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Recommended Citation

Vázquez, Karina Elizabeth. "Speak Out Loud: Deconstructing Shame and Fear Through Theater in a Community-Based Service-Learning Project." *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 25, no. 1 (2014), 113-137.

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Speak Out Loud: Deconstructing Shame and Fear Through Theater in a Community-Based Service-Learning Project

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The combination of theater and community-based service-learning can be a powerful tool to allow university students to meet their educational goals while connecting them with the world. The performance of children's theater in elementary schools with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs, for example, has important pedagogical and social effects. For both groups of students, this becomes an opportunity to be better prepared for a level of social engagement involving bilingualism that was not necessarily available to their parents and/or members of their community. The author describes and analyzes the results of the adaptation and performance of Alfonsina Storni's children's plays for two different ESOL classes. This experience may serve to enlighten the readers about a less conventional, but very effective, learning method.

Introduction

It is a challenge for teachers, administrators, and parents alike to encourage critical thinking and interaction among students and the community in order to promote a sense of dignity and solidarity. This is especially true during times of growing unemployment and economic crisis, when discourses of xenophobia become the scapegoat of restrictive policies, therefore reinforcing class, gender, and ethnic inequalities (Balibar, 2002).

In the face of these challenges, the classroom, whether at the elementary or the college level, becomes a central space for students, teachers, and professors to critique and contest those stereotypes nourished by fear and mistrust of what is perceived to be different and/or detrimental to generalized notions of culture and identity.

The combination of theater and community-based service-learning (CBSL) can enrich students academically and civically, but it can also help dismantle the stereotypes that conceal class/gender/ethnic inequalities within the current racial profiling that is linked to the Spanish language. In the years that I have spent teaching courses of Spanish language, literature, and culture and Latin American civilization, I have seen the classroom become a place where students recognize the social role of these stereotypes. I have found that the partnership between theater and CBSL allows students to think critically while also acquiring communicative skills in Spanish. As the long trajectory of adaptations of Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" (1990) in Latin America, Europe, and the United States has demonstrated since the mid-1970s, theater is a tool of linguistic, cultural, and social liberation that stimulates participation and critical reflection through the combination of the rational and the emotional. Using theater as a CBSL component in the Spanish classroom is an opportunity to meet and communicate across vast differences (Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2006). It reinforces the five areas of language learning: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. This final area allows students to work on a better understanding of the cultural and social issues regarding the use of Spanish in their own community. In the context of anti-immigration laws that can reinforce discursive antagonisms that synthesize feelings of fear, the combination of theater and CBSL is innovative because it proposes the practice of dialogue that involves discursive and perceptive awareness in students' analytical skills. Theater and CBSL promote an active involvement rather than a passive reception and reproduction of content, allowing students to visualize, identify, and contest stereotypes. Students, professors, teachers, and community members become the subjects who are able to transform and be transformed by the social forces that they try to understand, express, explain, and change (Boal, 1990, p. 10).

During the last four years, I have been undertaking theater projects for public schools with English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs that have a majority of Spanish-speaking children between the ages of 4 and 12. This article explores one such project that I developed while teaching at Missouri Western State University (MWSU), offering insights on a less conventional teaching approach in the Spanish

language classroom. These experiences have been both the basis and a fundamental resource for me as I continue to use theater in the Spanish classroom today in a different institution and as a structural, pedagogical component in my courses. The ultimate purpose of this practice always has been to offer students the critical tools for elaborating, criticizing, and contesting the mechanisms of social intimidation (dualisms such as “us” vs. “them,” “legal” vs. “illegal,” or “English” vs. “Spanish”) by means of the integration of audiences (university students and elementary ESOL students) into common horizons: formal education as a right, a choice, and a real possibility for ESOL students in a democratic, diverse, and engaged society. I have worked with theater because of its “unwavering support” in allowing students and communities the chance to explore the mechanisms and capacities that they have to perceive the world (Boal, 2006, p. 5) through the combination of the spoken word and other forms of perception in four stages: processing information; working with that information through verbal and physical expressions; presenting that information in a different context—that of the performance; and reprocessing the information from the critical perspective offered by the experiences.

The main purpose of this study was to explore and analyze the results of the adaptation and performance of Alfonsina Storni’s children’s plays in two different ESOL classes that group children from 5 to 10 years old. MWSU students participating in this CBSL project were enrolled in an Advanced Spanish Conversation I course. The course is the first in a series of Spanish Conversation courses for students majoring and minoring in Spanish, or those with a double major. There were 17 students enrolled in the class: 9 Spanish majors, 6 Spanish minors, and 2 double majors. The class met three times per week throughout the semester, had lab-video sessions once every other week, had cultural presentations once a week, and did reading analyses twice a week. The main objective of the course was to offer students the tools to improve their communicative skills in Spanish, enhancing their preparation for upper-level Spanish courses in Latin American and Spanish literatures and for study abroad programs.

The experience described in this article had a significant impact on both groups of students. The MWSU students and the ESOL students both engaged in a subtle critique of gender, class, and language stereotypes. The ESOL students were able to reflect upon their own perceptions of history and changes within their community. The university students discovered that CBSL and theater are an opportunity for meeting cultural needs in their community. St. Joseph, Missouri, is a community where the presence of foreign languages and cultures, as well as an immigrant workforce, are social phenomena that go back many years, as they do in other areas

of the Midwest (Gouveia, 2010). Like other areas of the Midwest with a predominantly white Caucasian population, in the last 10 years, the Hispanic population has greatly increased, in many cases surpassing the number of African Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Still, Hispanics' presence is not always well understood or tolerated. Despite St. Joseph's closeness to the Kansas City metropolitan area, an acknowledgment or celebration of cultural diversity, foreign languages, and cultural identity has occurred only recently, and St. Joseph can seem culturally isolated to those from Latino cultures.

