child gradually learns right and wrong, good and bad, in the play situation.

In play, there is pleasurable disciplined behavior in moral education. There is ethical education involved in play activities and play situations. The play patterns of a particular cultural group are preservers of social customs. Children play family life, shop keeping, etc., patterned after the culture of the group, but they also exhibit courage, endure pain unflinchingly, respect the rights of others and willingly abide by the agreements made in play. The spirit of play develops social adaptability and child ethics. (Schwartz, "Boyd Play Theory" Web)

It was Boyd's closely held belief, that play was not only instinctual in human beings, but a necessary expression. She believed that the power of play created community, taught social skills, and reinforced social codes of ethics.

Boyd's instruction often focused on games with rules and regulations such as folk dance and traditional established games (Sills 7). Boyd's variety of games also shared the distinction of

being activities where each participant has the opportunity to contribute as an equal (Sweet Web). Spolin includes some of these same games in *Theater Games for the Classroom*. In this volume, she says of the traditional and often recognizable games that she gathered from her experience with Boyd, “Their spirit is deeply rooted in our history and folk life . . . these games touch us, in short, where we are most human” (24). Clearly her choice to include these games in her theatre games canon indicates a link between culturally and socially significant roots and the ability to access deeply human instinct and intuition in a group setting. Spolin not only borrows these specific traditional exercises from her experiences with Boyd, but also a demand for the practice of play. This attitude is not only evident in her collection of acting exercises but also in the specific terminology that she uses. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin explains that she feels more comfortable referring to her actors as “players” (1). This is a clear gesture to not only clarify her position on the necessity of play, but also the role of the actor in the theatre games workshop. A person in the role of “actor” might expect to perform a determined role for an audience, a “player” might expect to experiment, to problem solve, to use the self in an artistic exploration.

Gary Schwartz, a student and disciple of Viola Spolin, is now a teacher of her work. In “The Power of Play,” he too explores the importance of play: “when we truly play, our intuitive ability engages and our minds become fully focused on the problem that the game asks us to solve” (Schwartz, “The Power of Play” Web). This seems to suggest that not only does play reinforce social and moral human code, it also provides a platform for people to access intuition as a method of problem solving. The participant in the theater game is able to practice and hone skills that are essential to his or her survival.

Play is not only essential to human beings that are part of a developing acting ensemble, however. As has been suggested, play is an essential human act that even educators can appreciate and that seems to be lacking from our educational institutions. In the same article referenced above, Schwartz states, “Fun is not an escape from reality. It is a doorway into reality. [Currently,] [s]chools . . . teach us what to think, not how to think” (“Power of Play” Web).

Additionally, these ideas and theories regarding the power of play very closely echo those of Lev Vygotsky. While it is not likely that Spolin was directly influenced by the Russian education philosopher, it is clear that their foundational beliefs are similar. Vygotsky’s theories are held in high regard in the education world, so it seems to follow that Spolin’s system, rooted in some of the same theories might also prove valuable to educators. It is not only in the focus on play behavior that their philosophies merge, however.

Closely linked with the power of play and of play behavior is the importance that lies in the development of community and the communal experience. In her published work, Spolin stresses the importance of the group over that of the individual. In *Theater Games for the Classroom*, she states in the opening chapter, “the theater workshop can become a place where teachers and students meet as fellow players, involved with one another” (2) and in *Improvisation for the Theater* this idea is clarified further, “Group participation and agreement remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open the way for harmony” (11). In a 1987 interview, Viola Spolin speaks about competition as ineffective stimulation for personal progress. She says in a discussion of the attitude of players in theatre games workshops, “The excitement doesn’t come from competition, it comes from extending yourself. And man extends himself: he doesn’t go to the moon because of competition, he goes because of the extension” (*The Spolin Center* Web). She is clear about the necessity of group

harmony in an improvisational acting ensemble where each member must rely on the other ensemble members for support and for direction as well as her observations that when players work together, and are able to freely access their own intuition, that the experience becomes stronger and more powerful than they would have been able to achieve on their own.

She is, however, careful to be clear that this community should not grow from popular politics. The community should grow from what she references in several of her works as “group agreement.” She explains that group agreement does not grow from “tyranny of the majority” but from a “mutual respect” (*Classroom* 17). In the ensemble, members have a full voice and their opinion matters.

This group mentality is also a necessary, if often lacking, aspect of a group learning environment. James Hoetker, of Florida State University, examines the potential use of Viola Spolin’s *Improvisation for the Theater* in the traditional classroom. He explains that, “children are inherently equal in their capacity to learn” (Hoetker 5) (referring to students’ ability to participate in the learning process, not to be confused with Vygotsky’s discussion about potential intellectual rate of development in the ZPD) but then explores how the engendering of academic competition in the classroom can serve to create an inequality. He believes that using drama activities, such as those compiled by Viola Spolin, can help to level the playing field and to create an environment where students are encouraged to use their intuition to be problem solvers. In an environment where the act of problem solving holds more value than the correct answer, and where the experience of learning as a group is prized, community and ensemble can more easily grow.

It is this focus on communal learning that parallels the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky’s ZPD reinforces and justifies the ideal Viola Spolin learning

environment by providing further explanation and credence to her strong reliance on creating an ensemble of players rather than a group of actors. Obviously this community structure proves useful as a foundation for teaching improvisational acting skills, but when paired with Vygotsky's theory, it is clear that her training system has developmental and educational benefits that are appropriate to the public school classroom as well.

Spolin recognizes some potential obstacles to achieving this ideal communal experience, however. It is her firmly held philosophy that any judgment within the world of the theatre workshop is crippling to the community of players. This judgment is not only reserved for the coach or leader of the workshop but also for the peer players and audience. In the same 1987 interview referenced earlier, Spolin explains, "the approval disapproval system is killing us . . . I don't believe in success and failure" (*The Spolin Center* Web). This attitude is explored time and again throughout her published work as well. Each volume has a dedicated entry on approval and disapproval.

While audience response is an important and integral piece of her theatre game system, this response should not be expressed as an opinion about the experience. It is, instead, a reflection of what was actually seen. Audience members are asked to vocalize a response about everything they see on the stage rather than to place judgments of their perceived value of the work. Spolin strongly encourages audiences to let go of prejudice and preconceived notions of behavior (*Improvisation* 26). In *Improvisation for the Theater*, she reveals her opinion on the role of audience and on the proposed relationship of audience to actor. She writes, "When there is understanding of the role of audience, complete release and freedom come to the player. Exhibitionism withers away when the student-actor begins to see members of the audience not as judges or censors or even as delighted friends but as a group with whom an experience is being

shared” (13). The role of audience becomes an organic part of the process rather than a body of people to be performed for and as such they become a useful tool for growth rather than a creatively crippling force.

The workshop leader, too, should be very cognizant of their role in organizing and facilitating these theatre games. While Spolin’s canon relies on a “side coach” that not only observes the action, but also vocally encourages the players during the exercises, it is necessary that this coach have a clear understanding about how they should do so. This coach must never place value on the actions of the players, but instead serve as a guide or facilitator of the exercises. Hoetker confirms that even positive encouragement or recognition from a coach may create a competitive environment (7). Spolin takes this further in an explanation of what she calls the approval disapproval syndrome. She postulates that from an early age, approval and disapproval from authority figures cause human beings to evaluate their instincts and intuitions as “good and bad.” Because of this, she explains that approval and disapproval from authority figures can, and will, stunt creativity in a group environment by causing players to internally audit (*Classroom* 9). The goal of the theater games workshop is to encourage participants to lower their defenses, not to create a situation where players are catering to the whims of a leader. When a leader or authority figure imposes judgment, players will mirror the desires of that coach rather than accessing their own tools, thus limiting the effectiveness and scope of the given exercise.

While educators try to promote a learning environment that is free of judgment, both student peers and authority figures consistently expose students of the traditional classroom environment to judgment and assessment. Students compete for academic excellence in an environment that is often unbalanced. Competition is routinely the driving force in many



educational institutions. Because of this severe sense of competition, bullying is becoming an increasing problem in American schools. By implementing the use and integration of Spolin's theatre games in the classroom, students may learn to respect the individuality of fellow players. Because of the integral importance and nature of play in the Spolin canon of exercises, students draw on their own experiences to problem solve. During theatre games, "participants are free to reach the game's objective in any manner they choose . . . In fact, any unusual or extraordinary way of resolving the problem of the game is likely to be applauded by one's fellow players" (*Classroom 3*). As fellow players in the theatre game, students would learn to appreciate the individuality and unique qualities of their peers. The act of problem solving as a team may provide an otherwise unavailable platform or opportunity for students to connect with one another. This element of communal group acceptance and value for individuality would be a welcome addition to any classroom environment.

