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Staging Stories that Heal: Boal and Freire in Engaged Composition

Nichole Lariscy

This article discusses the successes and vulnerabilities associated with combining the pedagogical methods of Theater, Composition, and Community Literacy in the Composition classroom. It examines how the ideas of Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* can be combined to support an innovative approach to Composition teaching, one that additionally employs engaged scholarship and service learning. The essay describes how methods and cycles of story gathering, playwriting, and rhetorical analysis have been used with various community partners, including an adult day care for dementia patients, an HIV/AIDS clinic, and Public Health outreach programs that address Health Disparities. The article explains how the ready audience of community-written plays and the inherent characteristics of theatrical production enable finite and clearly definable communication moments and products—especially in the autobiography-fantasy fused genre I have termed *magical memoir*—while engaging and empowering the voices of students, teachers, community partners, and audience members alike.

All human beings are actors (they act!) and spectators (they observe!) They are spect-actors. ... Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it. –Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*

The ensemble structure of theatrical production is a treasure trove for teaching Composition in the popularly understood paradigm of a play, which creates a unified and authentic purpose for the Composition writing class. As a professor of rhetoric and composition, I hope to be in the business of creating and sharing meaningful, functioning stories. I want my teaching to matter to my community. I have found that by utilizing the theatrical principles of Augusto Boal and the educational philosophies of Paulo Friere in my composition classrooms, my engaged scholarship and pedagogy are dramatically enhanced, if you'll allow me the pun. As Barbara McKean writes in her essay "Composition in Theater: Writing and Devising Performance," "the act of composing is one of forming, arranging, and ultimately creating a whole, fashioned from its many parts. Composition is at the heart of Theatre education" (503). Similarly, in his article "Theatrical Training in the Multimodal Composition

Classroom,” Jonathan Kotchian argues that teaching theater performance modalities helps students access a more authentic writerly voice, which in writing classes “is a matter of asking students to ‘get into the part.’” Indeed, I would argue, Theatre is at the heart of Composition education.

This productive union was exemplified quite clearly a quarter century ago in the friendship between two founding fathers of community literacy. Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and Brazilian playwright Augusto Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) both explained that the disciplines were similar reform tools for artists, academics, and community members alike. In “See the Boal, Be the Boal: Theatre of the Oppressed and Composition Courses” Gill Creel, Michael Kuhne, and Maddy Riggle conclude their essay on applying Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methods to student feedback by saying that “TO provides students with a space in which they can direct the course of action in meaningful and constructive ways” (151). In my composition classrooms I utilize the Theater of the Oppressed methods of creating performance stories with communities to help community members write about their oppressive situations. Students become writers and collaborators with community partners with whom we develop tactical theatrical interventions, better known as plays, designed to call attention to particular community problems. Through the process of researching to write a play for a vulnerable community, the students keep clearly in focus all of the basic rhetorical principles we try to instill in their freshman writing: ethos—does their writing have integrity for the community they are serving?; pathos—does their writing responsibly respect the suffering and triumphs of their community members?; logos—is it organized in such a way as to honor the community members and to clearly show their concerns?; and kairos—does the student research responsibly clarify the clear and present circumstances problems of the partner community?

My students help me write plays, primarily operating as dramaturges, for vulnerable communities in our city who wish to have their stories told. We call ourselves the *HearTell Story Works*, run Facebook and Instagram pages, and write newsletters about our projects. My students also facilitate and analyze the expressive writing of our community partners. Contemporary medical research shows that expressive writing helps heal individuals. While expressive writing has long been critiqued in Rhetoric as beginning writing, simple writing, even illogical writing, my role as writing teacher at a large medical university becomes important here, as my notions of effective writing have become influenced by public health and medical findings on expressive writing, in which the healing aspects of the writing are increasingly being recognized (Bridget Murray, “Writing to Heal” and Candace Spigelman “Teaching Expressive Writing”). Public health even has a sub-field called entertainment education that works on using expressive writing to address public health problems. Augusto Boal’s insights gathered through Theater of the Oppressed theatrical interventions add to this debate about the efficacy of expressive writing in that he seems to insist that this sort of community-based, community-driven writing can also help heal communities. We at the *HearTell Story Works* have so

far endeavored to help patients in an adult day center tell their stories of mid-to-late stage dementia; patients at the local comprehensive AIDs/HIV center tell their stories of stigma and survival; urban school children and their parents tell their stories of health disparities in the built environment in Birmingham; and students in a maximum security prison write their own plays to frame the significant problems in Alabama prisons.