A Hispanic presence in a predominantly white community may generate an irrational but very real fear of losing the English language, or of being "invaded." Some see Spanish speakers as a threat to their search for employment, while others see them as being unwilling to assimilate into an "American identity." In the same way, native speakers of Spanish may have a real fear that social integration means losing who they are and having to negate their cultural and linguistic heritage. In such a situation, bringing together university and ESOL students for community-oriented learning projects may provide an opportunity to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity toward differences by gaining insight into their commonalities, while respecting their quests for individual and social identity.

Conceptual and Theoretical Aspects

Making the connection between reflection, action, and experience has long been a goal of higher education, whose purpose has been to provide human beings with the critical-thinking skills necessary for a socially just and democratic society (Ferrer, 1972). Teachers of a second language have moved to more learner-centered pedagogies in an attempt to engage students in critical thinking. They have looked to transform the classroom from a passive place for the transmission of content to a more interactive process of action and reflection that involves class and community across activities (Vygotsky, 1962). Thus, students and teachers have become conscious of their place, not only in the classroom, but also within the community and the world at large (Freire, 2000). This type of open classroom approach assumes a communicative dynamic based on students' critical learning and understanding of social and cultural representations (VanPatten & Lee, 1995). Seeing themselves as students and as community members (Varona & Hellebrandt, 2005), students engage in group-based activities (Lee, 2000) and individual work, thus acquiring an awareness of the collective dimension of the society.

Community-based service-learning is a cooperative program designed by both instructor and students for promoting individual and collective critical thinking and for encouraging social justice advocacy (Varona & Hellebrandt, 2005). Research in the areas of service-learning and community service-learning has increased in the last decade, producing new approaches to the connection between the classroom and the community. Theoretical concepts about and definitions of service-learning have been the focus of different projects, as have communities' diverse populations. Based on this last aspect, in the Spanish teaching criteria service-learning is commonly defined as "... a method that coordinates classroom learning with service opportunities in the community and supports the objectives of improved Spanish language skills and enhanced cultural understanding. . ." (Nelson & Scott, 2008, p. 446). Service-learning is a tool for the development of communal "sensitivity" based on the "... joining of two concepts: community action and knowledge situated in academia [and a] teaching/learning method that connects meaningful community service experiences with academic learning, personal growth, and/or development of civic responsibility and intellectual curiosity" (Tilley-Lubbs, Raschio, Jorge, & López, 2005, p. 162). The difference between CBSL and community service is that the first is typically a program involving assessment and accountability through group discussions and reflections, journals, reports, blog entries, essays, and/or surveys (Nelson & Scott, 2008). The project described in this article reinforces service-learning as a community activity that engages students in projects addressing *unmet needs* in the community and promotes their reflection and critical thinking about the experience (Zlotkowski, 2001).

The performance of children's theater in schools with ESOL programs adapts well to this concept of CBSL and has two important pedagogical and social effects: the university students' spontaneous use of the target language with their audience, and the second-generation immigrant children's contact with university students and involvement in a cultural practice in Spanish. The children's theater performance brings awareness of the university and the opportunities it offers to the community. Children and their parents who might otherwise never consider going to college may begin to consider it as a possibility. For both groups of students, this becomes an opportunity to prepare for a level of social engagement that was not necessarily available to their immigrant parents and/or members of the receiving community.

As a practice inside the college classroom (through the rehearsals) and outside the classroom (through the performance), theater marks an awareness of the "permanent condition of change" (Boal, 1990, p. 28). Students

and professor work together through an active and creative process of thinking where communication in Spanish, "the message," is a constant state of negotiation of meaning through the on-going adjustment by each student to his or her words and gestures and to the other students' words and gestures. The students become aware of how this negotiation transcends the individual self of the enunciation as they are forced to consider the others' reactions and responses; "I" becomes "I and the others" and /or "I am aware of the others." This negotiation is present in both the rehearsals and the performance, but also in the assessment stage, where students reflect collectively in class discussions after performing the plays and individually in their written essays.

For ESOL students, experiencing theater in Spanish opens the door to exploring and releasing feelings and emotions in a context free of fear and shame, where they can reflect on stereotypes and universal human values of equality. They feel linked to the characters and the stories and communicate their emotions and opinions to the student actors using both Spanish and English. In this sense, theater becomes a practice allowing university students to create knowledge (communicative skills plus critical content) from action, while allowing ESOL children the opportunity to create knowledge and action that leads them to identification and also distinction. They can see that Spanish, their first language and that of their parents and relatives, is appreciated and welcomed by others in a public sphere where it is possible for them to face, experience, reflect upon, and voice situations related to human equality.