These explored philosophies provide a pedagogical foundation for the various methods embedded in Spolin's series of drama exercises and games. The use of the "game," the practice of players accessing their intuitions and instinct, and the role of a side coach are all vital elements in her work that serve her established pedagogical philosophy.

Games provide the entire basis and foundation of Viola Spolin's methodology. Not only do games access the power of play, but also they provide a forum for players to explore and to develop work. Games provide a structure and a framework for group work. Hoetker defines games within the Spolin world as the proposal of a problem to be solved (7). Once identified in this way, the theatre game seems to take on much more rigorous qualities. While the words "game" and "play" tend to denote qualities that seem of lesser importance, "problem solving" seems like a much more highly desired and necessary skill. These problem-solving exercises

require the players to maintain what Spolin refers to as “focus.” She often refers to this necessary focus as a metaphor. She encourages the player to think of their focus as a ball in a sports activity or game (Hoetker 9). Just as in traditional sports it is important to maintain a specific and careful focus on the ball, or the object of the exercise. The Spolin player needs to maintain focus on the given objective. In this fashion, players work together to pass and to work with the ball, or focus, of the exercise in an effort to solve the given “problem.”

The success of any of these games relies on the players’ ability to access their “intuition.” Spolin might argue that this is the most important element of any of her methods. Her theory is that when a player is truly free to access and act upon their inner intuition or instinct then they are truly able to engage with a group in an effort to solve problems. Spolin admits that this belief is closely tied to that of Stanislavsky. While Stanislavsky trained actors to access their inner selves in an effort to play “truth,” Spolin wants players to similarly access intuition to discover and to connect with their environment. She has said, “Stanislavsky is in the past. My work is on the experience of right now” (*The Spolin Center* Web). She seems to build on this idea in *Theater Games for the Lone Actor*; she writes,

In present time a path is opened to your intuition, closing the gap between thinking and doing, allowing you, the real you, your natural self, to emerge and experience directly and act freely, present to the moment you are present to.

(Preface n.pag.)

The intuition becomes not only the source for inspiration to the player but also a grounding point. The intuition becomes a link to the surrounding world and to other players.

Finally, Spolin’s philosophy and catalogue of exercises and games all call for the assistance and participation of a coach. This coach is encouraged to become a fellow player in an

effort to build community among the workshop participants. It is Spolin's belief that the participation of the teacher or coach builds community and an environment where judgment is reserved (Schwartz "Group Games Model"). This coach not only provides verbal encouragement and direction from the sidelines, but is engaged in a process of "following the follower" (Schmitt 124). The coach encourages players and attempts to propel the action of the game forward by following the actions and behaviors of the players rather than suggesting action. Spolin defines the coach as a potential "catalyst" (*Lone Actor* 6) of action but not as a planner or dictator of events. The coach is expected to encourage and provide assistance, but never to be a problem solver. It is Spolin's belief that once the coach problem solves for the player that the player will lose "initiative" and the benefit of having played the game will be lost (Schwartz "Group Games Model"). Spolin also makes it clear in her work that the coach should never jeopardize the group dynamic, but foster a community where the group supersedes the individual. In an analysis of Spolin's philosophy, Natalie Schmitt explains that there should be an absence of hierarchy within the workshop setting so that the work can be "truly collaborative" (125). This collaboration only reinforces the spirit of group problem solving in the theatre game.

It is clear through an examination of both Lev Vygotsky and Viola Spolin that they share commonalities in approach and philosophy. The educational theories of Vygotsky support the recommendation for using Spolin's theatre game system in the classroom. In the Chapter Three, I will take a closer and more specific look at implementation suggestions and case studies where Spolin's system has been useful in classrooms.

## Chapter Two: Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal

**“Revolutionary Leaders cannot think *without* the people, not *for* the people, but only *with* the people.”**

**- Paulo Freire 131, original emphasis**

Brazilian theatre practitioner and political activist, Augusto Boal (1931- 2009), is identified as an important figure in twentieth century theatre history due to his development of politically motivated theatre exercises. Boal taught and wrote about providing liberating experiences and opportunities for those that he perceived as being oppressed. He used theatre experiences as a tool for promoting dialogue and liberating thought. His most notable work, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) outlines his most notable theories and philosophies as well as providing descriptions of his basic set of theatre exercises. This work is clearly an exploration of theatre practice and of Boal’s original ideas and thought, but it is also heavily influenced by Brazilian education philosopher, Paulo Freire (1921-1997), author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), among several other well known education texts.

Paulo Freire was born to middle class parents in Brazil in 1921. Due to a loss of fortune, Freire grew up incredibly poor and from an early age expressed interest in advocating for the less fortunate (Collins 5). While he attained a law degree, he didn’t perceive himself as an incredibly gifted lawyer, and instead focused his attention on the education of the oppressed people of Brazil. Freire’s philosophy is largely based on his concept of “conscientização,” which biographer, Collins explains is “the term he uses to describe authentic education” (Collins 8) as

well as his way of describing the oppressed populations' burgeoning perception of their position within society, or as Roberts puts it, "attaining a (more) critical awareness of social reality generally and the nature of oppression in particular" (Roberts 72). Freire was not only concerned with the provision of content knowledge for the poor people of Brazil, but in the liberation that an education could provide to an oppressed population. Collins describes it this way: "By presenting participation in the political process through knowledge of reading and writing as a desirable and attainable goal for all Brazilians, Freire won the interest of the poor and gave them the hope that they could have a say in the larger issues of Brazilian life" (Collins 8). Freire considered himself an educator, but perhaps more importantly an advocate for people. Roberts writes, "Freire's effectiveness as an adult literacy educator was attributable not just to his technical competence but also to his recognition that teaching and learning are political processes" (Roberts 4). It is this attention and concern for humanization that defines and characterizes his education theory.

While *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was developed as a response to the need for education of illiterate Brazilian peasants, the work has more widely reaching implications. Although Freire's work has direct and concrete implications for third world countries, and he certainly had a specific focus on and for Brazil (Roberts 4), his work is recognized globally. Freire's philosophy and theory about the education process applies just as fittingly to the American public school system as it has to its original context. It is in this work that he deconstructs the traditional structure and relationship of teacher and student, and illuminates the oppressive nature of it. He then makes the argument for a more liberating form of education that allows the teacher and student to work together in pursuit of both knowledge and higher conceptual thinking skills.

Primary to Freire's theories regarding education is a clear definition of oppressive relationships. It is Freire's argument that oppressive relationships are limiting: in culture and, perhaps more specifically, in any educational setting. At its most basic level, he defines oppressive relationships as, "Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person" (Freire 55). He furthers this basic definition with a discussion of power structure and of control. His desire and ultimate hope, is for the oppressed population in any context to regain power over their own thinking and control over their own intake of information and learning. He identifies, however, that in oppressive relationships, the oppressive leaders are the ones that actually hold that power and control the intake of information of those that they are oppressing. He also clarifies this by indicating that in any oppressive relationship, their oppressors objectify the oppressed persons. They become less than human as they participate in the oppressive system. While it is theorized that every oppressed person desires freedom from their own oppressed state, through this desire, they often picture that freedom in the form of becoming an oppressor. This occurs due to their own limited frame of reference defined by their reality (Freire 48).

While Freire initially explores this relationship in the larger context of cultural and political oppression, he progresses to examine it in the context of students and teachers. He states, "Political action on the side of the oppressed must be pedagogical action in the authentic sense of the word, and, therefore, action *with* the oppressed" (Freire 66, original emphasis). He encourages a pedagogical relationship where the teacher works with students to create their learning experience. He clarifies his stance by identifying the traditional teaching format as a "banking" education: one in which the teacher deposits scripted and teacher determined information. The teacher is described as a narrator (Freire 71) and the student as a "listening

object” (Freire 71) and as a “receptacle” (72). He goes further in saying, “The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified” (Freire 71). Not only does this education model fit the definition of an oppressive relationship, but also he indicates that the value of the learning is diminished: the conveyed knowledge becomes limited in impact.

