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## Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the Musical? Using Theatrical *ScholARTistry* to Transform Teaching and Learning

Dirk Jonathan Rodricks

*Every classroom is a performance space (Pineau, 1994). The relations of power inherent to every classroom must be dismantled to transform pedagogy and make learning mutually liberatory for both teacher and student (Freire, 1996). Using Friere's (1996) Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a theoretical foundation, this article presents ScholARTistry as a medium to (re)imagine teaching and learning. Simply put, ScholARTistry is a hybrid practice that combines tools used by the literary, visual, and/or performing arts with tools used by educators and other social scientists to explore the human condition (Cabnmann, 2006). First, Freire's (1996) contributions to emancipatory scholarship and educational discourse are discussed. Next, ScholARTistry is reviewed as a medium exploring the transformative relationship between art and social justice. Finally, using an instrumental case study (Stake, 2003), I illustrate how theatrical ScholARTistry can be used to dismantle normalized discourse and transform teaching and learning.*

“Changing what we teach means changing how we teach” (Culley & Portuges, 1985, p. 2). Yet since the Supreme Court mandated diversity as a compelling state interest (*Gutter v. Bollinger*, 2003), colleges and universities have diversified their respective student populations without adequately preparing and supporting educators to effectively serve them. Most educators are trained in the “banking model” of education where they “deposit” hegemonic concepts into students’ “accounts” (Freire, 1996, pp. 71-72). According to Vacarr (2003), most of the social justice work on college campuses has focused training on developing curriculum to reflect multiculturalism. This leaves a gap between conceptual understanding of social identity marginalization and the ability to respond to interpersonal reactions with the “other” (Vacarr, 2003).

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The teaching and learning process is about relationships; and at the essence of that relationship is power. How can educators make teaching and learning more mutually liberatory rather than singularly oppressive? A way to effectively achieve this is through ScholARTistry where the human condition is deconstructed through creative expression: visual, literary work, or performance art. Simply put, ScholARTistry is a hybrid practice that combines artistic tools with those used by educators and other social scientists to explore the human condition (Cahnmann, 2006). I examine ScholARTistry as a medium and apply it to social justice education using an instrumental case study approach (Stake, 2003). The case study aims at dismantling normalized discourse around the subject of teaching and learning and illustrates how ScholARTistry may give voice to those living on the margins.

### Toward a Critical Pedagogy

Systemic oppression is rooted in White superiority, typically unrecognized by the majority, and in turn establishes a master narrative (Stanley, 2007; Taylor, 2009). This facilitates “othering” at an individual level, defined by Yep (2003) as a process whereby individuals, groups, and communities “are deemed to be less important, less worthwhile, less consequential, less authorized and less human based on historically situated markers of social formation such as race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality” (p. 18). Sustained dominance of this master culture is normalized through social regulation, control, and othering. Higher education is driven by and operates under this dominant culture of power (Delpit, 1988). As an institutional space, the classroom unites - without interruption - the systemic oppression and individual interactions between different social identities contributing to its reproduction in larger society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000). Freirian philosophy underscores education as subversive and challenges educational institutions to be agents of change and challenge ‘othering’ to dismantle hegemony.

### *Core Principles of Freirian Theory*

Used as one of the foundational authors for anti-oppressive education, Freire’s writings have proven to be difficult to understand and operationalize (Bartlett, 2005). Freire challenges educators to reject a “banking” model where students were passive recipients of an educator’s knowledge and actions. He instead advocates for “problem-posing” mutually liberatory education where teacher and student embrace dialogical learning and a dismantling of traditional roles where teacher becomes learner.

In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation. (Freire, 1996, p. 83)

All learning is relational and knowledge is produced in these interactions. Freire advocated for a dialogical dynamic of critical reflection, action, and re-reflection. He refers to this reflective-action/actionable-reflection process as “praxis” (Freire, 1996, p. 87). Through praxis comes the awakening of critical consciousness or “conscientização” (Freire, 1996, p. 109).

Praxis is intended to be cyclical. Students are encouraged to become social agents, developing their capacity to confront real-world problems that face them and their community. The reflective part of the process develops the understanding that complex problems require complex solutions that must be revisited, revised, and re-implemented to reach a full solution (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 25).

Freire (1996) cautions against “false generosity” where educators “attempt to soften the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed” (p. 44). This only serves to perpetuate the injustice and maintain the status quo of oppression and the roles of oppressor and oppressed. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) posit “educators must constantly reflect on their pedagogy and its impact on relationships with students” without striving “for affirmation of their own generosity but to destroy the causes of false generosity” (p. 26).