Foucault's (1975) notion of the disciplinary society states that power is not the result of the exclusive exercise of coercive tools, but of institutional regulation and standardization. Theater and service-learning are activities that break up both the individual "serial space" of the elementary school (p. 147) and the university classroom's "totalization," or generalization—and open paths for the understanding of both cultural difference and social equality. The serialization of education is a result of the progressive disciplinary techniques associated with the genesis of individualism and . . . administration of time ". . . by segmentation, serialization, and synthesis and totalization . . ." (Foucault, 1975, p. 160). Dividing and standardizing individuals' functions subdues them to antagonisms, such as normal/abnormal, healthy/sick, local/foreigner, citizen/alien, and legal/illegal. These antagonisms or polarizations reproduce power relationships within society, regulating it in toto. When this is allowed, the classroom becomes a place where "pedagogical action" ". . . reproduces the dominant culture, contributing thereby to the reproduction of the structure of the power relations . . . in which the dominant system of education tends to secure

a monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992, p. 6). The integration of CBSL into the language teaching curricula can contribute to the creation of cultural sensitivity. It can help to break down long-held stereotypes that contribute to the violence mentioned above. The use of CBSL in the Spanish classroom “create[s] mutually beneficial relationship[s]” within the Hispanic and Latino population (Carney, 2004, p. 267)—and within the community at large.

Why Alfonsina Storni’s Children’s Theater?

Storni’s children’s plays were selected for this project for several reasons. Working on adapting a play allowed students in a course focused on conversation the opportunity to work on specific syntactical structures and on developing a grammatical monitor. Storni wrote these plays in 1921 while teaching in the Labardén School for Children’s Theater, which was responsible for a vast number of theatrical performances for children in the public parks and schools of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Storni conveyed in her children’s theater her concerns about gender and class inequality. Given that her plays for adult audiences could not be staged due to the censorship that controlled the mainstream scenarios, it has been interestingly observed that her children’s theater might have been an educational tool for children as well as a strategy to disseminate her discourse on social inequality to adults (Garzón-Arrabal, 2008). It has been difficult to determine with precision the number of plays for children written by Storni and, of those, which were performed. Many of her plays remained manuscripts at the Labardén School until six of them were compiled by R. J. Roggero in 1946. These six plays are *Blanco...Negro...Blanco* [White . . . Black . . . White], *Pedro y Pedrito* [Peter and Little Peter], *El dios de los pájaros* [God of the Birds], *Jorge y su conciencia* [George and His Conscience], *Los degolladores de estatuas* [The Statue Killers], and *Un sueño en el camino* [A Dream on the Way].

The two Storni plays adapted and performed by MWSU students for this project were *Jorge y su conciencia* and *Los degolladores de estatuas*. This choice was made on the basis of the plays’ characteristics: The first play is what Storni herself defined as a “dialogue,” and the second one is a comedy. *Jorge y su conciencia* shows how typical prejudices of machismo (Garzón-Arrabal, 2008) are acquired from childhood and clearly invites the questioning of gender labels and roles. *Los degolladores de estatuas* treats the topic of freedom, as well as the importance of love and dignity for an egalitarian society, through a group of toys who decide to start a rebellion against their inconsiderate owners. In this comedy, Storni appeals to a clear

and evident self-awareness of the characters about their condition and suggests that the toys, like women and other oppressed groups, although manipulated, also have their own voice and will, which allow them to rebel against their oppressors (Garzón-Arrabal, 2008).

Storni's critique of culture, present in most of her works, points out the violent nature of class and gender stereotyping, as it often erodes an openness to the presence of an other, or someone with a different cultural/ethnic/religious/linguistic and social background. Issues regarding immigration, education, gender and class stereotypes, and labor and civil rights are all condensed in Storni's writings. For example, the portrayal of gender stereotypes in her poems "Little Man" and "You Want Me White" opened in the Argentine literary field of the 1920s and '30s a place for a voice critical of the traditional male (Don Juan) archetypes. According to Morello-Frosch (1990), Storni's position in these two poems reflects her new feminist ideas, which resulted from ". . . [a] new, very active reading of the tradition as sociocultural artifact. . ." (p. 92). Storni's writings question a system of social and cultural representations built on binary conceptualizations and a double moral. In this sense, the relevance of children's theater for a service-learning project within a community like St. Joseph, with an increasing number of "immigrant workers," resides in its provocative potential to show how binarisms such as "legal" and "illegal," "foreign languages" and "English," and "us" and "them," among others, have the political function of making the need for equitable social policies a controversial one.

For Storni, there existed a tailor-made audience of women and children that transcended the middle-class spectators. Storni's works propose a critical discourse that questions gender stereotypes as society perceives them (Kirkpatrick, 1990) and advocates policies of equality. Her children's theater transposes concerns about class/gender inequality, especially the limiting and excluding function of stereotypes within society. Theater's potential for combining reason and emotions in an active process of creating knowledge both inside and outside the classroom leads students and teachers to see themselves as community members and as "beings who are in process" (Boal, 1990, p. 95) of constant growing. In this sense, because of their treatment of the social function of stereotypes and of freedom, Storni's plays were of great significance in this project as a way to explore Boal's notions of beings who are in process of growing. This project of adapting and performing Storni's children's theater was thought of by the instructor as a means to destabilize stereotypes through community activity on behalf of the democratic values that Storni promoted in her own teaching career (Morello-Frosch, 1990, p. 93). The project allowed

the university students to discover an audience in the ESOL children, but also it allowed the children to discover a population interested in their (or their parents') native language and culture.

Phase 1: Presentation of the Project and Class Discussion

The CBSL component comprised 25% of the MWSU students' final grade for the course. The students' main goals were as follows: (1) to communicate in situations that would require the practical revision and application of intermediate/advanced syntax structures, (2) to express themselves using specific vocabulary related to cultural topics and to Spanish-speaking countries and communities, (3) to communicate with fluency, (4) to improve their grammatical monitor, and (5) to summarize information and offer a critical interpretation about it. The CBSL with theater added to these outcomes the possibility for students to (1) liberate themselves by using the target language and by learning how to improvise in order to maintain fluency and message accuracy while communicating with others, (2) improve their Spanish pronunciation, (3) communicate by being consistently aware of cultural nuances, (4) enact critical thinking on a cultural system that might produce and promote discourses of fear, and (5) speak in both Spanish and English without forcing or feeling the need to abandon either.

