

## Toolkit for Civic Engagement through the Practice of Theatre of the Oppressed

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**Important Note:** *This toolkit was designed as a resource for a series of in-person Forum Theatre workshops about migrant experiences, undertaken with communities in the North of England and London, and funded by the AHRC through the Research Project ‘Participatory Artsbased Methods For Civic Engagement In Migrant Support Organizations’ PI Umut Erel (Open University), CI Tracey Reynolds (University of Greenwich) and Maggie O’Neill (University College Cork) AH/T004045/1. We collaborated with Creating Ground <https://www.theground.org.uk>), Praxis Community Projects (<https://www.praxis.org.uk>), Regional Refugee Forum North East (<https://www.refugeevoices.org.uk>) and The Magpie Project (<https://themagpieproject.org>).*

*This toolkit has been written for use with participants, community mobilisers who have experienced these exercises in training workshops. As trainees, they can then choose the exercises they feel most confident about and those which are most suitable to the groups with whom they are working. They can apply and amend the exercises where necessary to support creative civic engagement. A separate toolkit describes how the sessions can be adapted to online contexts. We hope this will encourage training in Forum Theatre in migrant community organizations and community organizations more widely who are interested in using these methods for community activism and engagement.*

### The context

This toolkit supports the training undertaken by community mobilisers, organisers and activists to identify the social issues affecting migrant groups through participatory theatre. This will be achieved through the use of the following creative, participatory, and socially engaged theatre practices: Forum Theatre (a central method of Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*) and its group-based techniques. In the process, the workshops will enable participants to explore migrants’ different perspectives, insights, and personal experiences, and to learn how to train the groups with whom they are working to build blueprints for social action. This is important because the migration, education, health and employment practices and policies that affect migrants’ lives need to be explained and communicated, personally and experientially by groups of users, and to service providers, to enable public debate, informed listening and social action for all those involved. Ultimately, the theatre workshops will enhance trainees’ ability to make and creatively explore arguments for change by actively proposing ways to improve services and attitudes that impact migrants’ lives.

## Objectives of the Participatory Theatre Training and Toolkit:

1. To introduce the structure of Theatre of the Oppressed workshops to the trainees as a practical teaching and learning tool for working with migrant groups.
2. To introduce Augusto Boal's structure and theory as a basis for exploring approaches to dealing with their own experiences of social practices, understandings, power relations, etc.
3. To introduce the practice of the 'Joker', who guides the sessions.
4. To teach games and exercises which structure and encourage constructive communication and the creative sharing of thoughts and ideas, as a means of generating actions and solutions.
5. To create sets of processes for working with the trainees, which they will put into practice with groups.
6. To explore safe communication, as well as the enjoyment and safe sharing of space in face-to-face interactions.

## The Training and Toolkit aims:

- To explain the frameworks and techniques, as well as how they can be applied with groups in community settings.
- To consolidate a set of criteria for safe group work around sensitive issues.
- To teach facilitation/Jokering skills, which will include group work techniques, such as establishing boundaries, ground rules, using workshop structuring techniques, etc.
- To enable the trainees to explore the techniques through their own creative explorations and experiences, as a basis for working with the experiences of others.
- To reflect on the role of the Joker, and to integrate its key features into their practice.
- To offer the trainees the opportunity to draw together a set of games and exercises they identify as the most relevant to their groups.

## The workshops

- **Overview:** The trainees will learn and then practise the skills of the Joker, who plays multiple roles as a provocateur, creative stimulant, empower-er and educator. The Joker progressively hands these skills over to the group. In Theatre of the Oppressed, the participants/audiences/trainees are called Spectators: they both watch and participate in the process.
- **Agree ground rules:** Ground rules frame a working group agreement on how to communicate with and relate to each other constructively. They help to create a mutual and horizontal learning space, and are collectively agreed and owned. Examples include listening to each other, being open about difficulties, ensuring confidentiality, adapting to working in remote contexts/online spaces, etc.
- **Exercise Sequence:** An exercise sequence is a series of useful games and exercises, which transforms narratives into action, enabling reflection and the

exploration of individual and collective change. The most relevant exercises should be chosen and adapted for use. The 12 exercises in the sequence are listed and described in more detail on the following pages.

- **Feedback:** Feedback includes how people felt, what they discovered, and what was common to/different in their experiences. This process should be undertaken after groups of exercises, preferably not after each one. The facilitator should avoid chatting and should encourage a focus on individual and group experiences through sharing and exchange. This section needs to be brief, noted by the Joker, and summed up in full at the end of the sessions by both the Joker and Spectactors.

