

A Little Less Talk, A Little More Action: Using Theatre to Activate Conflict Resolution

Friends
&
Education

CHRISTEL GREINER

Christel, you've got to go do this," urged two great friends after returning from a five-day workshop in the tiny town of Port Townsend, Washington. The workshop was called *Theatre of the Oppressed Facilitator Training*, led by Marc Weinblatt.

"Wait, theatre of the what?" I asked. *Facilitator training* was the only part of this title that remotely resembled professional development I had done before. My friends described the training as transformative peace education. They hailed Marc as a facilitator and bubbled passionately about the new games and role-playing activities they were bringing back to their high school students. When I heard about the opportunities for empowering the student voice and using kinesthetic approaches to embody conflict resolution, I was interested. In fact, I saw a lot of potential, given the direction in which our small Carolina Friends School (CFS) was headed. It sounded like a little less talk and a little more action, and I liked the sound of that.

I had been drawn to CFS because of its roots in Quakerism. Pedagogy based on simplicity, stewardship, peace, and that of God in every person spoke clearly to me. I'm thankful each day, while I settle in with 145 middle school students and 22 staff members, that my path led to this small Quaker school in North Caro-

lina. This year I'm completing my fourth year in the middle school, watching the once tiny fifth grade students I taught in my first math class, lead the middle school community as proud, independent eighth-grade leaders and mentors. With satisfaction, I've completed a full cycle of students coming into—and now graduating from—middle school.

It has not been easy. Pre-adolescents and adolescents can be quite challenging at times. Physically, they are growing rapidly. They are trying to find a sense of individuality while fitting in with the group. They fall and get back

up every day. In a middle school, conflicts happen regularly, so students must learn how to process and deal with them peacefully. To help prepare students, we teach a course called Conflict Resolution to all sixth graders. We also offer electives and special programs on conflict resolution throughout the year. We ask our eighth grade students to take on a significant leadership role. Actively teaching leadership and conflict resolution skills is an essential part of creating a community in our middle school.

As a part of our mission of peaceful resolution of conflicts, our head teacher, Renee Prillaman, began a dialogue with the students using the terms bully, bullied, and bystander, to help them identify their role in a conflict. Renee stressed that the bully can change and is not always the same person or few people. The bullied is one who is targeted or made to feel unsafe—physically or emotionally—for any number of reasons. The bystander is one who stands

by and watches as a bully antagonizes the bullied. Sometimes the bystander can even become a bully-bystander by encouraging the bully to act in a hostile manner towards the target. However, the bystander also has the ability to stand up for the bullied by encouraging the bully to reconsider his or her actions.

As the students identified the key components of each role, they recognized the need for a fourth category. Renee had also been looking for a way to help students see the capability of the bystander to change the situation and stand up for the bullied. It was a student, however, who coined the term "the bold" to describe an up-stander, rather than a bystander. The bold is one who regains power by standing up for the bullied or inviting the bully to make a more positive choice. The bold shifts the energy toward resolving a conflict.

As I reflected on the direction



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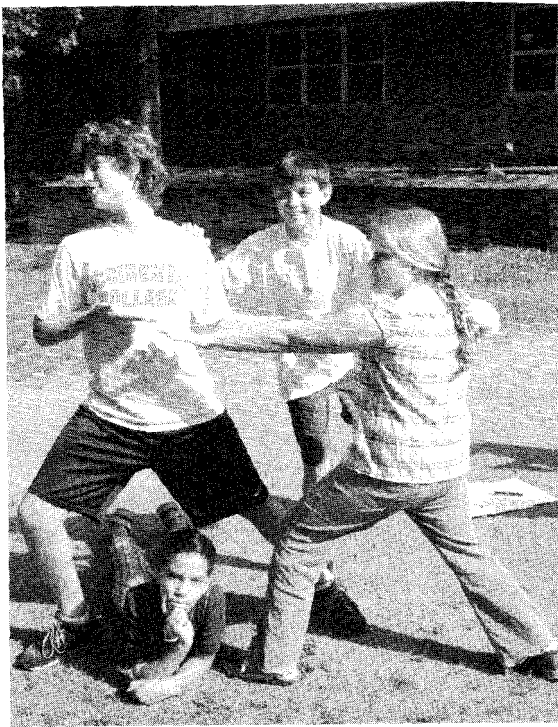
Renee was leading us and considered how skits and theatre could be a perfect strategy for helping students to embody bold action, I approached Renee with the idea of attending the Theatre of the Oppressed Facilitator Training. I explained that I was expecting to learn skills for empowering the bystander to be the bold. After hearing my excitement and weighing the potential this training could have on our community, she was fully supportive in making it happen. So I registered.