In order to make the most of this project in terms of critical and creative engagement, students participated in its design from the very beginning. Discussion sessions on the purpose of service-learning took place in Spanish. As stated earlier, service-learning is a cooperative program designed by professor and students alike and follows four phases: (1) discussion of the project and its possible impacts on the community (review of the community's needs), (2) reading, interpretation, and adaptation of the plays, (3) rehearsals and performances, and (4) interpretation/critical thinking through group reflections. Assessment of each of these four stages took place through instructor observation and a scale-form evaluation (see Appendix A).

The first phase of the project took place during the first two weeks of class. Students were required to answer a service-learning questionnaire asking for practical information as well as reflections that were to be discussed in class. Practical issues arose, including students' time availability outside the classroom, hours spent at their jobs, and the extra time students could consider devoting to CBSL. The questionnaire (see Appendix B) asked students to describe their understanding of the term

“service-learning.” They listed activities they considered helpful for the Spanish-speaking population of St. Joseph and those in which they would be interested in participating during the current semester. Finally, they reflected on how such a service-learning project could improve their communicative skills and cultural understanding of the Spanish language. Students wrote their questionnaire responses at home and returned the questionnaire during the second week of classes.

Students’ responses were of great value to both the design and the outcome of this project. Their knowledge and appreciation of their own community’s linguistic needs, demographic characteristics, and responses to diversity helped them identify stereotypes and prejudices. They perceived service-learning as a way to encourage the local community to be open to and interested in other cultures. The project was also seen as an opportunity to create spaces for literacy in both English and Spanish and to promote the creation of a “welcoming” and “receptive” environment. Among the activities listed by students (such as reading at schools and libraries, doing activities with elderly or women’s populations, tutoring, or helping teachers of Spanish), performing a play for ESOL students in the local schools was the activity that seemed best to address stereotypes and stress the acceptance of others. Students’ emphasis on the importance of knowing, understanding, and learning from different individual and collective histories was an important factor in deciding the type of activity considered for the project. After reading several plays, the instructor presented options to the students, and they agreed that Storni’s plays *Jorge y su conciencia* and *Los degolladores de estatuas* best suited their goals. After contacting two local schools and consulting with authorities and teachers, the class decided to perform two plays (the first in mid-March and the second at the end of April) in two ESOL schools located in St. Joseph’s downtown area. The class estimated that it needed between two and four hours every 15 days for rehearsals. During the regular class period, the class followed communicative activities based on readings, task-based exercises, and labs, while spending 20 to 30 minutes reading, discussing, or adapting the plays for performance.

Phase 2:

Script Reading, Interpretation, and Adaptation

The second phase of the project began during the third week of classes and consisted of the reading, discussion, and adaptation of the plays. Because *Jorge y su conciencia* required few characters but more work with staging, the class opted to perform it first. This gave students and the

professor the opportunity to set up a working dynamic that would be repeated in the preparation and performance of *Los degolladores de estatuas*. This second play had many more characters and required students to reflect more upon its content as well as to practice their linguistic skills.

Storni's trademark is the treatment of gender stereotypes, as in *Jorge y su conciencia*, and class representations, as in *Los degolladores de estatuas*. Both plays consist of one act, debuted in 1932, and were published late in 1950 under the title *Teatro infantil* [Children's Theater]. For both plays, the class agreed to adapt the scripts to simple language given the school-age audience. A simple and active script would allow the young students to understand the play, while interaction and role-play would make the older ESL students become more involved in participating and sharing experiences with the younger ones. The class was divided into three groups. One group performed, while the other two groups prepared the staging and designed role-play activities for the children. During this second phase of interpretation and adaptation, the entire class read the plays and worked on adapting the scripts. After receiving copies of the play, students read them for new vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, jargon or regional words, and grammatical structures. Class discussions were planned to ensure that all students felt comfortable with the language and understood the content. In the readings that followed, the class addressed questions about the main characters' characteristics, the scenes, and the messages. Students noted the uses of language in each situation and compared it to how they spoke during their own childhoods. Students read the scripts several times and made linguistic changes and adjustments to make them feel more confident. Making the language feel like "their own" gave them enough confidence for further improvisation during the rehearsals and the performance. In every discussion of the script, students made suggestions for changes that were introduced into the script after the class reached consensus.

Preparing to Perform Jorge y Su Conciencia

In *Jorge y su conciencia* [George and His Conscience], a boy, before going to bed, talks to his conscience using the formal term "Mrs. Conciencia." After protesting her constant presence in his life, he agrees to review his actions for that day, so he is able to sleep in peace. After listing a series of right and wrong actions, he confesses to being ashamed that he has been doing "things of little women" [cosas de mujercitas], such as doing the dishes and making the bed. With horror, he also tells her that he has sewed on a button:

Conciencia: Ja, ja, ja . . . Eres un personaje de cuentos Jorge! ¿A eso le llamas ser un héroe?

Jorge: Sí. Señora conciencia, piense Ud.: soy hombrecito, hom-brecito; y he hecho una tarea de mujer. . . .

[*Conciencia:* Ja, ja, ja . . . Jorge, you are such a story character! You call sewing on a button being a hero?

Jorge: Yes. Mrs. Conciencia, think of it like this: I am a little man, a little man; and I have done woman's work. . . .]

