



# Using Theatre to Stage Instructional and Organizational Transformation

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## SCENE I: CONFLICT IN THE STATISTICS CLASSROOM

You thought that you were prepared to teach today's lesson on correlation coefficients. But when you and the students discussed the graph on infant mortality and mothers' income levels, your plans went awry. Within seconds, an interesting classroom conversation escalated into a heated argument among the students about the parenting abilities of low-income mothers—culminating in harsh words that left one student in tears. Disconcerted, you raised your voice to bring the group back to order, thereby eliciting stony silence from the students for the remainder of the

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class. Now you dread the next class meeting, and you know that your students do too.

But magically, you get a chance to replay the conflict and handle it differently, and you can ask your colleagues for advice before the class begins. Now you can look into the minds of your students to discern their thoughts, concerns, and perceptions. You become deeply aware of the subtleties and nuances of the classroom dynamics, and you begin to understand the ways that gender, social class, and race are playing out

in the exchanges between you, the students, and their peers. With these new insights, you collaborate with your colleagues to develop productive responses to the students in the very moment of the heated argument. Essentially, you have the opportunity to transform the classroom conflict into an opportunity for learning.

## **SCENE II: A TENURE DISCUSSION IN A FACULTY MEETING**

You attended the departmental executive committee meeting to participate in a tenure review. But as the meeting unfolded, you felt as if the conversation was getting off track. The candidate's credentials were questioned in ways that seem biased. The discussion shifted from her qualifications to a contentious airing of views about whether good teaching matters, the value of interdisciplinarity, and the future direction of the department. The discussion seemed to be about everything but this candidate. You have the sense that the whole conversation was being influenced by gender. You tried to intervene, but your attempts were rebuffed.

But then you have the opportunity we all long for: the chance to revisit the conversation, think carefully about what was said, decide how and when to intervene effectively, and replay the scene. But it gets better: not only do you have a second chance, you also have a group of colleagues with whom to compare notes and strategize about the most effective interventions. You get to see the impact of your choices as selected parts of the conversation get replayed, this time incorporating the interventions you and your colleagues have devised. In the process, you develop an awareness of what are more and less effective approaches to raising sensitive issues; the unintended consequences of various strategies; and how power, status, and gender can affect one's ability to create change.

## **INTERACTIVE THEATRE AS FACULTY DEVELOPMENT**

Since 2000, the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan (UM) has presented an educational theatre program for the professional development of faculty and graduate student instructors. Through the medium of interactive theatre, faculty can experience the sort of "second chance" described in these scenarios. As they engage with the sketch, the characters, and each other, faculty are drawn into making sense of the issues portrayed, relating them to personal experience and strategizing about how to transform a difficult situation. We have found that the results can have a profound effect on faculty attitudes and behaviors.

Most people think of theatre as a form of entertainment—a diversion from our daily lives that inspires, amuses, or provokes us and that engages our creative imagination. But theatre has long served as a powerful educational tool as well. At colleges and universities, theatre is often used to facilitate student affairs training: sketches on topics like date rape and substance abuse are common now at orientation sessions. The marvel is that we faculty and consultants engaged in professional development have come so late to the idea of theatre as an effective teaching tool.

Faculty development workshops usually present research on teaching improvement focused on problems instructors typically face; consultants then work with faculty to figure out



how to apply the material to their own settings. These days, our theatrical productions often replace those kinds of workshops at UM. We have found that interactive sketches can accomplish the same objectives, only better. Consequently, the CRLT Theatre Program is in demand, performing not only at our own programs, but also at the university's departmental retreats and faculty meetings and at other universities and national conferences.

Jeffrey Steiger, the director of the CRLT Theatre Program, has adapted his use of theater from the pioneering work of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director and politician and the originator in the 1950s of the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. In developing this methodology, called *Forum Theatre*, Boal drew on the work of another Brazilian, Paulo Freire, the educational theorist and author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. A key Freirian thesis is that people learn through doing. Boal's methodology involves engaging the audience by presenting a problem in theatrical form (usually a political problem involving some sort of oppression) and then inviting the audience to advance and discuss solutions to the problem, often with individuals from the audience acting out those solutions on stage.

The CRLT Theatre Program sketches typically focus on diversity issues. While all faculty development workshops can seem didactic if done poorly, faculty often approach multicultural programs with special suspicion. Those who identify multiculturalism as a recognizable and worthy goal generally benefit from these programs. But those who need greater awareness, knowledge, and skill development may not participate in them or, when they do, react defensively or have difficulty seeing the relevance of the sketches to their own situations. This can be particularly problematic in the sciences and engineering, where the subject matter appears "objective" and discussions of identity (gender, race, and disability) or power dynamics can seem irrelevant to faculty and graduate students.