Each semester my writing classes are adapted to meet the unique demands of each writing project. In the case of the play *One Clear Light* that we wrote about AIDs/HIV in Alabama, the process went a bit as follows. I built working relationships through a friend with a few of the outreach educators at the university's premiere and comprehensive AIDs/HIV clinic. Coincidentally, that year the founder of the clinic published a well-received memoir on the impact and work of the clinic, and my students and I read it and got permission to use excerpts in our play. Students in English 101 and 102 courses, Composition I and II, contributed research, writing, and service-learning hours in three consecutive years. Their service learning included: creating imaginative stories with patients at the clinic, co-leading writing workshops at annual retreats, helping to sew the AIDs quilt with our partners, and building and maintaining Facebook and Twitter outreach social media pages. Their research and academic writing included: writing formal letters to secure guest speakers and interviews; listening to lectures given by staff and patients at the clinic, both privately in our classrooms and in larger lecture forums across the university); researching the cultural awareness of AIDs/HIV on social media; writing their own memoirs about loss and disease; interviewing and filming patients who volunteered to tell their life stories for the project; researching the kinds of theatrical modes that would be most effective in telling these stories; and also critiquing drafts of the play. In this way the patients, staff, and I remained constant over the three years, while students flowed in and out of the project, semester by semester. Student roles varied by where they were in the composition-course sequence, as well as what stages the play writing and development were in.

The first year we gathered stories by making up imaginative stories with patients, listening to their memoir stories, and attending their annual retreat. We collectively decided that the play needed to be directed toward young people, if possible, because though the disease is really unknown to them, they are at greater risk of contracting it. The next year I wrote the play with this raw material while students helped me research how to focus the play: What messages? What was different about 2013 AIDs stories from older ones? What was unique about telling this story in the South? The 102 students gathered extensive research on what young people ages 17-24 knew and thought about the disease and wrote literature survey papers on this research. Then, after a few readings of the play, students interviewed patients to get their feedback on the work and created short, filmed interviews to accompany the play.

One interview in particular in this cycle reinforced for me the notion that this process, this teaching, is sometimes working as I hope it will to enable students to

participate in public writing that is useful and effective for our community partners. I filmed an interview between a patient and a student who were working on *One Clear Light*. Alan Woellhart is a gallant and debonair artist living with AIDs/HIV. John Strenkowski was then a freshman. They had been interviewing for over an hour. We were tired, but sensed we were working toward something important when John asked Alan what the play meant to him. I sat up straight in my director's chair behind the camera, held my breath, and waited. I would never have been brave enough to ask this question. I would've been afraid that it would mean nothing to him—and that he would say so. Instead, this is what Alan said:

Alan: The play, it's different, it's like a gift. A gift that was given to me, and I never thought that I would ever be in a play. I am a gay man, and I don't have children. My brother couldn't have children. Our name, at the end of our lives will be gone, absolutely gone, but my name will be in the play. It makes me feel good.

John: It's like a legacy that you are leaving, being able to be part of this production that's really a big focus on the way that you are living your life right now.

Alan: I can't tell you how overwhelmed I am.

We still await the professional production, which is contracted for this year by a local theater. I'll have my English 102 students conduct and analyze surveys on audience reception of the play when they produce it. In freshman rhetoric and research classes, I have my students continually analyze who our audiences are, what they feel before they see our plays, and what they say they feel after seeing them. Inherently, then, the process of developing and producing a play keeps the rhetorical constraints of audience and persuasion solemnly and tangibly in the forefront of student writing since they are working sincerely to create writing products that will help communities heal.

We are not alone in finding this methodology successful by many measures. Jeff Sheehy writes in "Powerful Storytelling Overcomes Isolation" that the expressive writing plays created by the Medea Project with women with HIV at UC San Francisco were shown through surveys to "help women living with HIV disclose their health status and improve their social support, self-efficacy and the safety and quality of their relationships," which the doctors there agree has helped reduce the instances of death in their patients.