## **Introduction to the exercises**

The following exercises and games introduce and draw attention to social space, bodies in motion and social interactions within a playful frame. They de-mechanise our bodies in social interactions, by enabling us to move with other bodies in a different way than we would in our everyday encounters. The exercises, through creative and group-sharing processes, therefore seek to raise awareness of the construction of power relations in everyday life: between us and friends, colleagues, strangers, employers, politicians and power-holders. As Boal (1995, p.101) asserted: "We mechanise our lives - do the same thing at the same time every day... we try to do games to see things we're not conscious of". The twelve exercises are listed below and a description of each activity follows:

### ***Introductory Exercises***

- 1- Occupy the Space
- 2- Clap in a Circle: Group
- 3- Zip Zap Boing: Group Communication in a Circle
- 4- 123: Pairs Communication
- 5- Colombia Hypnosis or Mirroring?

### ***Image-based Exercises***

- 6- Complete the Image
- 7- Image of the Hour
- 8- Image of the Word
- 9- Model the Other

### **Forum Theatre Exercises**

- 10-Ideas Brainstorm: Images and Forum Scenarios
- 11-Forum Theatre shown to a group or to an external audience
- 12-Observations and reflections working on scenes

## **Introductory Exercises**

The following exercises allow participants to get to know each other, to learn the fundamentals of good communication, and to gain confidence.

### ***1- Occupy the Space***

- Ask the group to clear away tables and chairs and make a big circle of chairs. Then undertake the first exercise. No names should be known or introductions made prior to the exercise!
- Invite the group to walk around the space and emphasise that there should be no talking.
- Tell them to look at the floor as they walk around.
- Point out gaps on the floor and encourage students to fill them evenly.
- Walk in different directions!
- Vary the pace: slower, faster, etc.
- Shout “freeze!” to stop the movement and check for spaces. Repeat a couple of times.
- Look and smile at each other. Then avoid looking at each other, nod, and wave.
- Introduce a greeting in English or in another language.
- Explore walking in different ways, for example, with a happy, tired, brave, hopeful, or rushed gait.
- Explore walking in a different context. Imagine being in a village, city, supermarket, protest, etc.
- Meet in groups of three and exchange names and one thing you really enjoy doing. Remember what people have said!

### ***2- Clap in a Circle: Group***

- Ask the group to clear the space. Take away all tables and chairs.
- Stand in a circle.
- No talking is allowed.
- Look across and round the circle. Catch someone’s eye and exchange a clap.
- Speed up the process so that the claps follow each other closely.

### ***3- Zip Zap Boing: Group Communication in a Circle***

- Stand in a circle, following on from Clap in a Circle if desired.
- The Joker/facilitator demonstrates the game without using words, only the sounds “zip”, “zap” and “boing”. Say zip first, then add zap, and finally boing.
- Zip! Say “Zip!” with a clap and eye contact, to the person next to you. She pass(es) the clap/zip to the next person and so it goes round the circle in one direction. Practise until the process is continuous. No talking is allowed, but laughing is OK.

- Zap! Add Zap to Zip. Look across the circle, make eye contact, clap and say “Zap”, not to the people next to you. Use zip and zap sideways and across.
- Boing! Say “Boing”, with eye contact in response to zip or zap. Hands should be held up and flat, pushing zip or zap back to the sender!
- Play freely with 3 sounds/gestures and have fun. Try to get it smooth.
- Extension: you can substitute sounds and words as confidence develops. It is also good to ask the participants to lead when giving instructions and directions, as the game settles down.

#### **4- 123: Pairs Communication**

- Arrange the participants in pairs.
- Count “1 2 3” in turn and repeat, practising to get a steady rhythm.
- On a signal from the facilitator, replace 1 with a movement/sound and practise the sequence “m/s, 2, 3”.
- Facilitator signals to replace 2 and then 3 with different movement/sounds so that the number sequence is replaced by 3 movements/sounds.
- Perform to the rest of the group.
- Try doing this as a three-cue dialogue.

#### **5- Colombia Hypnosis and/or Mirroring? Select as needed!**

##### **Hypnosis**

- This activity is undertaken in pairs, with one person labelled 1 and the other 2. No talking is allowed!
- 1 should go first. Hold one hand 6 inches from your partner's face.
- Your partner follows the hand wherever it leads. The leader should move at a reasonable speed, and not so fast that it is impossible to follow.
- Then 2 leads and 1 follows.
- After practice, the previous mood should be changed: harder or softer, kinder or tougher.
- This process can be developed in groups: one leads two people, etc.