He advocates for a drastically different model that he calls the “problem posing” education model. In this model, students work together, not only in collaborative problem solving, but also in the generation of classroom material. Darder describes the process this way, “One of the major tasks of problem posing education is to effectively tap into the existing knowledge and hidden strengths of students’ lived histories and cultural experiences, in the process of their critical development” (Darder 101). He describes a very different student teacher relationship than the traditional banking model: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students” (Freire 72, original emphasis). Freire imagines a community where teachers are able to facilitate a dialogue among students, and may become a fellow learner as a result. He advocates,

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the student-of-the-teacher  
cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers.

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself  
taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach.

(Freire 80)

This classroom becomes an environment where students and teachers are on equal footing.

Not only does Freire advocate for problem posing education for the pedagogical value, but also because the content becomes richer and more meaningful to students due to their increased investment. He suggests that learning should occur in a dialogue between peer learners and the instructor, Roberts states, “Education in the Freirian view, should be based on a structured, purposeful, and rigorous form of dialogue between the teacher and students, and among the students themselves, rather than a monological, one-way, vertical relationship, where the teacher issues communiqués to passive, docile, patiently listening pupils” (Roberts 72). Freire suggests this dialogue should be an interchange of ideas among all members of the classroom:

Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants.

(Freire 89)

Freire imagines a classroom where all participants in the learning experience are able to contribute from their own unique and individual stance and with their own rich personal experiences.

He believes that every learner also has something to potentially teach. Freire continues these thoughts in a discussion regarding program content. He claims that, “the dialogical character of education as the practice of freedom does not begin when the teacher-student meets with the students-teachers in a pedagogical situation, but when the former first asks herself or himself *what* she or he will dialogue with the latter *about*” (Freire 93, original emphasis). Not



only is this interesting as a discussion of program content and generation of material but also due to his reference to teaching as a “practice of freedom.” This freedom is inherent in both his description of encouraged learner discourse, but also in the position of the role of the educator as a facilitator of ideas rather than a classroom dictator.

Freire insists that the communal relationship between educator and learner is integral to the success of a problem posing education model. He blatantly states, in a reference to his earlier defined relationship of oppressor to oppressed beings, “Authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ for ‘B’ or by ‘A’ about ‘B,’ but rather by ‘A’ *with* ‘B,’ mediated by the world - a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views or opinions about it” (Freire 93, original emphasis). It is clear from this passage that he sees the role of educator as a facilitator and as a contributing participant in a dialogical exploration among the learners.

It is important to note, that while Freire imagines the learning process as being the most impactful when it is controlled by the body of learners rather than exclusively by the teacher, that the teacher still holds an important role in the classroom. He often refers to the educator role as an oppressive one, though only in the context of a traditional banking education model. He is clear that the educator is important and should be valued as such. He recognizes that educators face enormous amounts of pressure. In reference to his work, Roberts writes about the role of educator: “Freire sees teaching as an act of love. Love sustains the teaching process in the face of what Freire sees as an utterly contemptuous attitude on the part of those responsible for the funding of schooling” (Roberts 42). Freire discusses the desire of the educator to liberate students through being an educator as an act of love, “No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause - the cause of liberation” (Freire 89). These

references clarify that while Freire questions the education process, that he still holds the role of educator with some regard.

Freire recognized that at the time of publication, in 1970, although also arguably true in our current time, that this problem posing education model was not in place or in practice. He recognized that there was a need for change or for transformation, and he predicts that this transformation cannot be achieved through the role of oppressor, or educator. He firmly indicates that change needs to occur among the body of learners rather than simply an adoption of behavior by a classroom educator. Freire writes, “The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not ‘marginal,’ are not people living ‘outside’ society. They have always been ‘inside’ – inside the structure that made them ‘beings for others.’ The solution is not to ‘integrate’ them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become ‘beings for themselves’ (Freire 74). While, the educator clearly has a responsibility in assisting in such a transformation, “The leaders do bear the responsibility for coordination and, at times, direction - but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis” (Freire 126), Freire believes that any lasting or impactful change should occur *among* the oppressed population in an effort to alleviate such oppression, “In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement” (Freire 69). He reinforces this by stating,

The revolutionary effort to transform these structures radically cannot designate its leaders as its *thinkers* and the oppressed as mere *doers*. If true commitment to the people, involving the transformation of the reality by which they are oppressed, requires a theory of transforming action, this theory cannot fail to

assign the people a fundamental role in the transformation process. (Freire 126, original emphasis)

Freire extends this demand for transformation to the training process. He identifies that change needs to happen among the learning community, and that while the educator has a responsibility to facilitate change, that they cannot control the change; but he extends his thinking to the training of leadership. He says the following in a response to leadership training courses, “These courses are based on the naïve assumption that one can promote the community by training its leaders - as if it were the parts that promote the whole and not the whole which, in being promoted, promotes the parts” (Freire 142). He believes that in oppressive relationships, that oppressors strive to maintain their oppressive status quo by continuing to promote leaders rather than promoting the oppressed community.

A close reading of Freire’s seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provides us with a clear understanding of his theory and philosophy. This is helpful when we examine the theory and practice of Augusto Boal, as his work, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, is very closely modeled on Freire’s. Boal used Freire’s theory to support his development of the *Theatre of the Oppressed* and his resulting series of theatre exercises and practices. With an understanding of Freire’s theory, it is easily understood how Boal’s practice became an extension of and a growth of Freire’s prior work.

Augusto Boal created and developed theatre techniques that are intended to give voice to the oppressed and to provide a forum that encourages revolution, or liberating change. As Babbage states, Boal’s goal in creating the Theatre of the Oppressed was not to, “teach theatre as an art form, but rather to make it available as a language” (Babbage 60), that people could use to explore conflict, oppression, and problem solving. Three of the foundational exercises explored

in Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, include Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, and Invisible Theatre. These exercises are not only valuable in the political context that Boal intended them for, but they can also be applied in an educational context.

A native of Brazil, Augusto Boal became the director of the Sao Paulo Arena Theater in 1956. It was at this theater that he was able to develop what he called the Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal states in *Theatre of the Oppressed* that, "theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon... [it] can also be a weapon for liberation" (ix). With a focus on exploring the role of the protagonist in theatre and on creating a forum for the Brazilian people to explore their oppression, he developed several different methods and strategies that changed the traditional role of the spectator. While these methods eventually developed into a series of carefully crafted exercises, they grew from quite baser and traditional theatre performances. In the early 1960's, while touring with the Arena Theatre, Boal was engaged in politically motivated agit-prop that played to the lower classes of rural Brazil (Mitter and Shevtsova 102). While he found that he was able to deliver a political message through this form of theatre, he recognized that the spectators were passive and were not engaged participants in the theatre experience (Boal, *Oppressed* ix), which he indicates is the case with all traditional theatre audience experiences.

Boal acknowledges the danger in the traditional Aristotelian model of drama. he asserts in *Theatre of the Oppressed* that the main tenet of tragedy, according to an Aristotelian model, is to provoke a cathartic experience from the viewer. This catharsis is a "correction" or a "purification" for the viewer (*Oppressed* 27); it is a purging of a vice or weakness that the human viewer possesses. This purging occurs as a result of the viewer seeing a character perform a scripted story with a predestined outcome. Boal writes that, through catharsis, the spectator loses

his will to act upon any of the emotions that are engaged or stimulated by the performance (*Oppressed* 37) because the outcome is dictated through the scripted ending.

Boal also experienced another danger inherent in this traditional form of political theatre. After one of Arena Theater's agitprop performances in which they sang and promoted the peasants to "give [their] blood for [their] land" (Boal, *Desire* 2), a peasant approached and asked the performers to join in their planned and armed revolution. While Boal attempted to explain that the actors' guns were props; metaphors for arms and not the actual weapons, he recognized that in delivering a specific message to spectators, he was dictating their response to the presented conflict.

In pursuit of a theatre in which the spectator could take an active role in the theatrical experience, Boal created what he calls the "spect-actor," an audience model where spectators take an active role in creating the content of the performance (Rector 307: 97). Initially, these spect-actors would provide suggestions, such as alternate endings or character behaviors, for the actors to perform. Forum Theatre was born during one of these performances when a spectator entered the playing space to demonstrate her suggestion (Mitter and Shevtsova 104). Boal recognized the power and potential for spectators to integrate into the performance and to take on the role of protagonist. The Forum Theatre model continues to swap spectators in and out of the performance in exploration of the various options for the protagonist to resolve conflict.