In *Tactics of Hope*, Paula Mathieu describes a methodology of community-literacy engagement based on acts of hope, and I'll add that they are also always acts of love and compassion. Anne Lamott in *Bird By Bird* says that writing is always an act of love—of giving of one's personal self in order to make a positive difference in the audience. In these Boal/Freire methods, freshman student writings leave the confines of the classroom and become acts of meaningful, loving, compassionate interventions designed to help marginalized populations gain a platform on which

to speak and to be heard. Mathieu writes: “To hope is not merely to wish, but to combine wishful thinking with willful thinking and willful action” (19). This hopeful, loving, intentional, and action-based pedagogy reminds me of what I can attempt to enact of bell hooks’ calls to action. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks argues for a progressive, holistic education in which “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential” (13). Inspiring bell hooks, Paulo Freire’s foundational *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which Freire famously argues for an approach to education wherein “The problem-solving educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students — no longer docile listeners — are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with their teacher”(80). My teaching is steeped in this ideology; and so my students become the writers for and with community partners and we struggle together to confront particular injustices in these communities.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed has brother -text in Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In these two foundational texts and in the careers of these two close friends, we see that Composition and Theatre are two sides of the same coin. Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* provides an epistemology and literacy inherently based on ensemble, creation, narrative, and the compact among writer, performer, and audience to listen with integrity to the stories being told and to respond to them with conviction. None of these are passive receptors; every one is an active meaning maker in the community built by author, audience, and content in a theatrical production.

Mathieu’s calls for community-literacy projects seem not only similarly motivated, but to mandate comparable genres of public work production when she says of her comedy/history bus tour play with homeless residents in Chicago that “the work was an end in itself. In this group, public writing was a meaningful act of community. The pleasures of the collaborations, shared meals, discussions, and quiet moments of writing were enough, for that week” (46). In her theatrical intervention, Mathieu recounts working with a group of homeless in Chicago who created and acted in a play designed to help the public understand homelessness in the city. It was staged and performed on a bus that toured key sites in Chicago. As I understand it, Mathieu worked mostly with the homeless as writers, and not with enrolled writing students at a university. Hers is a similar and inspiring pedagogy that is providing guidance for me as I devise my theatrical interventions through Composition composition classes beginning at the freshman level.

The inherent tactics of theatrical production also address some of the problems considered in community -literacy endeavors. In the ensemble structure of theatrical production, there are myriad roles to perform to get the story told: some visual, some material, some narrative, some musical, and some organizational. In such an ensemble environment, many types of literacies can be enacted and devised by students and community partners for the creation and communication of the rhetorical product.

There is also a mandate among community literacy scholars to create what is known as a local public. For instance, in “Activating Activist Literacy: Discovering

Dispositions for Civic Identity Development,” Virginia Crisco concludes that “public writing in classrooms should help students discover various ‘counter publics’ where writers may find receptive audiences” (27). The structure of the community play creates and defines a local public framework that limits audiences into a manageable focus group.

Compellingly, the play’s the thing wherein we can create knowable counter publics and receptive audiences in which we can measure audience responses and changes in perception. Going back to Boal’s notion of each person in a theatrical performance—actor, audience, director, etc.—as a “spect-actor,” or one who both watches and acts, Boal expands this notion to insist that while individuals begin involvement in a theatrical moment as individuals, we each move during the course of the play to become members of the community. We concede individuality as we consider the ideas or problems together, whether as performer or spectator or both, and if only in the moment of production. This is also seen in my small community plays inspired Boal. If only for the ninety minutes of *One Clear Light’s* performance, my students, actors, community members, and audience act together in community to consider and to give witness to the ongoing and significant problem of the stigmatizing of AIDs/HIV patients in the American South. Moreover, much of this community developed over the three years of preparation among my students, the staff and patients at the clinic, and myself.