##### **Mirroring**

- Partner 1 starts a movement.
- Partner 2 mirrors the movement.
- The Joker calls “Freeze!” to swap turns.
- In the last round of the mirror game, there is no leader. Both partners move together, mirroring each other.

## **Image-based Exercises**

The following short image exercises can be used as an introduction to Image Theatre, as they involve the creation of still body images and gestures, without verbalisation.

### ***6- Complete the Image***

- Participants shake their hands.
- One participant steps out and returns to complete the image in a new and unexpected way.
- Another participant steps out and returns, etc. The image changes each time according to the reaction of the participant.
- Sequences may evolve. No talking/planning can be engaged in.
- The above can be done with a chair as the centre of the image.

### ***7- Image of the Hour***

- The Joker guides the group: for example, what do you do at 6 in the morning, 11.a.m., midnight, when you wake up on your birthday, an election day, New Year's Eve, Saturday night?
- Without talking to anyone in the room, but working within your own world, mime and talk to yourself through images of the activities you undertake during different hours and days of the week and year.
- Gain feedback on how people felt, what they discovered, and what their experiences had in common.

### ***8- Image of the Word***

- Create a big circle. The Joker explains the game and asks the group to stand.
- Participants face outwards with their backs to centre.
- The Joker chooses a theme: love, hope, etc. Then, the Joker calls "Go!"
- Each participant makes the first image that comes into one's head. The Joker calls "Freeze!"
- The Joker calls "Relax!" and asks the group to face in.
- The Joker calls "Go!". All show their images. The Joker calls "Freeze!"
- The Joker calls for a vocal sound from everyone.
- The Joker asks participants to group together when they recognise aspects of images and feel they want to share them. No talking is allowed. The Joker calls: "Walk in image! Freeze!"
- Repeat the sound that expresses the image.

- Ask the groups to take turns to look at each group and call out the themes and thoughts provoked by them. No discussion is allowed, only spontaneous interactions.
- Use the participants' themes to derive new themes. E.g. love, exclusion, etc.
- When the group have practised this, it offers a good source of themes for the Forum.

### **Modelling Exercises**

The purpose of Modelling is the creation and development of images, relations, and stories. Modelling exercises help us to share thoughts, feelings and ideas which may previously have remained unspoken. They deepen group understanding and create a language of communication not simply dependant on verbal language. Body language is the essence of theatre.

#### ***9- Make a Sculpture of the Other***

- Divide the group into pairs, with partners labelled 1 and 2.
- Partner 1 creates a sculpture, using partner 2 as their model: Imagine you are a sculptor and you are creating a statue which is part of a theme relevant to the group ones works with. Your partner will become the statue. You can gently touch the statue and move their arms or if you prefer not to touch your partner, you can show them with your own body what pose you want them to strike and what facial expression you want them to take.
- Partner 2 mirrors what is shown by Partner 1.
- Practise: Partner 1 models their image of laughter, or hope, for example, with Partner 2.
- Models move to group images. Each model walks as an image. Participants should be given the instruction to help their model to move and to place them in a group with others.
- Look at your group of images. Share comments using single words and thoughts, not narratives. Accept and enjoy divergent and unexpected views.
- Examine the issues and problems emerging.
- Repeat with Partner 2 modelling partner 1.
- Moving to scenes: Arrange the participants in small groups. Each person in the group makes an image with others of issues they want to raise and the problems they want to talk about and explore.
- Each person works with a theme they have chosen: e.g. - a journey, change, surprise, or work.
- They show their images.

## Forum Theatre Exercises

The following exercises describe how forum theatre exercises can be integrated into group work.

### *10- Ideas: Images and Forum Scenarios*

#### Handshake Forum

- One person stands facing a queue of people.
- The first person in the queue extend(s) his/her/their hand for a handshake and the person who always stands facing the queue receives it.
- The second, third and fourth in the queue do the same and receive the handshakes one at a time.
- When the fifth extends a hand, he/she/they decline(s) the offer.
- The sixth and seventh person in the queue offer their hands and he/she/they receive(s) them.

#### Forum Theatre Scenes

- Step-by-step guidance: this needs to be explored in detail as a training process. Work in small groups of 3 or 4 people.
- Share stories from your lives which foreground a problem, for example, a situation when people you were dealing with were unhelpful or rude, whether because they did not understand or were blocking you, or where language and understanding was a problem.
- Choose one story to develop and show it to the whole group as a performance.
- The Joker facilitates the setting, time, location, roles and space by asking the group:  
Who are the characters?  
What is the story?  
When and where is it happening and why...???