Forum Theatre also seemed to solve the problem presented by theatrical performances dictating spectator response. In Forum Theatre, the scripted action stops precisely at the climax of the conflict. Improvisation then takes over as the spect-actors provide various character behaviors and propose solutions to the problem at hand. Forum theatre is also designed to inspire participants to act upon their ideas in their real lives. Boal states in *Theatre of the Oppressed*,

that Forum Theatre provides the spect-actor the, “uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action” (142). Boal never intended his theatre methods to be considered revolutionary in, and of, themselves. He refers to his theatre as a “rehearsal for revolution” (*Oppressed* 122), an opportunity for the spectator to engage in a physical dialogue concerning finding solutions to the problems and issues that concern him. By taking action, the spectator is able to experiment and see the results of different behaviors and actions in a safe and protected environment. He is able to engage with other members of his community in an effort to discover a suitable solution to community problems.

Image Theatre is another exercise from Theatre of the Oppressed. Often, Boal would use Image Theatre as a way to open dialogue and discourse prior to engaging in Forum Theatre with a group of spect-actors. Image Theatre consists of the exploration of a theme or conflict through the manipulation of bodies. Participants use their bodies to create still sculpted images that reflect the situation that is under scrutiny by the group. The sculptures are then manipulated to reflect the desired outcome and resolution of the proposed conflict, and manipulated once more to depict the transition, or method, for moving from the initial problem to the resolution.

Boal’s belief was that the human body provided more information to a viewer than the spoken word. Monica Rector describes this in the following way, “Throughout his career the body has remained an essential tool that allows for comprehension of the world and the multiple social and political problems with it” (Rector 307: 98). The development of Image Theatre arose due to the many languages spoken by the South American people that Boal was primarily working with. Dozens of languages and dozens of dialects for each language exist in Northern Peru alone (Boal, *Oppressed* 120), and Boal, concerned that verbal communication was not only limited, but the common use of Spanish by such very different speakers was convoluting

connotation among theatre participants, began requesting that participants create images to convey meaning. Boal states in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, “We must not forget that words are only vehicles which convey meanings, emotions, memories, ideas... which are not necessarily the same for everyone: *the word spoken is never the word heard*” (174, original emphasis).

Unlike Forum Theatre, Image Theatre requires spectators to engage and to participate from the start. They are encouraged to explore specific immediate issues that may be unique to each participant, such as family. The intent is to create communication among participants that is not concretized by the spoken word, but that is open to “multiple interpretations,” and that is, “subject to criticism and rectification” (Babbage 61). The group communicates through image and metaphor rather than through misinterpreted intention of spoken dialogue.

Invisible Theatre is a device that was born of necessity. Boal was experiencing increasing threatening pressure due to the political nature of his work in the mid 1970’s (Mitter and Shevtsova 105), and felt that Invisible Theatre was a way that he could continue his revolutionary work with the people while protecting himself and his company members from any dangerous consequences. Invisible Theatre consists of a fully scripted scenario that occurs, unannounced, in a public place (Babbage 21). This scenario is political in nature, and while the event begins with the involvement of trained actors, it may grow to include other members of the public that witness it. The most often cited example is of a consumer at a restaurant that orders an expensive meal. After the meal is consumed, the actor declares that he is unable to pay for it. Other actors that are planted throughout the restaurant chime in, explaining that none of their salaries can permit them the luxury of paying for even one meal at the restaurant, providing a commentary on consumerism, business, and of economic status (Bradley and Esche 213-215).

While there seem to be similarities between Invisible Theatre and “happenings,” or “flash mobs,” Boal is careful to make it clear that they are not the same thing. He declares that “happenings” belong in a traditional theatre world where the spectator is clearly removed from the role of the actor. Invisible Theatre should truly be invisible; there should be no distinction between the involvement of the actor and the involvement of the witness. Boal states, “a spectator is always less than a man! In the invisible theatre the theatrical rituals are abolished; . . . the theatrical energy is completely liberated, and the impact produced by this free theater is much more powerful and long-lasting” (*Oppressed* 147). Boal also suggests that the issue should be relevant and of relevance to the actors and to the spectators, he says, “the actors must perform just like real actors; that is, they must live” (*Games* 277). This suggestion reinforces the idea that the traditional theatrical customs and lines defining spectator, actor, performance, and life must not only be blurred, but be completely invisible.

The Theatre of the Oppressed arsenal of games and techniques could also be powerful tools for the secondary education classroom. The techniques could provide a new avenue for dialogue in the classroom. This dialogue could range from adolescent feelings of oppression to developing a common understanding of place or culture to the interpretation and ingestion of literary text. While some educators may be nervous about engaging in this sort of unscripted and open dialogue with their students, the intended benefits of the Theatre of the Oppressed are not reserved for adults. Boal is clear that his intention is to create a “human art.” In an interview conducted by Peter Duffy, he explains that, “we don’t have a special arsenal for children, a special arsenal for women, an arsenal for men, an arsenal for white people, an arsenal for black people... It is for everyone” (Duffy 255). Due to the universally applicable nature of Boal’s



work, Forum Theatre, Image Theatre, and Invisible Theatre can prove to be valuable tools for use with students in the secondary classroom.

Clearly, Boal and Freire share similarity in thought and in theory. While it may seem more accessible to simply use Freire's work as a nontraditional classroom model due to his position in education philosophy, it is my belief that Boal's work, as an extension of Freire's, capitalizes on his theory and position while actually expanding it into a common language of movement and creative dialogue that is particularly useful and desirable in a creative classroom. Boal's series of games and exercises can be used as tools to explore literature, social topics, and other important subject material, while capitalizing on the theory and dynamics expounded upon by Freire.

### **Chapter Three: Spolin and Boal in Action**

**“On one hand, art is affirmed to be pure contemplation, and on the other hand, it is considered to present always a vision of the world in transformation . . .”**

**- Augusto Boal, *Oppressed* Introduction n.pag.**

While the founding pedagogical theories and philosophies of both Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal are supported by those of prominent education philosophers, Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire, respectively, it is important to look at their theories in practice. Both Spolin's and Boal's methods and strategies were devised to be applicable in a theatrical context but some educators have begun the work of implementing them into education settings in an effort to demonstrate their effectiveness and value. These implementations, while limited, are a necessary early step in transforming the public school classroom into a community and dialogue driven format.

The value in Viola Spolin's theatre games model for the public school classroom is largely inherent in the foundational philosophy that she suggests for the actor-training environment. Her emphasis on community and ensemble support, the approval/ disapproval syndrome, and the physicalization of communication are all valuable and applicable theories for building a healthy and productive classroom environment. Her description of the role of the side coach provides an apt and specific model for an educator who wishes to embrace creative pedagogy and teach in a progressive pedagogical style. Her series of exercises are designed to increase the ability of players, or in this case, classroom learners, to problem solve and to

develop higher thinking skills. While the value for the K-12 school classrooms of Spolin's Theatre Game system seems clear, there have been very few studies available that illustrate their useful nature. There are many articles and references to Spolin's contribution that draw a cursory correlation between her theories and practical application to classroom education, but not many that have truly applied her work in that fashion.

Viola Spolin recognized the potential of her work as an excellent classroom tool. She was passionate about working with educators and teaching them to use her exercises as such a tool. It was in the 1930's during her work as Drama Supervisor for the Chicago WPA Recreational Project, that she not only began experimenting with the use of theatre exercises with children, but also began assisting teachers to gain the skills necessary to teach drama to a youth population with little to no previous exposure to the world of theatre (Spolin *Improvisation* xivii). In 1976, she was awarded the Founder Award by the Secondary School Theater Association in recognition of her contribution to acting training technique.

Ten years later, her volume, *Theater Games for the Classroom*, an adaptation and compilation of her work intended for use with children outside of the theatre workshop and inside the public school classroom was published. In the first chapter of this volume, Spolin explains,

Playing theater games with your students will bring refreshment, vitality, and more. Theater-game workshops are designed not as diversions from curriculum, but rather as supplements, increasing student awareness of problems and ideas fundamental to their intellectual development. (*Classroom 2*)

Her editor, Arthur Morey, reinforces this in the preface, “Playing theater games, students will not only learn a variety of performance skills but the basic rules of storytelling, literary criticism, and character analysis” (*Classroom* Preface n.pag.). This volume is a forceful argument for Spolin’s belief that her games can be useful beyond the theatre workshop and in a classroom setting.