An interesting modal trend is also apparent as I repeat this process. My plays have repeatedly taken on a quite specific genre: they’ve all been equal parts fantasy and memoir. It’s as if the individual truths of the community members must be told, but they are best told alongside highly imaginative narrative moments. I have begun to call this *magical memoir*. It feels like something at once as old as the sun and also new in form and function. In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore examines the ways in which memoir provides witness of oppressions of the subjects in the stories to a less oppressed audience. She warns, too, that this witnessing has real limits concerning the ways in which very difficult truths can be received by audiences (2); her investigations of these limits have informed me across many genres, especially non-fiction writing for theatre. The collective autobiographical nature of these community plays voices social injustice issues as the community members use the ensemble platform on which to speak the truths of their individual lives. Simultaneously, the magical-realism so readily available to the theatrical form opens the genre of memoir to contain manifold exaggerated and amplified forms of expression, the magic in them allowing for the social justice issues to be felt and understood more clearly by a present audience. Just as comic relief operates to release tension in a Shakespearean tragedy, the magic in these often-tragic memoirs provides the audience just enough emotional lift to take the stories in. As such, through community-engaged, Boal-inspired theatrical interventions, some of the limits of autobiography are transcended in the collaborative, collective, and magical-realism aspects of the theatrical exchange of memoir and fantasy among storytellers, play creators, and audience—all “spect-actors” engaging in theatre designed to transform.

Theatrical intervention in meaning-making, then, is a specific tactic, similar to those described by Mathieu. She notes that “public writing is usually to a fragmented and colonized audience,” but that tactical discourses are located “temporally (and temporarily) ...[in a] utopian level of play and possibilities, stories of miracle” (31). Just as Mathieu seems to value and urge here, Boal-inspired theatrical interventions embrace the magical, the meaning-making, and the reality-changing potential of public writing with just such tactics of hope and love in writing that is beyond the curriculum, writing that comes *out of the community for the community* (Parks and Goldblatt, *Writing Beyond the Curriculum*). Through the magical memoir plays created by the *HearTell Story Works*, my composition courses generate poetic interpretations and artistic arguments for audiences designed to willingly engage in imagined potentialities, to sit within the confines of the theatrical moment and to dream, to hope, and to *plan for action together*.

We at the *HearTell Story Works* have a few specific methodologies that we follow, though for each community partnership we develop new methods of story gathering and play development. We adapted Anne Bastings’ *TimeSlips* model of gathering stories from early-to-mid stage dementia patients, which I helped develop as her project assistant in the late ‘90s, and which draws from stories created in a story circle around a provocative image about which we ask questions like: who is this? where are they going? what are they doing? what do they want? what are they talking about? etc. We created and produced *A Will Not His Own*, a play on dementia from the perspective of those with dementia, using this method exclusively. Next, we applied the *TimeSlips* methodology to the play about HIV, *One Clear Light*. We also witnessed to the life experiences of patients when they came to our classrooms to tell us their stories. Additionally, we implemented Roadside Theatre’s “story circles,” which is a practice of story gathering where participants sit in circles and tell impromptu short stories, about three to five minutes long, in response to prompts designed to have participants either talk about the problems at hand or to just generate evocative memories. Some of my favorite prompts include: “that meal we had was...,” “that water there was...,” “it was a strange and beautiful thing,” and “one happy memory is...”. We also use many of the games in Boal’s *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.

Then there are the many unplanned moments of connection and creation. During the process of developing *One Clear Light*, for example, the *HearTell Story Works* was invited to attend the clinic’s annual retreat at Camp McDowell on the Sipsey fork of the Black Warrior River in Northeast Alabama. There, we gathered creative stories and sat in circles of rocking chairs writing memoirs together. The second year there, we performed a staged reading of the play, which the patients loved. They saw themselves depicted, and some of them heard each other’s life stories fully for the first time. They witnessed to each other through the framework of our play; they both spoke to and listened to one another through it. The play enhanced their community, while my students, my actors, and I joined their community through the mechanism of the play. They thought the writing was funny, poignant, respectful, and real.