While I was completely inspired by the idea of the training and ready to learn some new skills for empowering students, the part that terrified me was the word *theatre*. I am not an actor. I certainly don't like to be on stage or in front of a crowd. This would be my own personal attempt at being bold. Though I was nervous, I trusted my friends and my instinct that *I just needed to do this*. A little less talk, a little more action. Here we go.

The training challenged me personally and professionally. I used my own stories to engage in the work, which made it even more powerful. Other participants from across the country and the world provided startling perspectives and ideas. New truths were continually revealed. I was an actress, using my body to communicate joy, horror, frustration, fear, anger, angst, and mistrust. I embodied my antagonist in a personal exercise that used no words but spoke loud and clear. All the while I was considering how I was going to bring this back to the classroom, to students who were itching to be "the bold."

I left Marc's training with a fire to carry the work forward. Marc was not concerned with "ownership of title" or following a prescribed model. The nature of this approach is to try, learn, reconstruct, evolve, and tweak to fit the group with which you are working. Marc's teacher, Augusto Boal, inspired the same message: filter, grow, recreate, and change. Use a little less talk and a little more action.

When I eagerly began to utilize this learning with my CFS community, the work quickly spread. We performed for

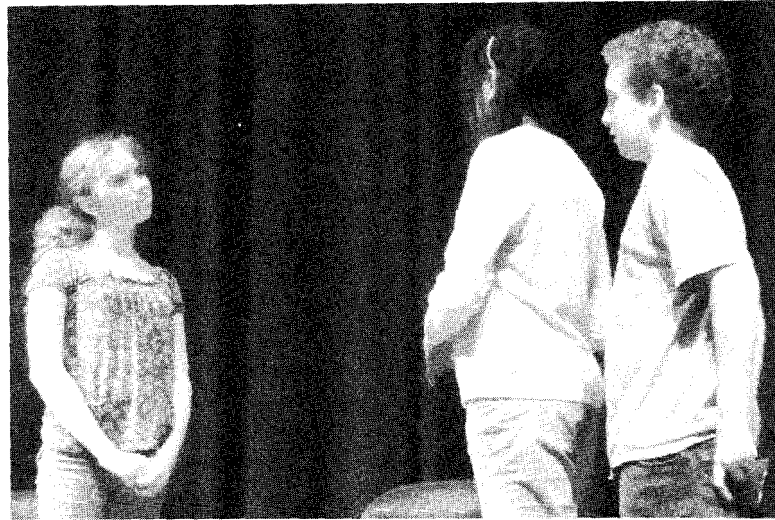


Below are some of the strategies I've used and what I've learned. I hope other teachers will use it with their students who are itching to be "the bold." The following methods are adapted from my training, and from Augusto Boal's *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Feel free to change, tweak, borrow, or re-create them. As you do, remember to let the kids own their process. It's their rehearsal for life.

Cover the Space

Cover the Space is the standard way that I begin my Rehearsal for Life class. It's an icebreaker that allows us to settle into our bodies and communicate using movement.

Begin with an open space for the stu-



Students and adults in Christel Greiner's classes use theatre to practice conflict resolution skills.

Photos courtesy of Christel Greiner

audiences ranging from 10 to 500 members. First, my class of 12 students presented to fifth grade students in a local, urban public school that was also studying the terms bully, bullied, bystander, and bold. We were then invited to present to over 200 adults at the North Carolina Psychoanalytic Foundation's conference: *Back Off Bully: Why School Anti-Bullying Programs Don't Work*. This presentation was meant to demonstrate to parents, teachers, and psychologists what common conflicts look like for adolescents and how kids can respond with bold action. Adults then engaged in forum theatre and practiced strategies of conflict resolution, following the models my students presented. When our neighboring public school was experiencing increasing conflicts on their playground at recess, we again performed skits, this time for kindergarten through fifth grade students.

Students to explore. Students will cover the space by simply moving and exploring their environment. Use some of the following prompts to get the kids moving and comfortable with their own bodies.

Cover the space by simply walking through the space of the room. Try to stay in your own space, and be aware of others so you don't collide. At any time you can return to a neutral direction, asking them to simply "cover the space."

Prompts for students:

- Move to a part of the room you feel drawn to.
- Move to a part of the room you don't feel drawn to.
- Walk as though the floor has turned to marshmallows.
- Walk the way you are feeling (bubbly, sluggish, eager, etc.). Emphasize it to make it look more dramatic.
- Walk the way you *aren't* feeling.
- When I say, "Faster," walk slower. When

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- I say, "Slower," walk faster.
- Walk the way you want to be feeling. Make the movements bigger.
 - Make the movements even more dramatic and obvious.
 - When I say, "Freeze," hold your position and give it a sound.
 - Repeat, emphasizing your pose and your sound. Make it bigger. Make your sound louder.
 - If you want to deepen the mood, you can slow down the action and even your tone of voice.