The diversity-related topics in the CRLT sketches typically fall into one of two categories. The first is teaching and learning improvement, especially the ways an instructor can serve underrepresented students and teach better by creating a classroom environment where all students feel safe and can achieve their full potential. The second topic is the transformation of the faculty work world—for instance, faculty meetings, hiring, mentoring, and the tenure and promotion process—so that women and faculty of color, who may be marginalized in their departments, are more likely to succeed. The latter topic has developed out of a collaboration between CRLT and the ADVANCE project at UM, funded by the National Science Foundation, to improve recruitment and retention of women faculty in the sciences. Thus, the Theatre Program is working on both multicultural instructional development and multicultural orga-

nizational development—with the ambitious objective of both personal and institutional transformation.

The CRLT Theatre Program currently presents 15 sketches. They have a variety of formats, all of which include some degree of interactivity. For example, some sketches are followed by a workshop at which the audience members discuss the issues in the sketch and may also address questions to the actors (still in their roles) in order to get a better understanding of the personal experiences of each character (for

example, the *Conflict* sketch described at the outset). Another format involves a sketch followed by an invitation to some audience members to join the actors on stage and redirect the sketch outcome (for instance, the *Tenure* sketch, also described above). A third format starts with a sketch, then has audience discussion with the actors in their roles, including audience suggestions to the actors for improving their interactions. The actors then replay the scenario, incorporating the audience feedback and demonstrating better outcomes than the original (the sketch called *Gender in the Classroom*, on the chilly climate for women students in the sciences, for example).

All of the CRLT Theatre sketches are based on research done at UM, a synthesis of the literature on a topic, or a combination of the two. Before a sketch begins, a CRLT facilitator briefly presents the research findings on which the sketch is based. After the sketch, the facilitator guides the exchange among the audience and the actors—noting implicit assumptions and helping the audience uncover the subtext behind the characters' comments. At the end, the facilitator underlines key points for the audience and

finishes with additional research findings and strategies for using the information presented.

## HOW DO WE KNOW IT WORKS?

As with any professional development activity for faculty, the primary purpose of the theatrical performances is transformation at both a personal or institutional level. There are a number of models for how such change occurs, but they share several common steps: gaining an awareness of the need for change, devising strategies, changing behavior, and making the change permanent.

We have evaluated our effectiveness by administering surveys directly following performances, following up with additional surveys and focus groups three months to a year after the performances, and interviewing key administrators who use the Theatre Program to effect change at the University of Michigan. Results from these multiple sources indicate that on an individual level, participation in theatre performances affects audience members' awareness and their behavior. On an institutional level, theatre makes a significant contribution as well.

To illustrate: We have collected over 2,000 evaluations of our most commonly performed sketches, *Gender in the Classroom* and *(dis)Ability in the Classroom*. In order to raise

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awareness, audience members must see the sketches as useful and relevant. Over 75 percent of the *Gender* audience members and over 90 percent of the *(dis)Ability* audiences thought that the issues raised in the sketch were useful for them as teachers. In addition, nearly three-quarters of the *Gender* audiences and almost 90 percent of the *(dis)Ability* audiences agreed that the interactive discussion enhanced their understanding of difficult issues.

Qualitative comments also consistently indicate an increase in audience awareness of key issues and a gain in instructors' knowledge and sense of self-confidence as teachers, as the following comments from *Gender in the Classroom* reflect:

- "The performance...reminded me how subtle gender discrimination can be. [It] encouraged me to make sure that my [TAs] were very clear on my preferences for classroom conduct and was a good organizer/reminder for me in talking with them before the start of classes."

- "I was amazed [at] how intensely some other people in the audience were moved by the presentation, as if they had never seen represented what they (mostly women in the audience) had experienced."

Similarly, among department chairs who saw the *Tenure* sketch, over 90 percent agreed or strongly agreed that the issues raised by the sketch made them think about familiar interactions and situations in new ways, and over three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed that the interactive discussion enhanced their understanding of difficult issues. Again, the chairs' comments are revealing:

- "Poor leadership leads to confusion and injustice. Not news, but people always think it is the other chair who is doing it. Self-recognition is the most valuable product of the sketches."