Throughout the process, it is incumbent upon the *HearTell Story Works* crew to learn the literacies of our community partners. What are their particular languages and lingos? Cadences and accents? What voices do they need to use to tell their stories? What various personalities need to be represented? What are their relevant historical facts, laws, and current events? It is rhetorical analysis at an immediate and real level. In researching to learn these variant literacies, each time there emerges a newly formed community built between my students and our community partners. While working on *One Clear Light*, many students befriended patients on their social media pages and testified to growing and lasting friendships. In “How the Arts Impact Communities,” Joshua Guetzkow notes that “community arts programs are said to build social capital by boosting individuals’ ability and motivation to be civically engaged, as well as building organizational capacity for effective action” by fostering trust, providing a collective experience, being a source of pride, increasing community members’ sense of connection, increasing their social network scopes, and providing experience for community organizers. In community-engaged, Boal-inspired composition classes, these same benefits support community members, students, and university faculty, as well. In the case of *One Clear Light*, the faculty, staff, and patients at the clinic, my students, my colleagues in the Division of Preventive Medicine, the School of Public Health, and the Theater Department, and I all saw our sense of positive community and university identity enhanced as we celebrated the lives of remarkable patients and colleagues in this play that is, like all of our plays, half bio-play and half fantasy.

Our current project is in its nascent stages. It is an immersive-theatre play on health disparities in urban Birmingham neighborhoods, which is a play produced not in a theater but on location. Our community partners are the Division of Preventive Medicine at our university and the United Way, particularly a program called Walking School Buses, which helps students walk safely to school in difficult neighborhoods. Once the play is written, we’ll stage it in the city along one of the Walking School Bus routes, which audience members will walk as they experience the play. If successful, this play will be the one most closely inspired by Mathieu’s work with the tour bus in Chicago. We envision actors stationed at many points along the Walking School Bus route who will enact the history of the neighborhood, as well as the challenges the children have as they walk to and from school each day. We imagine that the play will help to dispel myths about how the city neighborhoods got to be in such difficult conditions through presentations of the history of *redlining*, prejudiced home loan lending practices, and the discriminatory application of the GI Bill. Mostly, though, we hope to help the featured community tell the story of its strengths, passions, visions, hopes, and dreams. We hope to educate community members and policy makers alike and inspire them to take action. At this point in the process, however, I’m still searching for community members to help me tell this story. The United Way wants the story told; the walking school bus program does, too. However, guided by Mathieu’s work, I want it told primarily by community members. This is perhaps the hardest part of the procedure: forging authentic

relationships through which the stories can be gathered and persevering through slow mechanisms of community partnership development. At this point, we've volunteered in several programs, from the Walking School Bus to a Happy Healthy Kids program, a program designed to educate elementary children on healthy eating and exercise. But really I've only gotten three adults to tell me their stories from these schools. After three semesters I am feeling quite vulnerable about this project. Students have no problem logging service hours, and they've written a lot of observations and talked to many children, but community members ready to tell these stories have been scarce. The structures separating the university from the neighborhoods have been formidable in this particular play development process. These are the vulnerabilities of the process. Perhaps this won't work as well as *One Clear Light* did. But if it does, the benefits are manifold for myself, my students, and for our community partners.

While I build this pedagogy, I am working through many failures and a lot of structural vulnerabilities. When I forget why I am working so hard to create products that matter, I try to remember the interview between John and Alan, and how important the play was, and remains, to Alan. In that brief and clarifying interaction, I could see the full measure of the efficacy I hope for in uniting Boal Theatre with Freirian Composition practices. John and Alan had formed a cross-generational friendship and writing partnership between community member and student through implementation of both Boal theatrical practices and Freire educational methods. Together they bent their minds in study and practice to communicate the significant creative power inherent in staging the drama of the community members' singular, beautiful, and magical lives to an empathetic, involved, and ready audience.

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Nichole Lariscy earned her PhD at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and her M.A. at Northwestern University. She is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. She teaches courses on race in America, focusing on Whiteness Studies, and also first-year composition and sophomore literature courses, many of which focus on service learning. This service often takes the form of playwriting with and for the community partners, some of which have included: the elderly patients at the South Highland Adult Day Center, the patients at UAB's HIV/AIDS clinic, the 1917 Clinic, and prisoners at St. Clair and Donaldson maximum-security prisons. Magical-memoir plays that she has written with these communities include: *A Will Not His Own*, *One Clear Light*, and *Through Our Eyes*. She is currently writing her first full-length, personal magical memoir about coming of age in the rural South, entitled *Bodies of Water*.