Conciencia laughs at what the boy understands to be a heroic act because he is a "little man" [hombrecito]. Their dialogue continues when Jorge explains how difficult it was for him to sew, and that he was afraid his classmates at school would make fun of him. After praising Jorge's action as being one that overcame a stereotype, Conciencia asks Jorge what he would like as a reward. But Jorge does not accept any of her offerings, even though they would make other children very happy. In desperation, Jorge asks her to see to it that he never has to sew on another button, because it is a "terrible job."

It is clear that Storni's intentions with this play are similar to those in her poems "Little Man" and "You Want Me White." In deconstructing gender stereotypes, her poetry addresses perceptions about the division of roles in the public and private spheres. While adapting the play, students observed that, during their childhoods as well as now, housework is perceived by men as being a burden. Women, if given the choice or opportunity or if required by their economic situation, have jobs and professions in addition to typical domestic duties. Students noticed that in the families of "foreign workers," this situation might be affected by migratory status and worker authorization, making women not able to pursue a job or a profession.

Some linguistic aspects of the play were changed by the students to make memorization and improvisation easier (for example, in some cases, the present perfect was replaced by the preterit). They also opted for a major change in the text and the performance: Jorge and Conciencia's dialogue were rewritten using the "informal treatment" (tú form) to make for a freer exchange between the two. Students proposed that the relationship between Jorge and Conciencia represents how they felt toward their own "inner voice," which some may refer to as a "conscience" or "moral compass." As evidence of this role reversal, students suggested that Jorge should be playing video games on his bed, and his conscience should be young. Instead of going to a park as a reward for his merits, Jorge should go to Disneyworld or get a new video game; instead of

watching a Charlie Chaplin movie, he should be watching Spiderman or Dora; and instead of sewing on a button as a “mujercita” task, he should be washing the dishes or cleaning the bathroom. In addition, instead of wearing the typical uniform worn by children attending private school, Jorge should be wearing regular clothes.

Consumption, gender, and class aspects were revealed to the class through this play without any previous definition of these categories. Focusing on gender as a key category for the study of class helps to break up dichotomies (private/public, culture/work, family/community, manual/intellectual, skilled/unskilled) that function at the core of social stratification. However, the gender/class category was not introduced to the students for a discussion in the target language because of its complexity. Therefore, the class did not enter into discussions with any predetermined definitions of gender or class identities. Instead, the unorthodox use of such categories allowed for a spontaneous understanding of their social construction and functions. Upon reflection, a few women in the classroom found that their inner voice or “conscience” was a woman. For a few male students, it was a man. A majority could not identify its gender, and they argued that conscience is a “neutral inner voice,” a non-gendered voice. Students decided that in their performance the conscience would be a “voice” offstage. A female student simulated a neutral voice tone for Jorge’s conscience (not too low, not too high), making Jorge’s tribulations about his “female actions” more visible to the audience.

Preparing to Perform Los Degolladores de Estatuas

The other Storni play students performed was *Los degolladores de estatuas* [The Statue Killers]. This play focuses on class stereotypes more than anything else. In the play, a group of toys (a soldier, a clown, and a doll) belonging to two sisters of a wealthy family rebel to express their discomfort with the treatment they receive from their owners, or “masters.” The plot explores the right to feel and be treated with respect, no matter the social position: The soldier feels he is inferior to the others. It also explores gender: the doll feels she is always treated as an idiot. And finally, it also questions class origin: The clown feels he is not made of real/noble materials and represents someone of a lower class or caste:

Payaso: Se han ido todos. Soldadito, despiértate.

Soldadito: Ya lo he oído. ¿Crees tú que soy sordo?

Payaso: Y la Lency, ¿siempre idiota?

Lency: La Lency también ha oído, ¿qué te piensas payaso arrogante?

Payaso: Me alegro, estaba cansado de quedarme mudo. Somos unos verdaderos esclavos.

Lency: Los seres humanos juegan con nosotros. Creen que no tenemos alma.

Soldadito: Tenemos alma! Tenemos alma y yo sé mover mi espada.

Lency: Y yo me hago sola los rulos.

Soldadito: Pero nadie lo sabe. Creen que no tenemos alma. Estamos condenados a estar en esta sala adornando muebles.

Lency: Sólo podemos hablar cuando no hay gente.

Soldadito: Yo tengo tanto tanto miedo de hablar delante de mis dueños! Me parece que se reirían de mí.

Lency: Yo creo que me sacarían todo el aserrín que tengo!

Payaso: Eso, eso Lency, nos sacarían el aserrín, porque yo también, tengo el cuerpo relleno de aserrín.

Soldadito: Y a mí me romperían a pedazos mi piel de Madera.

[Clown: They've all left. Wake up, little soldier.

Little Soldier: I already heard. Or do you think I'm deaf?

Clown: And the doll, always the same idiot?

Felt Doll: The doll has also heard; what do you think, arrogant clown?

Clown: Ok, I'm happy. I was getting tired of not ever talking. Truly, we are slaves.

Felt Doll: Humans only play with us. They think we have no souls, that we don't feel.

Little Soldier: We do have souls! We do have them, and I know how to use my sword.

Felt Doll: And I know how to curl my hair.

Little Soldier: But nobody knows that. They believe we have no souls. We are condemned to remain in this room as furniture decoration.

Felt Doll: We can only speak when there are no people around.

Little Soldier: I am so afraid of speaking before the owners! I think they will laugh at me.

Felt Doll: I think they will empty all my sawdust!

Clown: Yes, you are right, doll, they will take out all the sawdust, because I, too, have a body filled with sawdust.