- "My main observation was to realize how difficult it is to handle these kinds of situations and how important it is for the chair to be prepared, anticipate issues before the meeting, come to the meeting with all of the information, and not leave it to other faculty."

When instructors' capacities and awareness increase, they can begin to make changes in the classroom. Our follow-up surveys indicate that instructors who attend the Theatre Program presentations pay more attention to the effect of their actions on students and design assignments and make classroom management choices that work more uniformly for the student body. For example, attendees at several TA orientation programs saw the *(dis)Ability* sketch. In surveys three months or more after the performance, close to 80 percent said that seeing the sketch had affected their teaching or their interaction with students in some way. Some typical comments:

- "[I developed an] understanding of what 'sensitivity' to disabilities is really about: it is not feeling compassionate or sorry for disabled students, but treating them as equals and

understanding the nature of their disabilities and how they are able to handle them. Based on that, the teacher proceeds to interact with the student."

- "I remembered to ask [students] to let me know of any special needs they had when they filled out index cards for me."

- "I became aware of the possibility that I would need to consider a student's disability when arranging the room/office hours."

TAs in the sciences and engineering were surveyed three to 12 months after seeing the *Gender* sketch. Almost 90 percent agreed that the sketch made them aware of classroom experiences of women and minority students; over 80 percent said it led them to reflect on how their actions in the classroom affected students; and about three-quarters said the sketch led them to consider the issues as more important than before, made them proactive about creating a positive climate, and gave them strategies to address classroom dynamics that negatively affect women and minority students. Moreover, close to 40 percent said they changed their behavior as a result of the sketch, a particularly notable number in the sciences and engineering, where many TAs have had no prior teaching experience. Some of their reactions:

- "I attended the CRLT Theatre performance last year before I actually started teaching. When I started, I found out that the class was more difficult for students than I expected. I had more women in the class than men. After a couple of labs, I realized that the men were more enthusiastic, and I kept paying more attention to their answers. *Gender in the Classroom* showed me the real issue. So I decided to pay attention equally to both genders, and also I answered more questions referring to all my students, sometimes using 'random call.'"

- "I teach a lab course. Often I see women being the note-taker in the lab, rather than actively participating in the experiments. In those cases, I now intervene immediately to remind my students that they will all need individual lab skills."

Given the power of the Theatre Program, it can also help create change on an institutional level. CRLT has collaborated since 2002 with the ADVANCE Program at UM on its efforts to improve institutional culture for women faculty in the sciences and engineering. Each ADVANCE sketch is developed with input from key faculty and administrators in the relevant departments—including initial interviews that provide the basis for the script—and then previewed by faculty opinion leaders. In addition to strengthening the sketches, the process also creates an investment in them. Administrators and faculty who have contributed to their creation want to bring them to their departments and use them as tools for making difficult conversations go better. One dean told us that the dialogue sparked by the performances was not always easy or comfortable, often leading to heated discussion and disagreement, but it was productive in the long run:

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“We were dealing with tough topics, like gender equity,” the dean said. “These were difficult topics, very difficult to move the School forward....[Theatre] raised the level of consciousness so that people were aware of their behaviors. They became aware of themselves and others making comments that make you cringe, behaviors they want to change. Even if it did get some faculty angry, that discussion alone caused other faculty to say, ‘Well, wait a second, why is that faculty reacting that way?’ and [realize] that there really was a problem. As we hired a more diverse faculty, we did not get the pushback we used to get. The interview process that we were putting faculty through went a lot better.”

## WHY DOES THEATRE WORK?

Theatre works because it combines the best elements of reflection and exchange characteristic of professional development workshops with the power and creativity of theatre. And the sketches use a set of strategies that allow faculty to open up regarding issues that they would normally resist dealing with. The following section describes four such strategies.

**1) *Serious issues are presented with humor.*** The topics dealt with in the sketches are serious and sometimes controversial: gender dynamics and how they play out in departments and classrooms, ways that race and class can surface in discussions, the challenges of disabled students. While the sketches do not shy away from the issues they usually contain some humor, which allows the audience to relax and enjoy the sketch and which can come as a welcome release when the sketch focuses on problematic dynamics and tense situations.

As one participant in the Tenure Sketch observed, “Humor is a great way to open people’s minds to new ideas.”

**2) *Sketches are emotionally engaging but allow participants to maintain distance.*** The importance of emotional connections in learning has been explored in brain research (see Leamonson in the November/December 2000 issue of *Change*), has been discussed as part of good practice in multicultural pedagogy, and is the subject of current work in the Carnegie Campus Program that is investigating cognitive-affective learning (see the *Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning*, <http://www.jcal.emory.edu/>).