While Spolin obviously recognized that her theatre games had pedagogical potential, the structure of *Theater Games for the Classroom* is very similar to *Improvisation for the Theater*. She leaves the adaptation and interpretation of her exercises to the classroom teacher. There are specific application possibilities in her work, however. An imaginative and creative teacher will have no trouble adapting Spolin’s catalogue of acting games to their curriculum, but I will provide a few suggestions, here, as a think tank or a launching pad.

Many of Spolin’s exercises are easily adapted for the language arts, literature, and social sciences classrooms. In *Theater Games for the Classroom*, “Interpretation” (154) is an improvisational exercise where a poem is read and a group of players performs their interpretation of it. It is an easy leap to see the benefit of this kind of exercise in a literature classroom.

In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin has divided her canon of games into categories. Each category suggests a general purpose for the types of games that fall within it. For example, Chapter IV is dedicated to “Where” exercises, games that are designed for players to explore environment and creating or experiencing rich and informed environments. In “Emerging Where” (*Improvisation* 90) players enter an agreed upon environment one at a time and touch or interact with an imaginary object in that environment. Each succeeding player touches or interacts with a new and different object that exists in the same environment. This particular

activity may be useful in exploring a literary text. The agreed upon “Where” may be an environment from the text and the activity could be used for players to explore and to experience the textual environment on a more visceral level. For example, by exploring a character’s home in this physical manner rather than by only intellectually, a student’s reading comprehension skills may be assessed, the student may discover information or make a connection with a character that they may not have otherwise, or the student may understand author intention in a new way. This “Where” exercise may also be used in a history or social studies classroom to explore a historic or culturally diverse environment. Students may achieve a clearer understanding of historical or cultural context by physicalizing their interpretation of their learning.

In Chapter XI, “Emotion,” “Changing Intensity of Inner Action” (224) is an exercise where players improvise a scene with a determined “where,” “who,” and “what,” players are provided with where their setting is, who their characters are, and what it is that is going on in the scene. The job of the players is to play an emotional range that intensifies as the scene progresses; for example, they may have to play irritation to anger to rage. By improvising a scene such as this where they are exposed to experiencing an increasing range of emotion, rather than discussing it or considering it intellectually, students will have a deeper understanding of motivation. When applied to a literary text, a social conflict, a historical context, etc. students will more easily make connections to curriculum content.

Chapter XII is devoted to “Character.” Exercises in this chapter are intended for players to create rich and interesting characters. In “Animal Images” (241), players are asked to imitate the movement and characteristics of an animal and eventually to translate those animal characteristics to a human character or persona. Useful in an exploration of stage characters, this

exercise could also be used to achieve a greater understanding of literary characters or historic figures. This acting exercise could also lead to journaling or personal writing where the student is able to explore the idea even further.

In fact, just about all of the Spolin games could be used as brainstorming sessions for student comprehension of material and for writing. Students can reflect on their physical participation in a game or exercise and apply their experience to the curriculum. As an alternative to completing the exercises in a purely physical fashion, teachers could also fashion writing prompts that are based on the games. Students could discuss the posed questions or problems as a group and write a response; in the above example, a prompt might ask students to compare characters in their assigned reading to an animal and to justify their response. Group discussion with guidance from an instructor may model the type of learning environment proposed by Spolin.

Spolin based pedagogy is not limited to literature and social science classrooms, though. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) classrooms can also benefit from her work. Spolin philosophy encourages a dialogic atmosphere where a community of students should work together as a group to solve problems, and this philosophy can extend directly into a STEM classroom. STEM students can also take advantage of the physicality suggested and encouraged by Spolin work. In a chemistry classroom, students might explore the periodic table by imagining it as a party and all of the elements as invited guests. As each “guest” mingles and makes contact with other “guests,” students learn how the elements interact.

In a math classroom, students might engage in an adaptation of “Mirroring” (*Improvisation* 61). Two students might work through a math problem by adding steps one at a time. One student, ‘A,’ performs one step of the equation, the other, ‘B,’ must mirror that step on

their own work and add one more. ‘A’ mirrors the step and adds one more. The students can also use back tracking as a step in the process if an incorrect step is made.

Students could also practice mathematics word problems as improvisational scenes. They are given characters in the literature and they must work their way through the scene, or the word problem, by using Spolin improvisational scene technique.

While this serves as a small sample of suggested material adaptation for classroom use, the possibilities are truly exponential and it is intended to indicate the ease of adaptation and to provoke the generation of subject and curriculum specific ideas for the use of the exercises.

The article, “Role Playing in Education,” by Adam Blatner, M.D., champions the use of creative drama in the classroom. Indicating Spolin’s work as a potential driving force for the generation of subject appropriate curriculum, it indicates the larger need for educators to identify the need in our current education climate to recognize the benefits of improvisation in our classrooms, “Improvisation and spontaneity training tend to be lost (if ever they were understood) as basic goals of education” (Blatner Web). Soon after, it connects the usage of creative drama, including the incorporation of Spolin games and exercises, into the traditional curriculum, “Drama in education can be used to teach about various topics in literature, social studies, history, and the like, and role playing can be used to enhance these experiences and motivate further study” (Blatner Web).

In “Creative Dramatics in the Language Arts Classroom,” an article in ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) Digest by Bruce Robbins, a call is made for English teachers to embrace the usage of creative dramatics to teach literature, “the literature on classroom drama suggests that there is considerable untapped potential for using drama as a teaching method” (Robbins Web). It makes the distinction that using theatre methods in the classroom is not the

same thing as teaching theatre, as theatre is an art form that is focused on development of a final product, where creative dramatics focuses on the process of learning and on the student. This article specifically suggests that exercises from Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater* may be adapted and used as techniques to explore literature. It suggests that students improvise characters and situations from literary works, choral reading performances of literary texts, and performing dramatic activities as a way to begin writing brainstorming.

A student of Viola Spolin, Gary Schwartz, writes about the theater game system in terms of its potential usefulness in the classroom. While the majority of his article, "Group Games Model of Learning" (2006), is an unraveling and clarification of the structures inherent in the game system, he makes some references to the usage of the games in non-theatre settings. He writes, "When using play as learning, a teacher's role is one of facilitation and coaching. Teachers can provide a context for play by creating games that match the curriculum and more importantly the needs for the students" (Schwartz, "Group Games" Web). The majority of Spolin's games are, in fact, adaptable. They can be adapted and altered to fit the curriculum and lesson plan of any classroom. It is in this article, that Schwartz also points out the benefit of group learning over a teacher focused model, "Authoritarian learning is based on an invisible norm so that the game becomes 'please authority and get the grade' . . . This may lead to conformity or rebellion" (Schwartz, "Group Games" Web). In the group games model, we see students reaching for success for the potential benefit of the group, rather than as a half-hearted effort to please an oppressive teacher figure.

Teacher Jo Beth Gonzalez has found several specific Spolin inspired exercises useful in her classroom. She uses Spolin's range of tableau and stage picture exercises to help her in theatre rehearsals, but she also uses theatre games in other classes she teaches, such as speech.



She finds the foundations behind the improvisational exercises useful to, “help teams bond with each other, get their creative juices flowing, and brainstorm for possible project topics” (Gonzalez Web). At the end of the article she thanks Viola Spolin for her contribution to both her and to her students.

In this example, described in the article, “Becoming Involved: Spolin Theater Games in Classes for the Educationally Handicapped” (1985), the work of Viola Spolin is used to support the learning of American students who are defined as children with psycho- emotional, physical (such as minor brain damage), or learning disorders. The students ranged in age from 6-9 years old, but most of the students in these classes were at least two years behind their expected grade level. Bradley Bernstein, who trained with Spolin, performed two workshops per week over ten weeks in four different classrooms. He argues that, “Spolin work can be used effectively with educationally handicapped students because of its ability to bring people into closer relation with each other and to foster the individual development of children who are socially isolated and emotionally disturbed” (Bernstein 220). Bernstein cites the benefit of using Spolin’s theatre games in this type of classroom setting as creating a group mentality for the students in which they work toward group success instead of focusing on their individual problems.