Little Soldier: And they will break my wooden skin into pieces.]

As an act of rebellion, the toys cut off the heads of the garden statues and then return to their usual submissive positions. This creates chaos and desperation in their young owners, and a series of confusing situations lands all of the human characters in the police station.

With regard to the play's linguistic aspects, students proposed replacing tenses in the present perfect with the preterit in order to facilitate fluency, memorization, and improvisation. In terms of the content, students determined, for example, that a reference to the female domestic worker as a "mulata" (a biracial person of European and African descent) was significant to the historical relationship between race, gender, and labor, whether in Argentine or U.S. society. Students made connections between the social changes after the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the current situation of many Hispanic workers suffering prejudice and discrimination in their communities and in the U.S. at large. Based on this understanding, students decided to refer to the female domestic worker as a "mentirosa" [liar] instead of using the term "mulata." Students explored the use of that expression in Argentine society during the 1920s and '30s, and although they acknowledged Storni's intention to point out the relationship between gender, occupation, and race, they decided that the character would remain the same, but they preferred to change the word. The result was the replacement of a derogatory stereotype of race or ethnicity with a term that applies to any person who does not tell the truth. Based on actions, "mentirosa" describes a personal characteristic rather than a predetermined prejudice, although it can also be used as a more subtle way of expressing prejudice.

The variable of "social class" was visible during both the students' adaptation of the script and the rehearsals as well as in the work students did on their verbal expression. The toys moved from submissive complaining in the beginning, which corresponded to the disdain they received from their two spoiled owners, to rebellious and empowered self-recognition at the end, which was in accord with the girls' desperation. Students' expressions reinforced the toys' sense of identity, pride, and dignity by

working on their attempts at freedom through speaking and laughing out loud. This is especially obvious when the policeman decides to take the family, the maid, and the driver to the police station, grumbling, "Las personas ricas se creen con derecho a todo" [Rich people believe they have a right to everything].

Phase 3: Rehearsals and Performances

In the project's third phase, the class divided into two groups. Only one group actually performed the play, while the other supported the performing group with the script lines, staging, and role-play activities for the children. The role-play games dealt with "female" or "male" tasks. Other activities to engage the children included having them bring in their favorite toys and introduce them to the audience, explaining why they liked them so much. While the rehearsals for *Jorge y su conciencia* took place during extra time on weekdays and weekends, *Los degolladores de estatuas* was rehearsed during the second half of 15 class periods as well as two complete class periods and one extra class meeting.

For both performances, students designed and prepared the plays' printed programs for the children, who received them as they came to see the performance. Twenty ESOL students between the ages of 5 and 10 attended the *Jorge y su conciencia* performance; 25 ESOL students between the ages of 4 and 12 attended the *Los degolladores de estatuas* performance. In both performances, the college students communicated with the children in Spanish and improvised. The students prepared an introduction to each play by explaining that they were also students and that they were learning Spanish because they wanted to become bilingual and hoped to go abroad in the future. They talked about their fear of making mistakes and asked the children to help them with their Spanish. Finally, they responded to the children's questions after the play.

During the rehearsals, the college students had the opportunity to improvise and create supporting situations among themselves. Their concerns about the audience's reactions reinforced the sense of cooperation and group work. In the performance of *Jorge y su conciencia*, the students were more concerned with their own interaction within the group. Fear of forgetting their lines or becoming confused, as well as concerns about timing among those working on stage, helped them stay focused on the group, rather than the audience, during the performance. The class had to move from individual engagement to a "group spirit" while working on the project. Those who were not actors in the performance assisted those

who were by supplying script lines during the rehearsals and the performances when needed. In the end, everyone knew the lines, because they had all worked on assisting and helping each other. This gave the group confidence in their ability to overcome difficult situations that might arise during the play—without losing the intended message.

Rehearsals became an enjoyable, liberating space and practice for students. First, the rehearsals broke up the classroom's physical layout and dynamic by having to move seats in order to work on the plays' physical characteristics. Students decided on their locations according to their roles in the plays and made all the necessary adjustments to the "blocking" in order to improve their wording, eye contact, and physical expressiveness, always focusing on communicating the play's actions and ideas. By doing so, they became responsible for managing time, space, and the rhythm of the action to make the most of the class period in order to repeat the rehearsals at least two times. They also did extra rehearsals outside of class during weekends and on the day prior to the performance. They became involved with and responsible not only for their own parts, but also for the collective activity. As such, they became "protagonists," not only in the play, but also for the entire learning process and for involving the ESOL children.

Prior to the first rehearsal, students worked on memorizing their lines as best they could, but they all had the aid of flashcards, and the professor and student assistants had the entire play written on flashcards for supplying lines when necessary. The first rehearsals combined recitation and reading until students felt comfortable and confident. They stopped each time they needed to work on the pronunciation or intonation of a phrase and repeated the lines as necessary. Throughout this process, students felt free to modify physical staging, the way they were moving through the action, and how they faced each other in the dialogues. They also made changes in the script to accommodate the physical and emotional aspects of the communication in the play as well as their own needs for improvisation in the script lines. Basically, they worked on their speech fluency, pronunciation, rhythm, and gestures, always using Spanish. In this way, they became very familiar not only with the play, but also with the cultural and social nuances of the language, as well as the different ways of seeing each other. When approaching the performance day, rehearsals took place without flashcards (except for the professor and the student assistants), and students focused on the importance of gestures and body movements in communication. They were able to work on the constant adjustment of rhythm, verbal expression, and gestures in order to feel confident and offer an accurate message. By repeating words and

complete sentences with the help of the professor and other classmates, students worked on phonetics and phrase intonation. For mastering gestures and body movements, students first worked individually, by doing movements as they felt them. Then they worked collectively, addressing each participant's suggestions on posture to improve the efficacy of the message, considering the effect on the audience, and keeping in mind the ways that they came across onstage.