Instructors who are able to create in students an emotional connection with the content they are teaching are able to engage students’ imaginations and inspire their interest. Emotional engagement stimulates the learning process.

Theatre condenses the experiences of instructors and the research on those experiences, and it features actors who act like familiar colleagues and students—people with whom faculty identify or for whom they feel empathy. As they act out the scenes and during the interactive discussion, actors experience pain or discomfort, and the audience explores the reasons for it.

The scenarios often call up emotions from previous events in faculty lives, and the interactions with the actors—asking questions and offering suggestions—lead to faculty awareness of the toll that these situations can have on others. Faculty remember the sketches precisely long after the performance because of their emotional impact.

A faculty participant in *Classroom Conflict* recalls, “I vaguely remember being frustrated at the TA. Like I thought it was interesting what was happening between the students, and I just wanted to shake this TA and say, ‘are you missing all of



this?’ Thinking to myself, it made me frustrated. Do I miss all of this when I’m doing it, or is this guy just bad? Is it me? I mean, why am I so upset?”

At the same time, the sketches do not implicate faculty participants: it is the actors who experience the problems. Audience members are invited to identify the problems and then discuss strategies for solving them without having to reveal whether they experience similar difficulties.

The post-performance activities and interactive components enable the audience to step back and think critically about the scenario and to evaluate their own responses based on what

they hear from others in the audience. Seeing the issues enacted on stage, separate from their own experience, provides a distance from them that lowers audience defenses so they can engage with the subject matter more freely.

According to a participant in the *Tenure Sketch*, “Putting a difficult subject in the context of a dramatic sketch distances the subject from the audience enough to help them take a fresh look.”

**3) Sketches have credibility but take advantage of a willing suspension of disbelief.** CRLT Theatre sketches seem credible and relevant because they are built on a strong foundation of research concerning the experiences of underrepresented faculty and students. For example, *Classroom Conflict* grows out of the considerable literature on the role of race in classroom dynamics, as well as interviews with students of

color about the impact race has had on their learning experiences and interactions with UM faculty and TAs. The *Tenure Discussion* is based on a series of interviews and focus groups with faculty at UM, as well as the literature concerning how gender informs tenure and other personnel decisions in the academy and the workplace.

The realism and power of the sketches is enhanced by the rigorous process of actor training. For sketches on institutional transformation, the actors must learn about the details of faculty life, everything from what a provost does to what tenure means and how decisions get made in departments. Actors read the research on the sketch’s topic and prepare for the types of questions that might arise in interactions with the audience. Then, when the sketch is over, they contribute their own experiences to some of the audience discussions, such as how they have experienced and thought about identity (race, gender, ability) and power dynamics.

“I think they are good actors, and you believe for the moments that you’re watching that they are actual students. It’s a realistic enough scenario that you get caught up, like when you watch a play, you forget that they’re actors,” a faculty participant in *Classroom Conflict* remarks.

“You folks must do an incredible amount of research. The sketch was right on the money,” says another faculty participant in a customized sketch for a professional school.

While the sketches need to be credible and realistic, the theatrical setting requires some willing suspension of disbelief. Sketches must compress a range of problematic behaviors into a short performance. In the sketch on *(dis)Ability in the Classroom*, for example, two of the five students have disabilities, and in a 10-minute performance the TA makes a whole series of gaffes that are representative of the behaviors with which disabled students must contend.

For example, when the TA finds out about one student’s learning disability, he starts a conversation about accommodations in front of the whole class, despite the student’s obvious desire to keep it private. The TA also resists giving extra time for a test. While we occasionally get comments from audience members that sketches are overdrawn, theatre’s distillation of a problem helps audience members remember what they see and focus on change.

“It seemed a little contrived, at the time. Once we finished the whole discussion, it was obvious that he was playing a bad [TA] so that we could talk about what would make him better. But that works well,” concludes a faculty audience member in *Classroom Conflict*.

**4) Meaning is created through presentation and active learning.** The literature tells us that if students learn actively, they typically learn more and retain information longer. Active learning, as its name implies, engages students with the instructor and with their fellow students (often in pairs or groups) so that they are sharing perspectives, generating their own ideas, and teaching each other.

The role of the teacher is to facilitate student involvement with the subject matter, to serve as a guide rather than the sole source of knowledge. The challenge that many instructors face is how to balance the presentation of content with interactivity.