Throughout the article, Bernstein describes the personal successes of several students. In each case, the student initially engaged in chronic disruptive behavior that gradually decreased in each workshop session. Bernstein identifies this improved behavior as a result of working closely with their group of peers- rather than focusing and drawing focus to their individual problems, they began to contribute to the group effort, “In choosing to participate they cross the threshold from isolation and become fellow players” (Bernstein 221). Not only does the individual student

begin making a group contribution, but the fellow players help to model and encourage this behavior as well. He further clarifies this idea of the group player with the following,

When players get involved in focusing and contributing to a larger group effort they spontaneously overcome their individual personal “problems.”

They act in new ways and make new personal contacts. The player has a feeling of release, a sense of personal accomplishment that is generated by contributing to a group rather than through any external means of reward and punishment given by the teacher. (Bernstein 223)

The use of Spolin’s arsenal of games in this context has helped to create a student-focused classroom where students are able to benefit from a communal group thinking approach. In this case, students, who are perceived to have learning challenges, were able to overcome them and have a learning experience where the larger group values individual contributions.

Viola Spolin’s catalogue of games and exercises, paired with her founding philosophy of the power of group play, have proven in these examples to be a positive influence on these classroom situations. Students’ positive response and demonstrated growth of higher conceptual thinking skills support the claim that using a Spolin Theatre model in a classroom would be a beneficial and powerful pedagogical tool.

Augusto Boal’s brand of liberatory theatre, most clearly characterized in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, has most often been utilized in its originally intended context. It was derived as a tool to give voice to those suffering from oppressive forces, originally for the people of Brazil. Since its conception, however, it has been used in other cultures as well, including throughout Asia and the Phillipines as described in Eugène Van Erven’s *The Playful Revolution; Theatre and*

*Liberation in Asia* (1992). Boal's theatre model, while proven to be influential as nontraditional theatre, is also useful in a classroom setting.

Boal's Theatre model is intended to provoke social change due to Boal's theory that by leaving the material unscripted, and by not providing participants or viewers with a cathartic experience, that his spect-actors would be spurred to real action. This theory is applicable and relevant to classroom students, too, however. By exploring classroom subject content through the TO techniques, students will take an active role in their own learning. Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, and Invisible Theatre are the three most widely recognized techniques from the TO arsenal of exercises and they are also highly adaptable for classroom teachers, as well.

Image Theatre, designed to create nonverbal communication between people, can do just that in the classroom as well. Boal was convinced that nonverbal communication was a clearer and more dependable than the spoken word. Students can experiment with sharing ideas and thoughts about different topics through Image Theatre. Image Theatre can serve as a brainstorming tool for student writing. Through creating body sculptures and images, students can explore topics in a range of subjects: literature, history, social issues, etc. Because the activity is nonverbal, students can collaborate in a physical way and use journals or personal writing to express their thoughts in a verbal way. In a science classroom, students can use models ranging from biology to engineering in much the same way. By manipulating models (potentially made from clay or recycled materials), students may learn different ways of interacting with the content. In these ways, students are practicing using multiple intelligences and improving their communication skills with their peers.

Forum Theatre is also easily adaptable to a number of different contexts. Obviously, Forum Theatre, a model where scripted action halts at a climax and spect-actors make

suggestions and act them out in an effort to find the best possible outcome, is a likely “forum” to explore social issues as this was the original intent. The model could also be an excellent tool in literature classrooms to promote literacy skills such as prediction and character study. Forum Theatre paired with assigned texts would allow students to become spect-actors and to practice predicting outcomes of texts (the students are assigned to read a piece up until the climax, as a class they use Forum Theatre to explore possible outcomes, and then read the rest of the text). The students would also have the benefit of having played as the characters from the text, perhaps allowing a deeper understanding of character motivation and desire. Forum Theatre can also prove useful in the STEM classroom. In a mathematics classroom, a problem can be posed and presented to a certain point, serving as the scene climax, and different students can jump in and attempt to provide a solution to the problem. In a science classroom, similar interaction could prove useful. By providing students with a biological, engineering, or technological problem, students could use Forum Theatre as a way to explore potential outcomes and solutions.

Finally, Invisible Theatre, a technique where players perform planned and scripted action in an unplanned context or setting as a method of inspiring social change, could be a powerful tool for students to experience and explore their own self-efficacy and their impact as citizens in a community. If, with the guidance of an educator, students were to use Invisible Theatre as a tool to mediate their own oppression and to take an active role in advocating for things that are important to them, students may realize their own potential world impact. Students could orchestrate their own Invisible Theatre performance in a real effort to promote change.

These suggestions for classroom adaptation are by no means all inclusive, but they may promote an interested educator to begin thinking of their own adaptations of material.

Theatre of the Oppressed methods have been used as an education tools for promotion of social issues as well as curriculum driven objectives such as literacy, although these experiments have not been well documented. One practitioner reflects this scarcity, “there is a paucity of research about [Image Theatre] in classrooms . . . little, if any, research has been published about Image Theatre as a means of encouraging critical literacy with young children - our literature review did not yield any results” (Rozansky and Santos 179). While these educators are referring to case studies regarding just one facet of the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology, the Image Theatre technique, it is representative of literature discussing classroom use of TO in general. Another author, Suzanne Burgoyne, indicates, “little empirical research has examined the use of these techniques for enhancing teacher effectiveness” (Burgoyne 22). There are some published examples, however, and they collectively campaign for the value of the use of Boal’s theatre techniques in the classroom.

One practitioner, Leigh Ann Howard, an Associate Professor at the University of Southern Indiana, used TO methods to work with communications students (17 - 29 years old) on the issue of body image. These students were required to participate in just five ninety-minute sessions, although after these sessions had concluded, six students chose to continue the work for an additional ten weeks and created a performance piece as a result. Howard discusses the TO methods as “critical performance pedagogy because his methods generate potential as a concrete system for personal political, and cultural transformation” (Howard 218). Howard identifies a lack of resource material that discusses this type of work citing that most practitioners choose “to ‘do’ rather than to ‘speak’” (Howard 218), recognizing that while others may be doing similar work in classrooms, that they aren’t writing about it and publishing their analysis. She believes that this type of pedagogical work is important, however, and explains how the TO techniques

allow the students to discover personal awareness through working collaboratively. She writes about “transformed individuals” and their ability to enact change as a “critical mass” (Howard 228). Specifically, she is able to identify changes in perception, attitude, and awareness in both the performers and in the participatory audience members after the process. Many described to her action they had taken afterward in regards to the types of issues they were working through in the TO process. Participants were able to grow developmentally and psychologically, and were also able to translate that growth into action.

Dani Snyder-Young, another practitioner, conducted a twelve-week long TO residency in an American public high school in 2007. She was also interested in addressing social issues, specifically those that are generated by the participating students that have relevance to their community. Snyder-Young advocates for the usage of the TO theatre model, but her article focuses on the concern that popular politics are not necessarily progressive. While TO methods give the spect-actors permission to script alternate endings to proposed scenarios and problems, it does not provide an inherent ethical meter. The will of a group may not reflect desirable ethics or progressive politics. While the article and the description largely serves as a warning to interested practitioners, it also advocates the model as an excellent tool for generating conversation about tough topics. She identifies that human beings offer a range of differences and a unique set of beliefs, but that “popular participatory theatre might provide a platform through which we can learn to listen to each other” (Snyder-Young 43).

Carol Lloyd Rozansky, of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, records observations from using Boal’s Image Theatre to promote literacy. One article, co-authored with Caroline Santos of Omaha Public Schools, discusses Image Theatre with third graders while the next, co-

authored with Colleen Aagesen, examines the use of the technique with Ms. Aagesen's low-tracked eighth graders.

In the first article, concerning the third grade readers, Rozansky and Santos designed a three day lesson plan that utilized Image Theatre as a vehicle to explore a text. It was Santos' particular goal to explore the use of TO to create a classroom focus on student strength rather than on their struggles or weaknesses, "she sought out ways to practice a pedagogy of opposition that rejects these low expectations and replaces them with pedagogy that treats students as competent, insightful problem-solvers" (Rozansky and Santos 179). Both educators were also particularly interested in fostering a classroom environment where students examined text for content as well as for connection to their lives and experiences. The students explored three different texts over the three days and through using Image Theatre as the medium, were able to achieve a rich and textured understanding of the texts. Santos' reflection of the experience includes the following, "Adopting a critical literacy perspective with my students was surprisingly easy to do, even with such young children. Children are inherently empathetic and are quite able to form opinions and feelings, even on deep subjects; they just need a venue, such as Image Theatre, through which to express them" (Rozansky and Santos 185). She also reflected that students were able to exhibit the critical literacy skills that they gained during the TO workshop at later times.