Although some of the students felt they did not have enough opportunity to demonstrate their abilities by simply reciting the lines, they all used the target language in a very effective way. This was made evident by the fact that the children's attention during the play did not focus only on the characters, but also on the members of the group that were doing the staging. In the first play, *Jorge y su conciencia*, this effectiveness was manifested in the dialogue with the children about Jorge's feelings. A conversation about how the students help their mothers with housework took place completely in Spanish and involved everyone. By defining some specific housework activities and inviting the ESOL students to say which ones they disliked or never did, the university students had one-on-one interaction with their younger counterparts. The boys in the audience explained that they disliked the same things as Jorge, and that most of the time they wanted to be outside playing with other children or with their fathers. This allowed the university students to see that in all societies, regardless of environment or social standing, children enjoy playing, meeting, and spending time with other children rather than being inside. These are universally desirable activities enjoyed by children everywhere. The girls agreed that they enjoyed helping their mothers while their fathers worked, but that they also enjoyed going to school. The children in the audience identified the neutral voice with their mothers, although all agreed that "house chores" should be done by all members of the house.

In *Los degolladores de estatuas*, students used body language in order to keep the children's attention. In this play, most students had a role, and three of them were in charge of staging. As in the previous performance, the professor and another student assisted with lines by lying, hidden, under tables. While preparing this play, the Spanish students recognized their own experiences and feelings reflected in those of the characters. This self-identification was also observed among the ESOL students. Besides sharing the story in Spanish, the students remembered their own childhood and their special and ignored toys. Students also agreed not to ask the children uncomfortable questions, such as their origin, residence, or parents' activities, so as to spare them any awkwardness or embarrassment.

The dynamic for the rehearsals of this second play was the same as for the first. This time, however, students were much more confident and had learned from the first experience about time management, memorization, and working with spacing during the practices. They worked more on expressing the emotions the characters were supposed to transmit, which was the result of a better understanding of the play's message and better vocabulary preparation. This was made evident through much more dynamic rehearsals that allowed students to improvise their lines as well as to work more confidently with body language while expressing themselves verbally in Spanish. Also during these rehearsals, students were more connected with each other through the dialogue as well as the gestures. They tried to be sure they were all in the same "mood" during the scene, something that allowed them to correct one another and, consequently, to improve their pronunciation, their expression of the characters' emotions, and their own understanding of the play.

For the performance of the second play, the students were more confident, which was reflected in the children's reactions. Once the play ended, the children gathered around the stage (which was level with the classroom floor), breaking the "fourth wall" between the university students and themselves, and began to touch the soldier, the doll, and the clown, expressing that they understood their feelings. When invited, they brought up their own toys and explained how they played with them on weekends when "they were all together." One girl brought a "plaza" she had made that resembled the places where she used to play before living in the United States. She included her parents and siblings in the re-creation. Also memorable was a boy who showed a car he had built with his father over the weekend. At the beginning of each activity, the children tended to avoid speaking to the MWSU students in Spanish. After they jumped on the stage, however, they spoke only in Spanish and were even confident enough to correct the students' Spanish. The children became increasingly talkative and started to chatter about school, introduce themselves, and ask the MWSU students how old they were and what they liked to do outside of school.

During this second performance, it became obvious that the children identified and expressed solidarity with and interest in the toys' feelings of abandonment and the loneliness this produced in them, rather than identifying with the little masters, or the owners of the toys. The empathy the children felt for the toys made them approach the students and speak about how they value their own toys, how they play with them, and with whom they play. This was the only moment in which the children mentioned their time spent with family. They went from being passive

spectators to expressers of what they do and believe: treating others (even their toys) nicely and playing with parents and relatives. In this sense, the children and students "reassumed" their protagonistic function in their world/community, just as Boal (1990) suggests in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*. At the end of the performance, the children asked to take pictures with the students and their teachers. Some of them mentioned that they had never attended a play before. Days after the performance, the children sent the students and the professor thank you notes with their drawings of the play.

Phase 4: Interpretation/Critical Thinking

Data collection for this final project phase, "interpretation/critical thinking," was based on instructor observations of class discussions and students' reflections after the play.¹ Students worked first in groups, talking about the positive and negative aspects of the experience, and then, in a second activity, each group presented their reflections, opening the discussion for the entire class about common and different observations, perceptions, and opinions. The students reflected in class upon a kind of a *shame factor* they noticed when the children were reluctant to speak Spanish. Students verbalized the need for greater community support for linguistic and cultural heritage as well as diversity among St. Joseph's population. They were found it noticeable that the children spoke Spanish only when they felt confident and respected. The performance had functioned as a place of "common language" that led all involved to explore similar interests and experiences. When communication involved respect and interest, it was possible for all to speak and exchange experiences based on differences and similarities. In post-service questionnaires, which focused on practical aspects of the project, students noted that the only negative aspect of the project was the extra time needed to accomplish it. Still, all agreed that it was a very challenging, enriching, and educational experience that they would repeat if given the opportunity.

The assessment of students' performance on the project involved evaluations completed by the instructor for each of the performances. The areas evaluated included pre-performance preparation (work on the script, attendance at rehearsals, set construction, cooperative attitude), the actual performance (confidence, accuracy in communication, interaction with the audience), and critical thinking (original and elaborative contributions to class discussion).