For example, the Joker can introduce character building and rehearsal techniques, such as:

- **Speech bubbles:** Group members verbalise the thoughts of the performer by starting with the word "I". For example, "I feel scared"; "I want to speak up". The facilitator should try to get as many group members as possible to come up with the potential thoughts of the character.
- **Hotseating:** Ask questions about the character. The person who answers the questions should use only "I". Questions should start off simply: What is your

name? What is your age? Where do you live? These initial questions should build up to asking about the aspects of their relationships and life situation that are relevant to the character for the forum theatre scene.

- **Analytical pair images:** Group members make an image of the Protagonist and the Antagonist. One starts by making an image of how the Protagonist feels and the other responds to that image. The result is the creation of new and different pairs of Protagonists and Antagonists. Participants start talking to each other to make visible the different power dynamics of the characters they are expressing.

### ***11- Forum Theatre shown to a group or to an external audience***

- The Hero and key Protagonist of the scene is the author of the story who wants to make a change to what is happening. The scene shows the difficulty and/or blockage the Protagonist is experiencing.
- The scene is performed to the group.
- The group watching the scene are asked to take turns at calling “Stop” and entering the scene to replace the Protagonist.
- The replacement tries out a different way of resolving the problem depicted in the scene. The Antagonist/problem person can also be replaced.
- The replacements play a scene to the group.
- First, the group watch the performance all the way through. •
- Once the group have watched the performance, students can step in one at a time to stop the action and replace the Protagonist.

### ***12- Observations and reflections: Working on scenes***

- There are many approaches to creating scenes and these will develop and change as work progresses. Many other issues may also emerge during the work.
- If possible, avoid stories that are potentially traumatic or too personal: encourage the group to explore social and linguistic issues that are shareable. If the facilitator develops a story further, check that the student who shared the story is comfortable with it. Bear in mind that creative conflict is the basis of Forum Theatre. The best stories get their energy from conflict. Therefore, have faith in introducing Forum, as it works!
- Sometimes, stories shared are not fully Forum-able. Support all group members to share stories but develop those which work best in Forum. For instance, the story needs to display a clear rejection faced by a character and not an internal dilemma (The latter can be worked on with other Theatre of the Oppressed techniques).
- The process of group members sharing and recognising similarities in each other's stories is very powerful.
- If someone understands the oppressor role better than the actor playing the oppressor, or if someone wants to explore the pressures faced by the Antagonist, for example, questions such as “are they a horrible person?” or “are they being bullied too?” may be asked.

- The stories become 'our stories', not one person's.
- Sometimes a story isn't clear at first, and if so, persevere. Give it time. It might take more than one session. Groups may have to re-work the story more than once before deciding to use it.
- As in all group facilitation situations, if problematic information or material emerges, the facilitator needs to manage this ethically by prioritising the safety of the spectactors as part of ethics of care
- A diverse set of techniques for exploring Forum Theatre are included in this toolkit, which recapitulate the guided exercises explored in the sessions with the trainees.

## Glossary

**Forum Theatre:** A participatory theatre form, developed by Augusto Boal in Brazil from the 1950s to the 1970s. Forum Theatre is the central technique used in Theatre of the Oppressed. It seeks to address social injustices through reflection, action and optimism. It creates a space for rehearsing change.

**Image theatre:** The creation of still body images and gestures, without verbalisation. Rather, the body's posture creates the energy for the articulation of words. It is used as a technique for group members to reflect on and interpret the different meanings of the image.

**Joker:** The facilitator and person who shapes the overall structure of the workshops. The term Joker comes from Boal's use of the Brazilian Portuguese word "curinga", meaning "wildcard".

**Spectactors:** The name given to the participants in Theatre of the Oppressed. They become thoughtful and reflexive learners as they explore different ideas, skills and group sharing, by taking part in Forum Theatre. In the process, they fulfil multiple roles as participants, creators, performers and eventually, Jokers.

**Theatre of the Oppressed:** A socially and politically engaged theatre practice created by Augusto Boal in Brazil and Europe from the 1950s onwards. It offers a means of bringing diverse groups of people together to engage in dialogue, critical thinking and action through performance.

## References

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In the projects below you can watch performances which were part of participatory action research. Key methods we used are Playback Theatre, Image Theatre, Forum Theatre, Legislative Theatre, Physical Theatre exercises, mapping exercises and 'Talking to the panel'. For a better understanding of these methods, see the Methods and Toolkit sections of this website.

<https://fass.open.ac.uk/research/projects/pasar>

<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/migrant-mothers/participatory-theatre/>