In the next piece offered by Rozansky, we look at Image Theater in an older student classroom. Aagesen's goal was to use the TO method with her low performing eighth graders in an effort to engage them in critical literacy. This particular set of students was one in which the administration had relegated them to a prescribed learning program that "teachers and students found stultifying in its low-level and repetitious format" (Rozansky and Aagesen 458) and it

seemed that the students were set up to fail. Rozansky and Aagesen designed three ninety-minute workshops that used Image Theater as a catalyst for exploring literary text in an effort to combat the prior learning environment and to engender one in which these low-level readers might flourish. Over the three days, students read three different texts ranging from newspaper articles to a Langston Hughes poem. The educators discovered that with scaffolding and content support for students (Scaffolding is the practice of offering material in increments that build according to increasing student skill set and content support refers to any contribution by the educator, such as complementary material, to support the core content that is offered to the student), that students were able to demonstrate higher learning skills, “Students did things we did not expect but were excited to see. Although they were accustomed to implementing skills based on the directions in their reading program, they were less accustomed to implementing unprompted metacognitive strategies” (Rozansky and Aagesen 463). They confirmed that the TO methodology was useful in developing higher learning skills in students and,

We understood [as a result of assessing student performance with TO technique] that Colleen’s [eighth grade] students were much more than what was revealed by “objective” test scores. Through Image Theatre, we contradicted the pervasive pedagogy of privilege in which students deemed advanced through hegemonic practices, such as standardized testing, participate in high level, engaging educational practices, while those identified as low ability through those same practices are relegated to a pedagogy of exclusion. (Rozansky and Aagesen 464)

While there seems to be a limited assortment of case studies examining the usage of TO methods in public schools, there are several articles describing an introduction to pre-service



teachers (students in the process of becoming teachers). At the University of Baltimore, pre-service teachers (PST) were trained to use Image Theatre and Forum Theatre exercises to explore literature. Image Theatre and Forum Theatre are both major TO techniques. Image Theatre is a practice that uses stage pictures and bodies to facilitate communication of ideas while Forum Theatre is a much more kinetic and interactive theatrical process. The authors of the article point out the current deficit in American public school curriculum of higher thinking skills and topics relating to social justice. They identify the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 as increasing the demand for teachers to instruct “to the test,” leaving little room for “students and teachers to work in a way that invites creativity and critical thinking” (Shelton and McDermott 124). They demand educators to “challenge existing social structures and search for deeper understandings of concepts at work to suppress some members of our society and elevate others. And we must work to prepare our students to be citizens in a more equitable global society” (Shelton and McDermott 124). They are clear in their mission in “challenging our students to envision social justice as the work of public education . . . ” (Shelton and McDermott 124). In this case, they have created and performed a lesson plan with PSTs that not only explores the content and structure of a piece of literature, in this case a picture book, but that also helps to extrapolate thematic and conceptual content including race, gender, equality, and power. Through written reflection, they were able to ascertain that the TO approach was helpful to the PSTs in understanding and mastering all of these goals of the lesson. The PSTs indicated that they felt the TO model held great potential value in their future classrooms.

Practitioners from the University of Missouri facilitated another example of teacher training in TO methodology. They were interested in highlighting the correlation between the use of TO methods and high teaching efficacy. The article indicates that teachers with high self-

efficacy are not only able to deliver content, but are able to do so in a way that also creates a dialogue among students regarding social issues and their own experience. The article concludes with an affirmation for the effectiveness of the TO methods, but notes that many teachers are nervous to try to use the methods or create a classroom with such open dialogue. Teachers expressed concern at retaining control over a classroom that may be engaging in emotional issues. The practitioners leading the workshop indicate the need for increased teacher training in this type of pedagogy.

In this final example, Forum Theatre is used as a teacher training method, not as a tool to deliver curriculum, but as a problem-solving tool for training teachers how to behave and to perform in a professional environment. In “The Power and Possibilities of Performative Critical Early Childhood Teacher Education” (2008), Mariana Souto-Manning, et al. describe the teacher focused “top-down” nature of traditional teacher education courses. They suggest that this style of education is often text based and does not allow students to explore material with “active social engagement” (Souto-Manning, et al. 311). They suggest that learning teachers might achieve a cathartic experience with the material in this type of context, but do not learn alternate ways of problem solving in real classroom situations, “Traditional teacher models may not be able to tend to the nuances of individualities, cultures, and personalities. What works for one person may not necessarily work for everyone everywhere” (322). Through workshops with practicing teachers, the practitioners used Forum Theatre as a method of training teachers how to manage their professional relationships and behaviors. Through these Forum Theatre experiences, teachers were able to “leave with greater conflict management skills” (323). While TO methods were used in this case in workshops designed to teach professional behavior, it is a very small leap, indeed, to understand that the goals and benefits in this context are directly

applicable to classroom situations with younger students. The problems inherent in the traditional teacher training classroom are the same as those in the traditional public school classroom and the benefits realized from the use of TO methodology are clearly also directly transferable.

From these examples, one can see the potential benefit and power of using TO methods in a classroom setting. The strategies and methods are not only adaptable to curriculum but provide a forum for exploring social issues and problem solving, as well. Boal's intention was to give voice to oppressed people, and through using these methods in public school classrooms, it is possible to give voice and power back to student learners and to provide a classroom where the teacher is able to facilitate and guide students through their learning.

## **Chapter Four: Conclusion: The Promising Potential of a Spolin/ Boal Pedagogy**

**“Our students learn when a caring adult finds a way to connect. We all learn by sharing our stories.”**

**- Richard Kent 7**

Despite research by educators and scholars such as Carla Hannaford, Keith Sawyer, Anna Herbert, Florence Beetlestone, Richard Kent, and many others, that suggests that a creative pedagogical approach has a powerful and positive impact on the learning potential of students, it is not currently the most commonly accepted method in the American public school system. Following an examination of the critical performance pedagogy field, it also seems clear that by adapting a classroom model of disciplined improvisation not only aligns with the ideal teaching strategies suggested by creative pedagogy, but also provides a philosophical foundational platform from which a student focused classroom environment can be built. The theatre models created and practiced by Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal are easily modified and adaptable for classroom use and provide strategies and tools for the creative classroom teacher. Supported respectively by the philosophies of education theorists, Lev Vygotsky and Paulo Freire, these theatre models possess proven educational merit.

Viola Spolin, well recognized for her remarkable contributions to the performers at The Second City, a premier improvisational theatre founded in Chicago, wrote several volumes dedicated to her theatre game system. *Improvisation for the Theater* and *Theater Games for the Classroom*, particularly, are recognized as seminal and illustrative of her philosophy and theory.

Having trained in her early adult life with sociologist and settlement worker, Neva Boyd, Spolin's theatre games are highly influenced from her work in this field. Boyd's influence on Spolin is most clearly seen in her emphasis on the power of play and play behavior on the development of the human psyche.

Spolin also emphasizes the importance of community and of group acceptance in her work. In her theatre games model, the success of the group holds more importance than the success of the individual and individual contribution should always serve the group as a whole. Because players are consistently making contributions that support the group, group members learn to respect and appreciate player contributions, further supporting the building of a communal ensemble.

In addition, the Spolin Canon of theatre games is designed with the contribution of a side coach. This coach does not provide the answers or solutions to the group of players, but supports them in their discovery. The side coach is carefully instructed to avoid approval or disapproval in the coaching of players, but rather provides encouragement for players to lower defenses, take risks, and to access their own set of problem solving skills. This side coach, while a resource and guide to the participating set of players or learners, never delivers direct instruction or acts as an imposing dictator like figure.

The education theory and philosophy of Lev Vygotsky supports the use of Spolin's theatre game system in the classroom. He, too, recognized the power of play on learner development. He stresses the link between play and imagination and asserts that play behavior allows learners to experiment and to expand their learning boundaries and potential. He proves that play is not simply a pleasurable activity but is structured by rules and guidelines and allows

the player to learn how to interact and to problem solve in group settings and also expands the problem solving skill set of the player.