Interactive theatre by its nature balances these two approaches. Theatre audiences are often unfamiliar with the research behind sketch topics, and the performance itself functions as the



research presentation. Because theatre works best by “showing” rather than “telling,” the research comes through in the characters’ actions, interactions, and dialogue, and by means of brief comments by the facilitator. As a result, the sketches are open-ended (there is no single solution to the problem presented) and based on constructivist principles: rather than being told “the answer,” audience members are asked to make meaning from what they have seen.

The active learning that follows the sketch continues and deepens the sense-making process. When a sketch ends, the audience interacts with the actors in their roles and then with each other (often in pairs or small groups). They question the actors, brainstorm suggestions to improve the outcome of the sketch, or find ways that an audience member can enter the scene and redirect the action. Discussion usually consumes two-thirds of the program. Through these conversations, each learner takes away understandings that are meaningful in her own context.

“I think that the faculty, just as our students, get more out of experiential learning than the more passive style of learning. And it causes a dialogue to occur, which I think is fruitful,” says one dean.

## INTERACTIVE THEATRE AND FACULTY CAREER STAGES

Faculty go through distinct career stages, and what is appealing and helpful at one stage may not necessarily be so at another. Nonetheless, interactive theatre is a powerful educational medium at all stages of the faculty career.

- **Graduate Students.** New TAs come to the classroom with their own theories about learning based on their many years as students. In their early years, TAs are likely to personalize relationships with their students, and it is not until they have had some time in the classroom that most learn to distance themselves from the relationships and become more analytical, eventually learning to think of students as professional clients.

The interactive theatre experience provides TAs the chance to be more analytical about their relationship with students and see that the challenges they encounter are ones common to the teaching experience and faced by every instructor. Interactive theatre provides them with a practice session, a rehearsal for their classes. It lets them take risks during the discussion and consider solutions and teaching strategies in a safe environment.

- **Junior Faculty.** Junior faculty need to learn the behavioral norms of the institution they have joined. Pre-tenure faculty have many questions about how to behave both in and outside the classroom, but there is a perceived cost to asking too many questions. Though many institutions have mentoring systems to facilitate the candid exchange of institutional information, junior faculty know that the people who are mentoring them, or the colleagues who could answer their questions, are often also those who will judge them when it comes time to make a tenure

decision. The simple act of asking questions might create a negative impression (why doesn’t she know these things?), new faculty may think, so it is easy to understand why they may be reluctant to air their confusions.

Interactive theatre bypasses the need for junior faculty to initiate inquiries because questions are incorporated into the discussion of the sketches. Faculty can have their challenges addressed without admitting that they face the same ones as the instructor or administrator in the sketch or that they do not understand institutional policies. When there is a mix of junior and senior faculty in an audience, junior faculty find that their more experienced peers share their concerns and have similar questions, and they have an opportunity to listen in as senior colleagues do problem-solving about the challenges they face. It is an ideal way to learn about institutional norms and expectations.

- **Senior Faculty.** Senior faculty become less likely to engage in professional development activities over time. They may not attend teaching improvement programs, for example, because they already consider themselves good teachers. But the playful nature of a theatrical experience can draw them to an event on a topic they would not otherwise address in a public setting. That theatre is typically regarded as entertainment, not education, makes attendance more acceptable—it does not indicate that one is facing a problem or needs assistance. Consequently, a theatre program is less likely than other faculty development programs to be preaching to the converted. Moreover, theatre models the experimentation and creativity that faculty should be bringing to their classroom, giving them

ideas for role-playing and other innovative pedagogy.

## CONCLUSION

In June 2005, an NSF-funded summer institute at the University of Michigan brought together theatre professors, faculty developers, and academic administrators from 17 institutions to learn how to create interactive theatre programs on their own campuses. We believe that it will not be long before educational theatre is as common for faculty as it currently is for students. That would bode well for efforts across the country to transform campuses so that faculty and students of all backgrounds can succeed and flourish.

Parker Palmer has written eloquently about how knowledge and the learning process are communal acts; interactive theatre is so useful in part because it creates community among faculty audiences. As they share dismay at the challenges presented by the theatre scenarios, faculty recognize the barriers to being inclusive. As they engage in the group problem-solving sessions that follow the sketch, faculty learn from each other about ways they can transform the climate in their own classrooms and departments. The academy has long wanted to transform our campuses into inclusive learning communities, and interactive theatre is one important step toward that end. □

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