One of the most interesting parts of the students' critical reflections that

they wrote during class after the play was their response to the question "What if we would have done this in a different way?" This question reinstated doubt as a "seed for knowledge or understanding and acting over reality based on the existence of the doubt" (Boal, 2009, p. 40). Examples of this doubt included considering the possible effects of having the word "mulata" replaced by another ethnic/gender marker rather than eliminating the expression, making Jorge's conscience a masculine voice, and introducing the father figure in the second play. Students saw themselves as actors and agents responsible for giving the project significance. They understood themselves as actively creating meaning inside and outside the classroom, rather than merely being passive receptors of communicative formulas and cultural content.

The project followed the principles of "critical pedagogy" as a means toward civic and democratic engagement (Freire, 1970), "critical thinking and knowledge" as a result of interactive action and reflection in a specific social context (Vygotsky, 1962), and education as a proponent of justice and solidarity (Ferrer, 1972). All of these are present in Storni's children's theater and her journalistic writings. Kirkpatrick (1990) indicates a new contextual reading of Storni's works for understanding the ways in which feminists in Argentina understood the relationship between working female occupations and national and cultural traditions (p. 116). Beyond this, Storni's plays also reveal the context in which the power relationships of oppression and exploitation are created. This aspect is revealed through theater, as it allows for the integration of different voices and cultural backgrounds. In the same way, this project demonstrated that one of the most important results of service-learning is the creation of a "critical audience" that is aware of the social context.

Conclusions

From the perspective of the pedagogical theories mentioned at the beginning of this article (Ferrer, Vygotsky, Freire, VanPatten, Lee), one of the first achievements of this community-based service-learning project for the Spanish students was its ability to make them conscious of the nuances of the language. In terms of communicative and linguistic outcomes, students worked with and through the target language to find a "place" from which to communicate with a specific audience: ESOL children. During the process, the students had to recognize the social, historical, ideological, and cultural aspects of the language. They worked on the literal understanding of the plays, their cultural and linguistic contexts, and their symbolic interpretations. The students were also aware

of the conflicts that particular expressions in the original script might represent for their cultural backgrounds as well as those of the children. The students expanded their lexicon and improved their pronunciation and grammatical accuracy by using a grammar monitor. The result was the adaptation of the script to the linguistic expressions that students felt would be easily understood. In this sense, the students improved their own speech's accuracy and fluency. They were also able to consider the play from different perspectives—at the linguistic as well as the cultural level. By making “visible” the common aspects they shared with the ESOL children (gender stereotypes, feelings for their toys, learning a new language, places for playing), a wide range of prejudices about “foreign workers” and their families were challenged. The university students and the ESOL school children both had opportunities that their parents had probably never had. The students enjoyed having a receptive audience of youngsters from backgrounds far different from their own. The ESOL students had a positive opportunity to communicate in Spanish outside of their homes.

In terms of the critical thinking and civic engagement outcomes, this project helped to dismantle social and cultural antagonisms and create common ground for experiencing and respecting social and cultural differences without fear. Theater as a liberating force promoted an indirect reflection on fear and stereotypes. By sharing the learning of a language, as well as a comprehensive and global vision of reality, perceptions of “strangeness” and “otherness” were transformed in the abstract (Schwartz, 2009) by the creation of a “scenario,” or common place, for respect, equality, and dignity for both the children and the students. The stimulation of bilingual literacy, the valorization of cultural heritage, and the permanence of Hispanic children in the school system are some of the positive effects of CBSL and theater when used as part of a Spanish teaching curriculum. In their class reflections, the MWSU students found that this experience led them to participate in other local activities encouraging literacy and in exchange programs with a service component and to consider a possible teaching career as well as journalistic opportunities in Spanish in the community.

This experience meant that both groups of students, as well as the teachers and the professor, “walked” the path of acceptance—moving with confidence in identifying social issues and conflicts. Interaction using Spanish allowed everyone involved to “erase” their *shame or fear factors* when using Spanish. The importance of this experience lies in the fact that turning this shame factor into pride allows heritage speakers, university students, and community members alike to recognize the pres-

ence and contribution of Hispanic populations in the area. Both groups shared and understood feelings of insecurity when using their second language and extended the atmosphere of respect and confidence needed to promote interest, curiosity, a sense of belonging, and cooperation in any social context—despite the number of languages spoken. The objective of promoting critical thinking towards a diverse democratic society was underscored by providing a cultural opportunity in Spanish in order to maintain cultural heritage and promote integration, strength learning, and understanding and respecting differences. In addition, students moved along a communicative context far beyond the linguistic aspects of the presentation. Improvisational theater is a format to encourage a spontaneous (or partially planned), target-language production, as well as a real-life interaction. Whether used in a classroom or as a community tool, it can be said that theater in the second language classroom can become a space for transforming perceptions of strangeness and for opening doors for communication, relationships, and mutual respect. Theater combined with CBSL in the Spanish classroom is a poetic practice of liberation and participation that invites students to act rather than simply to observe and receive. It is an opportunity for creating—instead of merely reproducing.

Footnote

¹Data collection for the ESOL students was not possible due to legal procedures involving children. IRB approval was not considered necessary by the institution, given the qualitative character of the work (and that the students' comments were not going to be cited or quoted).

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Author Note

I wish to thank Cathy Pankiewicz and Brean Riley for their help with English editing of the manuscript, and Analola Santana for discussing this article with me and offering valuable suggestions.

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