Thus, Freire’s work is rooted in dialogical teaching with a fundamental goal of creating “a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorizing about experiences shared in the dialogue process” (Macedo, 2005, p. 18). Failure to link these experiences effectively to the politics of power in the hegemonic narrative reduces Freire’s work to a methodology (Macedo, 2005). This not only offers a low-risk pedagogically-safe approach for the educator, but also fails to position the *learner as teacher* – a central tenet for mutually liberatory education. hooks (1994) drew on Freirian theory and called this *engaged pedagogy* where educators must be “actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization if they are to empower students” (p. 15). Freire’s pedagogy is not a method, yet its core values and principles are reflected in *ScholARTistry*, an arts-based approach to reimagining teaching and learning.

### ScholARTistry as Methodology

Most social scientists are professionally socialized to view the study of the human condition solely through the scientific lens and constantly seek the highest degree of certainty in their findings. Once published, such findings aim to predict and control the future. Arts-based research is a form of qualitative inquiry of human condition using the “premises, procedures, and principles of the arts” (Cole & Knowles, 2007, p. 55). There is no attempt to seek a single truth. Rather its purpose lies in the diversity of thought, word, and actual experiences. It is a “means of transcending borders, of building and discovering possible forms of connec-

tion and relatedness” (Stasko, 2008, p. 24). Behar (1996) summed up arts-based research as an evolving research methodology “that explores an intermediate space [that] we can’t define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life” (p. 174). ScholARTistry is one such form of arts-based research.

### *ScholARTistry Defined*

Neilsen (2001) defined ScholARTistry as the educators’ use of art to make meaning of the world around them and integrate this meaning into teaching, learning, writing, and research. According to Neilsen, (2007), “doing so, allows for ‘scholARTists’ (2001) to do more than know about experiences – they transport us through the imagination, drawing on embodied knowledge and lived experiences as tools for understanding” (p. 96). Clarity and creativity are the legitimate cornerstones to interconnect social science research and the arts (Cahnmann, 2006). According to Knowles and Cole (2008), ScholARTistry is evidenced in the literary (novels, short stories, poetry, memoirs, etc.), visual (photography, film, sculpture, paintings, etc.), and performing arts (dance, music, ethnodrama, etc.) as well as at their intersections.

Art connects personal narrative to theoretical concepts. The arts have also long used ordinary conditions as the center of their creative manifestations (LaMarche, 2010). Through various forms such as film, theatre, photography, and books, the arts have effectively presented real life conditions where people live and work. In the process, the greater consciousness has mobilized movements that advocate justice for those living on the margins. Over the last sixty years in the United States, many social movements (e.g. civil rights, women’s rights, LGBT rights, etc.) have underscored this participatory relationship between art and society, thus engaging affected communities directly in self-advocacy (Boal, 2006; LaMarche, 2010). Social theatre is one such medium to engage groups living on the margins.

### *Social Theatre as ScholARTistry*

Social theatre as an experience stands out as perhaps the most striking form of ScholARTistry. In its rightful sense theatre should do more than entertain, it should teach. Bertoni (2000) described theatre as a relational and symbolic form of communication that juxtaposed personal experience to a particular context and the world. Tracing the origins of social theatre is useful to better understand it as a tool to *enliven* Freirian pedagogy.

Brecht’s (1964) *Epic Theatre* in 1930s Germany challenged the realism of theatre as passive and by extension suppressive to active participation in life. He used techniques of “alienation within the dramatic action, including episodic scenes

interrupted by narration, songs, and projection of images to break the illusion of the performance and make audiences active interpreters of the multilayered text rather than a play on their emotions” (Conrad, 2009, p. 164). Simply put, Epic Theatre aimed to awaken a critical consciousness in the spectator.

Like Brecht, Freire’s (1996) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* focused on getting citizens to take an active role in their lives. His praxis involved the development of critical consciousness or conscientization that allowed people (especially those living on the margins) to question the nature of their historical and social situations and move from object to subject in the creation of a more democratic way of life (Freire). Inspired by Brecht’s theatrical techniques and Freire’s pedagogical approach, Boal (1979) developed a specific set of theatrical techniques called *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Challenging traditional theatre as the dominant narrative, Boal proposed a tool for oppressed individuals to use towards altering their social reality, theatre for the people, by the people, “a rehearsal of revolution” (Boal, 1979, p. 155). Thus, social theatre is a medium in ScholARTistic methodology and Boal’s approach is its tool.

Social theatre focuses on direct engagement with the problems of individuals and communities in specific areas. According to Thompson and Schechner (2004), “social theatre is a complex process of interdisciplinary performance...the most effective social theatre rubs up against and reveals the performative in the setting, complementing or undermining it, challenging or further heightening it” (p. 13). Thus, social theatre offers a qualitative researcher’s dream, not just observing lived experiences, rather experiencing it, live. Art must go beyond entertainment to educate.