Faint by Numbers

This is another game that can be either a playful warm-up or a serious exploration of group support. The energy will most likely follow your intent, how you speak, and how quickly you pace the game. You'll want an open space, free of objects to trip over. Remind the kids that, though they'll be "fainting," they are in charge of their own bodies and should make safe choices. To play, each student is assigned a number. Students then cover the space silently, but when their number is called, they must make a loud fainting sound and slowly pretend to faint. When the other kids hear a student fainting, they rush to support him or her and return the student to a standing position. You then call another number and another student loudly and slowly faints, until caught. Continue to call numbers until all the students have had the experience of "fainting."

As an extension, you could call more than one number at a time. Sometimes I end the game by calling all numbers at once and we end up laughing in a heap on the floor.

Complete the Image

This warm-up is a kid favorite! It also helps the students become more comfortable with improvisation, which is essential when using forum theatre or when confronting a conflict.

Complete the Image begins with two students shaking hands. You freeze the action and ask the audience what is happening. Is it a first meeting? A business transaction? Are they long-lost brothers, or swing dancing? When a student has an idea, he or she comes up and replaces one of the actors, usually by tapping the actor on the shoulder and taking his or her position. The new student then improvises a new scenario, and the original

partner must also improvise, following the new actor's lead. The audience watches, and when another student sees an opportunity for a new direction, he or she yells "Freeze!" and replaces an actor, and then takes the skit in an entirely new direction. I usually allow about ten minutes for this particular game. Encourage the students to use big, bold movements when they are in the skit. Simply standing and talking is hard to replace, while large, dramatic movements can be fun to alter and change.

Forum Theatre

Forum Theatre is what I'm working towards in my classes. Learning how to facilitate Forum Theatre is a result of the five-day intensive training I underwent. However, here are the basics.

In Forum Theatre, students present skits based on authentic conflicts. Students create a skit presenting the anti-model, or an escalation of conflict. In their skits, the students *do not* solve their conflict. Rather, they present the conflict to their audience and invite an audience member to enter the skit and try a variety of strategies. Ideally, skits should be three to five minutes long, with some key moments when the conflict escalates. They can also be shorter when using the model to help students work through a recent conflict.

Tips for facilitating Forum Theatre with an audience:

- The audience is invited to watch the skit once, considering who is having a hard time, or how that person can make a better decision.
- Once the skit is finished, the spectators have the opportunity to participate and become "spect-actors." The skit is performed again, but this time a student in the audience who sees a chance to enter the skit and try a new strategy yells, "STOP!"
- At that point, invite the student to come onto the stage and replace one of the characters. Ask the student to indicate from which point to begin (sometimes rewinding a bit).
- The actors then replay the skit, rolling with the strategies the audience member presents. Actors should stay reasonably true to their characters. The actors should allow for success without making it too easy, which takes practice.

- After each intervention, discuss the strategy with the group—how it worked, and whether they think it would be effective in real life.
- Thank students for their ideas and ask if others have ideas for the same situation, getting as many students involved as possible.
- When there are no more suggestions for that particular scene, continue the skit.

Suggestions for audience members:

- Please be careful not to hurt yourself or the actors. Be safe and responsible.
- Intervene only for a character you feel is struggling with the situation—usually the bystander or the bullied. (It would be very easy to change the world if we could change the people we think are causing the problems.)
- No magical changes. You have to stay true to the characters and the play that's been created. For example, if the scene involves two kids talking, and one of them is a new student, you can't come in and say, "But I'm your sister!"
- There is no wrong answer or bad suggestion. We learn from every idea that is presented, so don't take yourself too seriously, try some things out, and let us see what ideas you have to be "the bold."

Throughout my own process as an educator and facilitator, I've learned that it's not about what *I* want the students to gain; it's about creating a space for them to identify what's not working and allowing *them* to offer their own, unscripted ideas. I begin by creating a safe, playful space for students to unwind and let go a little. I then invite a deeper focus on what is truly happening in their personal lives. Often, I need to adjust my plan to fit where the students are and what they need to express. At its best, this work enables students to practice being bold in an authentic situation. It is a rehearsal for life.

Resources:

- Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. New York, 1992, 2002.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York, 1979.
- Mandala Center for Change: <www.mandalaforchange.com> □

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