Additionally supportive of Spolin's model, Vygotsky's theories regarding the Zone of Proximal Development are widely recognized as important and influential in education scholarship. His assertion regarding the ZPD is that each learner has varying abilities and potential for future learning development. Two learners at the same current developmental level may not have the same potential for future learning. More importantly, however, is the concept that learning can exponentially increase for all learners when they work in collaboration with others. Often, independent student work only accesses learning that has already taken place in the student rather than expanding or increasing it. Collaborative work with others provides opportunities for the expansion of each student's Zone of Proximal Development.

Vygotsky's philosophy, widely and commonly accepted by educators, supports the theory behind the practice of Viola Spolin. It stands to reason, however, that her theatre model is also an acceptable and beneficial pedagogical tool in a classroom context.

Similarly, Augusto Boal's theatre model can be adapted for use outside of the theatre environment. Interested in social change and in a dynamic shift between oppressor and oppressed, Boal developed a series of theatre exercises designed to change traditional theatre experiences. Not only did his methods change the experience inside the theatre, but he effectively took theatre to the street where his theatre model was intended to prompt participants to apply their theatre experience to their own lives and to create change in the world.

Written by Boal, *The Theatre of the Oppressed* most clearly characterizes this ideology and provides a description of his most commonly used methods: Forum Theater, Image Theater, and Invisible Theater. The volume describes an inversion of role, as the spectator becomes a

“spect-actor,” a participant in the action. Spect-actors participate in problem solving and take an active role in the performance. By doing so, they avoid the traditional Aristotelian catharsis, where their call to action is emotionally purged through the dictated ending of the theatre performance. In Boalian performance, the conclusion, or ending, of each performance is left open, decided by the communal group.

Boal’s emphasis on active over passive experiences reflects an understanding of multiple learning intelligences. He believes in the communicative power of the human body, and, in fact, asserts that communication with the body is more powerful and more clear than spoken word. In this way, he believes that misinterpretation is minimized and the participants become more free in their ability to share and to communicate by minimizing the use of spoken language.

Boal’s methods are firmly supported by educational philosopher, Paulo Freire. In fact, Boal’s work is heavily influenced by Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In Freire’s volume, he also is extremely interested in the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. He looks at this relationship specifically in the classroom context, examining the teacher in the Oppressor role and the student in the role of the Oppressed. He calls students to take control of their own education and learning. Through a discussion of traditional pedagogy, in which he describes a “banking system” where knowledge is deposited by an Oppressor Teacher into passive and disengaged students, he advocates for a dialogic and communal classroom experience where students take an active role in their learning.

While the potential pedagogical value of both the methods of Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal seem clear, there are very few published examples where their work has been used in the classroom environment. In the available examples where they have been used, the practitioners

have indicated successful and positive learning experiences for students. Why then, are these models not being adapted more frequently?

One potential reason why the practices of Spolin and Boal, and other similar practices, are not appearing more frequently in the American public school classroom is due to the structure and belief system that is so highly ingrained in our political system. As described earlier, the more predominantly practiced traditional pedagogy is capital intensive in nature. To provide more text based materials is basically supported and funded financially. The government may find it an easier solution to “throw money at the problem” in an attempt to increase our student learning. By passing legislation requiring arbitrary test scores and statistics, supported by book and software purchases, they appear to be taking an interest in our education system, but unfortunately this type of legislation is not creating a qualitative impact on the education occurring in our public schools.

As early as 1988, George F. Madaus wrote about the impact of measurement – driven instruction. He asserts his view that assessment was beginning to lead instruction rather than being driven by curriculum and assessment. He writes,

The long - term negative effects on curriculum, teaching, and learning of using measurement as the engine, or primary motivating power of the educational process, outweigh those positive benefits attributed to it. The tests can become the ferocious master of the educational process, not the compliant servant they should be. Measurement driven instruction invariably leads to cramming; narrows the curriculum; concentrates attention on those skills most amenable to testing . . . constrains the creativity and spontaneity of teachers and students; and finally demeans the professional judgment of teachers. (Madaus 74-75)



The NEA (National Education Association) published an article on its website in January 2009. In this article, it discussed the effects of the high stakes testing demanded by “No Child Left Behind.” Author Alain Jehlen writes that although the scores on these specific tests are rising that it does not indicate any significant learning by students. According to Jehlen, and to Harvard University Professor Daniel Koretz, a leading test researcher whom Jehlen references in the article, these tests only measure a very specific set of skills and do not reflect the ability of a student to navigate subject matter at a higher level or a wider scope (Jehlen). In addition, national legislation puts local taxpayers at a disadvantage. The implementation of national performance assessment devalues and “only partially captures what employers and taxpayers value about schools” (Franciosi 2007). Unfortunately, however, it is a current reality that teachers must learn to navigate and to work with. As Madaus indicates, however, the stakes need to be lowered and the nationally mandated exams should be either reformed or paired with local assessment (106-107).

Due to “No Child Left Behind” and similar legislation, teachers feel bound by depositing and banking information in students so that they may perform well on these assessments that are dictated by legislators outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, this poses another problem facing educators who desire to teach in a creative pedagogical style. The work is more difficult to assess. Not only is student learning more difficult to assess (at least in a neatly packaged form that can be sent and analyzed by legislators) but also the efficacy of the educator role. However, support for these types of education practices will be hard to come by until some sort of assessment has been made. It is important and essential to the successful integration of creative pedagogies into our public schools that educators begin to experiment and include dialogic and

creative discourse in their classrooms and, equally as important that they provide documented evidence of their inclusion.

There are assessment possibilities available to educators that are not in the form of standardized tests. As advocated by Richard Kent in *Room 109: The Promise of a Portfolio Classroom* (1997), portfolios provide a way for students to indicate their learning through multiple genres. In these student portfolios, learners can deposit varied examples of learning evidence that may range from traditional writing samples (that may reflect on non-traditional learning experiences), photos of projects, DVD's of multi-media, etc. He also advocates for student journaling and student self- reflection as an indicator of learning. Similarly, Jeffrey Wilhelm, Tanya Baker, and Julie Dube in *Strategic Reading: Guiding Students to Lifelong Literacy, 6-12* (2001), suggest student interviews and presentations where learners explain how they are processing material and what they have learned in a more open format than filling in bubbles on a multiple choice exam sheet. Methods such as these can be time consuming, but exist as potential options for assessment of creative work.

Growing class size and outdated classroom architecture are also very real challenges for instructors who are interested in engaging in creative pedagogy. As class sizes grow to close to or more than thirty students and classroom sizes remain the same, instructors become limited in what they can do, both due to physical limitation and to crowd control. It is certainly becoming a priority to advocate for smaller class sizes for the learning benefit of students. Small classrooms and classroom furniture that constricts student movement is also a difficult challenge. Recently, however, I saw a school outfitted with desks on wheels. These desks were connected to a chair and included a shelf beneath the seat for backpacks. Students could easily “scoot” around the room into different seating configurations or small groups. These desks could also easily be

pushed to a corner of the classroom leaving the majority of the space open for activities or exercises requiring movement.

Adapting a creative pedagogical style in public school classrooms requires more than a financial contribution, although it certainly can still require financial support, as it is also labor intensive. Creative Pedagogy is not dependent on passive text-based materials, but on educators that are trained to engage students in critical and communal discourse. This requires not only a labor-intensive overhaul of public school curriculum, but also in the training programs for educators.

Many educators may feel trepidatious to engage in creative pedagogy because they have not been trained to teach that way. Many teachers may feel that they would not be equipped or able to teach with the Spolin or Boal theatre model without extensive theatre training. It is my assertion that this is not the case. Teachers should feel comfortable, to take risks and to engage their own problem solving skills in an effort to increase or to positively affect the learning of their students.

Creative Pedagogy, specifically disciplined improvisation, in the form of the models presented and offered by Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal could prove to be interesting, engaging, and powerful pedagogical tools in our public school classrooms. Their methods can provide a doorway for quality student discourse and effective student learning. By embracing and adapting systems originally offered to the theatre, educators may discover new and exciting learning environments that will not only better facilitate learning, but will also serve engaged and self directed student learners.

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