### *Using ScholARTistry in Education*

In higher education, with the growing complexity of intersecting identities and student narratives, educators are not immune from lifelong learning. The willingness of educators to embrace “teacher as learner” is central to Freirian pedagogy. Research and teaching methods are still linked to the hegemonic master narrative concept putting a premium on autonomy by rewarding individualism. For example, quantitative research often focuses on personal detachment and analytic objectivity at the cost of “personal, emotional, embodied, and spiritual aspects of knowledge and experience and as a result fails to recognize and value the process by which researchers may participate in, relate to, and co-create subjective realities of their work under study” (Dobson, 2007, p. 10).

At its core, ScholARTistry challenges educators’ personal and cultural assumptions ignored in educational discourse (Barone, 2006). Staska (2008) advocated for “a dynamic and transcendent process of creative inquiry” over “being guided

by a desire to know in a static sense” (p. 24). Social theatre is founded on process rather than finished product (e.g. traditional notion of a theatrical performance-run reproduced nightly). The focus is on the development of relationships through dialogical process. “The objective is to question society, with the living presence of its differences, rather than to be purified and brought back to a ‘normal’ value system or social code” (Schininà, 2004, p. 24).

Social theatre is often applied reactively to expose difference and thoughtfully engage and empower participants to greater points of action on issues. Can social theatre as ScholARTistic methodology be applied proactively? How can social theatre help the case for Freire’s problem-posing education model? I present a case study to illustrate how social theatre, as a scholARTistic medium, can impact teaching and learning.

### ScholARTistry Applied: Case Study

Fry, Ketteridge, and Marshall (1999) described case studies as complex examples that give an insight into the context of a problem as well as illustrating the main point. A case study is instrumental if a particular case is examined mainly to provide insight into a larger issue or to redraw a generalization (Stake, 2003, p. 137). Here *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, the Musical* is an example of theatrical ScholARTistry.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed is Paolo Freire’s call for a more liberating and humanizing approach to the learning process. The play is meant to make some of these ideas more accessible to an everyday audience. But it’s also a celebration of those students, those parents, [and] those people who work in the sometimes-oppressive system who stand up for their humanity. (Flowers, 2011)

Based on the work of Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, The Musical* is an original experience by Falconworks Artists Group of Brooklyn, NY. It dramatizes the diverse experiences of students, teachers, and parents in educational environments and the moments influencing perceptions of those experiences (Kapp, 2011). According to one of the young actors, Anthony Wilson, the creation exposes education as both corrupt and organized.

They have it organized in a way that you learn something that might be their opinion and you to have learn it in like [sic] that way and it’s just like [sic] very corrupt that they teach you like that. (Flowers, 2011)

Using a fresh approach to learning and the teacher/student relationship, the play weaves “satire, smart mob, documentary drama, and a call for education reform”

into a single musical theater experience (“Pedagogy of the Oppressed: The Musical!” n.d., para. 1).

Using ScholARTistry, the production embraces Boal’s techniques to create the inter-active event where there are no spectators (observers), only actors and spec-actors. Focusing on process rather than product, scripted stories emerged from real lived experiences and are dramatized to include the mutually liberatory opportunity for spectators to join-in the performance and be part of the dialogue. The script seemingly frames interactions between teachers, students, and parents and their respective decisions to engage or not engage, persist or not persist, succeed or not succeed in and outside the classroom environment. For example, a particular scene focuses on student voice to challenge the curriculum or they way it is being taught while another scene challenges the actions (or lack thereof) by a teacher to intervene effectively in an interaction between students in the classroom.

The beauty of an experience like this is complexity of identity and its increasing relevance within the higher education context. In this case, issues of race, gender, sexuality, religion, (dis)ability, and class are all layered in each scene (whether intentional or not) making the performance rich for critical analysis. Watching these performed interactions allows one to, without fear or mandate to participate, identify with, and learn from through self-reflection. A 65-year old Fordham University faculty member in the audience noted the performance increased his awareness and understanding of the issues both teachers and students face (Kapp, 2011). Whether this increased knowledge impacts curriculum construction and pedagogy is left unexplored and merits further longitudinal research.

#### Implications for Educators

According to Boal, “you cannot teach if you don’t learn from those you are teaching” (as cited in Schechner & Chatterjee, 1998, p. 87). Recognizing that all areas of social life can be used as topics for artistic study, ScholARTistry has the potential as a powerful and necessary interdisciplinary tool to lead art out of the shadow of academe and dismantle relations of power. Educational researchers and faculty can do more to integrate its numerous mediums, tools, and techniques into research and teaching beyond just case studies and role-plays. For example, integrating institutional and community arts events into course assignments or through course design which may include artistic service learning, can lead to heightened non-traditional levels of engagement. Educational institutions can help mitigate this issue by encouraging and supporting innovative scholARTistic innovations. Yet more research is required to study the effectiveness of ScholARTistry to dismantle hegemony in teaching and learning environments. The implications for such research are many: increased cultural competency, more affirming teaching and learning environments, and increased academic student success.



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