

Guidelines and Protocols for Adapting for Theater of the Oppressed to Social Entrepreneurship Education¹

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One of the more significant hurdles faced by social entrepreneurship educators is communicating the complexity and depth of social problems and their human impact. Without this understanding, the development of a social enterprise is untethered. Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) is an exercise that can accelerate this understanding by using a theater performance to promote mind-body-social awareness.

Application to social entrepreneurship classroom:

Theatre of the Oppressed has a long tradition of brokering conversations around conflict and core values to build empathy for politically, culturally, and economically marginalized populations. This tool was reframed and adapted to the social entrepreneurship curriculum in the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy at Florida State University through a senior seminar-style class (ECS 3022, Social Entrepreneurship and Economic Development) for the Fall 2019 semester. The seminar has an enrollment cap of 19 students and incorporates 15 to 20 exercises with a focus on equipping undergraduate students with the knowledge, insight, and tools necessary to create a social enterprise business plan.

The course is a 15 week “crash course” in social entrepreneurship. Exercises are grouped into three areas:

1. Building a **knowledge base** on social issues and problems, primarily through readings and in-class discussions. The course heavily leverages students’ experiences working with or living in communities often considered marginalized.
2. Building **empathy** toward people living in marginalized conditions, communities, or cultures. No boundaries are placed on social problems or issues. Thus a typical semester will include research and social enterprises focused on a wide-range potential issues, including the challenges of homeless, chronic poverty, environmental degradation, LGBTQ+ communities, drug addiction, domestic violence, microfinance, and others.

¹ The author acknowledges Dr. Gaye Theresa Johnson for introducing the tool at a conference sponsored by Course Hero in July 2019 and the assistance of Dr. Crystal Taylor in reframing the exercise for applications to social entrepreneurship teaching.

3. Creating a **business plan** for a social enterprise that is financially sustainable through market-based revenue sources and has the potential for meaningful social impact

Theatre of the Oppressed was added to the portfolio of exercises focused on building empathy and implemented during the first full week of classes after drop-add (which is the first week of the semester at FSU).

Classroom Impact:

At the end of the semester, each student is required to participate in an “exit interview” during finals week. The exit interview is not graded, lasts for 30 minutes, and is used to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the class as well as review the in-class performance of the student. These exit interviews revealed that 35.3 percent of the students (N=17) believed the Theater of the Oppressed exercise was one of the most impactful one or two activities among the 15 they experienced in the class over the course of the semester.² When asked on an anonymous survey to score the exercises on a numerical scale ranging from least effective (- 5) to most effective (+5) in helping them the course objectives, Theater of the Oppressed (N = 13) averaged 2.8 (although one student scored the activity -3).

Exercise Learning Objectives:

- Develop empathy for marginalized populations and other “out” groups/individuals
- Clarify personal attitudes, values, and beliefs about social problems and issues
- Define and distinguish between a social issue and a social problem
- Compare and describe human responses to social problems and issues
- Differentiate between human responses to the particulars of social problems and interventions
- Discuss the varied dimensions and components of social problems, interventions, and responses
- Understand the importance of engaging in active versus passive learning

Exercise Application:

The exercise is suitable for large and small classes as long as students are able to visually experience the performance. The focus of the exercise is on two participants who act out a physical reaction to a prompt provided by the facilitator by striking, and holding, a specific pose. Two actors are assigned the sequential roles: A) the first actor (V1) responds to a verbal prompt given by the facilitator, and B) the second actor (V2) responds to the first actor.

After the response, the facilitator engages the remaining members of the class (excluding the actors who remain silent in their pose) in a discussion about their emotional and subjective reactions to the actors and their response to the prompt. The discussion should focus on the first actor’s (V1) response to the prompt, followed by a discussion of the second actor’s (V2) reaction.

² Interviews and survey deployed after the first application of the teaching tool during the Fall 2019.

Facilitators should be prepared to engage with at least two (2) scenarios. The first scenario is a tool for establishing the ground rules and a safe space for dialogue.

The actors should perform/react in silence. This instruction can be challenging for undergraduate and younger students since US culture emphasizes verbal communication. Many may simply never have reflected on physical responses to what they see or feel. If their inability to perform physically becomes a significant barrier to the exercise, the facilitator can use this moment as a supplementary exercise in discussing the ways people physically show emotions (e.g., smiles, slumped shoulders, clasping hands, etc.). *The discussion should focus solely on how to express feelings in physical poses, not a reaction to the content of the prompt.*

In addition to making progress on the explicit learning objectives, students should come away from the exercise with, 1) a greater appreciation for the difficulties in interpreting other people's actions, 2) the wide range of differences in perspective, and 3) the assumptions that often underlie our interpretation and understanding of events and behavior.

Procedure:

1. Ask for two volunteers
2. Ask for one volunteer to go first
3. Instruct volunteers and participants that this is a **silent exercise** unless prompted by the facilitator
4. **Prompt**
 - a. Instruct all participants to remain silent until instructed by the facilitator.
 - b. Verbally announce the prompt to the entire class/group.
 - c. Instruct Volunteer 1 (V1) to strike a physical pose reflecting their feelings/reaction to the prompt.
 - d. Instruct Volunteer 2 (V2) to strike a physical pose reacting to V1.
 - e. Invite the class to verbalize their reactions to V1.
 - What do they see?
 - What do they feel?
 - What is the meaning behind the pose?
 - f. Invite the class to verbalize their reactions to V2.
 - Why do they think V2 reacted the way they did?
 - What does their reaction say about the issue/problem?
5. **Intervention**
 - a. Verbally announce an intervention
 - b. Instruct V2 to react to the prompt
 - c. Instruct V1 to react to V2's change
 - d. Invite the class to verbalize their reactions to V2
 - How did V2 respond?
 - How is this reaction different from the first prompt?
 - e. Invite the class to verbalize their reactions to V1's reaction

- How is V1 response different from their initial reaction to the prompt?
- How is V1's response connected (or not) to V2's reaction?

6. Debrief

- a. How did the prompt influence responses by V1 and V2?
- b. How did the intervention change the responses between the volunteers?
- c. What do you think caused these differences in behavior?
- d. How do the physical poses reflect the worldview/perspective of each person?
- e. What does this exercise suggest about the need to understand individual problems? Social problems?
- f. What does this exercise suggest about the complexity of social problems and their interventions?

Warm-up activity (10 min):

- Lead interactive, student-centered discussion on social issues

Potential Prompt 1: Youth Gang Violence

- **Intervention 1:** Youth have access to counseling, a job, adult mentors, and stable homelife

Potential Prompt 2: Homeless Veterans

- **Intervention 2:** Veterans are provided job and skills training, access to psychiatric services, therapy, counseling resources, a job.

Potential Prompt 3: Deforestation of the Amazon

- **Intervention 3:** Local villagers are provided resources to practice traditional forestry practices, sustain livelihoods, and retain culture

Adapted from:

Gopal Midha, "Theatre of the Oppressed: A Manual for Educators," *Masters Capstone Projects*, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Center for International Education, 2010,

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