

Giving people something to talk

Using Theatre to Address Issues

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Why Use Theatre?

- **Context** – Theatre puts issues into a real-life context so that they are more than just abstract ideas and disconnected statistics.
- **Humanity** – Theatre puts a personal human face to the issues. It allows participants to see how the issues affect real people in real situations. Audience members can identify with theatrical characters and therefore identify with the problems that arise from the issues.
- **Engagement** – Theatre engages participants on a variety of levels. They engage emotionally in the conflict. They engage intellectually with the ideas. They identify personally with the characters. This leads to a deeper connection with the issues.
- **Entertainment** – Let's face it, attention spans are getting shorter. Students' patience with lectures is dwindling. There are plenty of distractions. Theatre allows for humor, drama, passion, action, and interaction.

Core Concepts of Issue-Based Theatre

Intent

- What do you want to say?
 - What response are you seeking?
 - How are you going to get it?
- } Your answers to these essential and interrelated questions will determine what you do and how you do it.

Keep it Truthful

- Reality vs. Truth
 - Theatre is heightened reality; start with real situations and theatricalize them to expose the truth.
 - Theatrical truth is subjective truth. How does each character experience a situation?

Conflict is the Essence of Theatre

- 2 people, 2 passions, and a platform
- Objective, Obstacle, Action

Audience Investment

- Give them a stake.
 - Don't talk at your audience, dialogue with them.
 - Give your audience ownership of the issues.
- Ask something of them.
 - What does your audience think?
 - Demand a response in words or actions.

Types of Issue-Based Theatre

Agit-Prop

- Actors perform scenes that present a specific point of view on an issue.
- Didactic
- Message flows from stage to audience
- No exchange with the audience
- Best used to impart important factual information or when a specific message must be given. Examples include where to find study help, what is there to do on the weekend or what is the grievance process for resolving disputes. However, because the audience has little or no stake, it is not much different from a lecture.

Intervention Theatre

- Actors present scenes that show behavior related to an issue and then remain in character to discuss that behavior with the audience.
- Dialogical
- Message flows from the stage to the audience and back to the stage
- Active exchange of words
- Used to generate active discussion of issues. The characters in each scene must represent different points of view on an issue. Audience members must feel comfortable expressing their opinion, whatever that opinion may be. Requires a skilled moderator who is familiar with the issues. Requires extensive preparation by the performers to fully understand their character's point of view and to be able to improvise answers that accurately reflect that point of view.

Forum Theatre

- Actors present scenes that ask the audience to help resolve a specific problem. Audience members come to the stage to try out different approaches.
- Dialogical
- The actors are the audience, and the audience is the actors.
- Active exchange of words and actions
- Used within a specific community to seek and practice solutions to specific problems faced by that community. Scenes are generated from real stories. Actors and audience are playing and watching themselves.

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Rehearsal Techniques

- **Playing to the Deaf**
 - Use this technique to deal with scenes with no physical action (talking heads).
 - Actors go through the actions of a scene without words. Physical actions and relationships should be exaggerated so that the audience still understands what is happening.
- **Stop/Think**
 - Use this technique to connect actors mentally and emotionally to their character's words and actions.
 - The scene is played. When the director yells, "Stop", the actors freeze. The director then yells, "Think". The actors express their character's inner monologue simultaneously and out loud. They must keep talking until the director yells, "Action". On this direction the actors start immediately back into the scene where they left off.
- **One Word**
 - Use this technique to deal with unnecessarily wordy scenes.
 - Actors play the scene, finding a single word to express the intent of each of their lines.
- **Somatization**
 - Use this technique to connect actors physically to the emotional desires of their characters.
 - Actors physicalize in an exaggerated manner their character's emotional desires. For instance, if a character is feeling afraid to let a parent go after being dropped off at school, that actor might physically cling to and hang on the actor playing the parent.

Good Books on the Subject

Essential

Boal, Augusto (1992) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, New York: Routledge.

Rhod, Michael (1998) *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue*, New Hampshire: Heinemann.

Spolin, Viola (1986) *Theatre Games for the Classroom*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Also Good

Boal, Augusto (1985) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Cosa, Mario, Sally Fleischman-Ember, Lauren Grover and Jennifer Hazelwood (1996) *Acting Out: The Workbook*, Washington DC: Taylor-Francis.