

# **Image of Transition: Using Embodied Pedagogy to Facilitate Difficult Topics and Build Empathy**

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## ***Abstract***

*In this paper, we share the process of introducing embodied learning techniques to a kinesiology undergraduate class that critically examines power relations and (in)active bodies through a social justice perspective. Drawing on insights from the sociology of the body and applied theatre pedagogy, we sought to use bodily intelligence to interrupt the typical focus on linguistic engagement in the classroom. More specifically, we implemented and assessed an embodied learning activity called “image of transition” which is a branch of Boal’s system called “theatre of oppressed” (1979). “Image of transition” seeks to put the challenges of people’s social lives at the heart of the theatrical process, and to empower audience-participants to create, rehearse, perform, and analyze aesthetic enactments of social problems and potential interventions. In this paper, we reflect on relevant aspects of the facilitation process (what worked well, what did not, and changes made), and also assess the efficacy of our intervention, with a specific focus on whether or not our intervention facilitated the examination of socially-charged topics and if/how it engendered empathy, and the intellectual and affective impact of this perspective taking on students. By way of conclusion, we identify three insights for future research and practice using embodied pedagogy in critical health education contexts.*

**Keywords:** embodied learning; Boal, theatre of the oppressed; social justice

In this paper, we share the process of introducing embodied learning techniques to a kinesiology undergraduate class focused on the intersection of physical activity with public health. In the course, the lead instructor (second author) uses a social justice approach to examine the diverse range of factors that shape physical activity practices and population health. Drawing on insights from the sociology of the body (Shilling, 2003) and applied theatre pedagogy (Boal, 1979; Bolton, 1979; Jackson, 1993), we sought to use bodily intelligence to interrupt the typical focus on linguistic engagement in the classroom. Embodied learning is the concept that refers to this bodily intelligence and, more specifically, is the active process through which shifts in perspectives, behaviors, and/or actions are experienced “in, through, with, and because of the body” (Munro, 2018, p. 6).

We hoped that the use of embodied learning techniques might enrich the students’ comprehension of the relationship between social injustice and health disparities in American society,

a major focus of the course.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, we aimed to supplement students' cognitive understanding of health disparities by pushing them to explore their relationship to, complicity within, and affective responses to structures of power—and the resultant health disparities—in an embodied fashion (see Bolton, 1979). Thus, and in line with developments in the field of cognitive science and performance studies (McConachie, 2011), we were particularly interested in how/if embodied learning techniques might engender empathy (i.e., putting yourself in another's shoes). Also informing our pedagogical intervention was our collective experience that discussions of discrimination in general, and racism in particular, appeared to illicit student discomfort and limited meaningful student engagement. As such, we sought to explore how embodied pedagogy techniques functioned as an alternative mode to explore these sensitive topics, as well as how these techniques might help students better relate and build empathy across difference.

We thus view embodied learning as a potentially transformative health education practice intended to challenge traditional classroom pedagogy. Driving our intervention were the following research questions: Did using movement instead of words only help students engage more courageously and robustly in sensitive topics such as how discrimination and privilege operate in American society? Did this technique help students build empathy and, in doing so, better relate across difference? With these questions in mind, we implemented and assessed an embodied learning activity which is one of Augusto Boal's (1979) radical "theatre of the oppressed" techniques called "image of transition." Image of transition seeks to put the challenges of people's social lives at the heart of the theatrical process, and to empower audience-participants to create, rehearse, perform, and analyze aesthetic enactments of social problems and potential interventions.

While there is a growing focus on embodied learning in the field of education (see Nyugen & Larson, 2015), with some examples of how to critically engage bodies in pedagogical spaces (see Bresler, 2004a; Davidson, 2004; Perry & Medina, 2011; Powell, 2004; Sutherland, 2013; Wagner & Shajhahan 2015; Warren, 2003), such analyses are limited in the field of kinesiology. A handful of scholars in the area of physical education have provided embodied pedagogy case studies (see Lambert et al., 2018; Sparkes, Martos-Garcia & Maher, 2019; Standal & Engelsrud, 2013), but engagement with the body in social science/humanities kinesiology classes tends to be theoretical in nature. Additionally, despite the increased focus on embodied learning modalities in education, there appears to be a paucity of research that explores how or if embodied learning fosters feelings of empathy and enriches student understandings of course concepts. We looked to address this gap through our interdisciplinary collaboration that brings together the fields of kinesiology and applied theatre.

In what follows, we share the process of undertaking our intervention with the aim of providing guidance to other critical health educators who wish to use the pedagogical technique of embodied learning in their classrooms. We begin by situating our project with an overview of the theory and praxis that grounded our pedagogical intervention, as well as the identification of our contributions to the literature. A methodology section follows in which we describe the intervention in more detail, as well as data collection/analysis. Our thematic findings are organized as *reflections on facilitation* through which we share two themes ("meeting students where they are" and "disrupting hierarchy") and *evidence of learning outcomes* from which we identify and discuss two additional themes ("nuancing right and wrong" and "engendering empathy"). We close by

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1. In their online publication, *Healthy People 2020*, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services state that health disparities adversely impact groups of people who have systematically experienced greater social or economic barriers to health than the general population due to such factors as race or ethnicity, religion, SES, disability, gender, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or geographical location.

reflecting on future directions for the use of embodied modalities in critical health education contexts.

### **Situating our Pedagogical Intervention Embodiment and Embodied Learning**

Examining the role of the body—and embodiment—in pedagogical spaces is not a new endeavor. In line with a growing focus on the body in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by those working in and with critical social theory (see Shilling, 2003), scholars have also been seeking to center the body in the classroom (for instance, Bresler, 2004a; Davidson, 2004; Evans, Davies & Rich, 2009; Perry & Medina, 2011; O'Loughlin, 2006; Pillow 2000; Powell, 2004; Warren, 2003). A common sentiment amongst these scholars is that bodies are inseparable from teaching and learning, not only in terms of power relations being written upon bodies (i.e., subjectivities inscribed) but also in terms of bodies as agentic, creative, and thinking entities that “write” upon society. This interest in embodiment, which refers to the inseparability of mind/body, is a counterpoint to the Western philosophical tradition of privileging the “rational” mind over the “unruly” body (Shilling, 2003) which has dominated educational theory and practice, and not without consequence (Peters, 2004). As Peters (2004) explains: “[t]his dualism historically has developed as an instrument of “othering”: of separating boys from girls, reason from emotion, minorities from the dominant culture, and classes from each other...it remains one of the most trenchant and resistant problems of education...” (p. 14). As such, attention to embodiment in pedagogical spaces is simultaneously about improving learning and enacting social justice.

The move towards embodiment in pedagogical spaces has, however, tended towards the theoretical, with less attention to connecting theories of embodiment to embodied pedagogy techniques, or what Davidson (2004) terms “enacted curricula” (p. 197). Exceptions include Davidson’s (2004) examination of embodied knowledge in arts education and Warren’s (2003) use of role playing in sociocultural courses to critically examine the performance and privileging of whiteness in the classroom (see also Bresler, 2004; Powell, 2004). Adding to this, performance studies, one of the theoretical bedrocks of applied theatre, has long posited performance—situated and embodied action carried out and witnessed by groups of people—as a distinct episteme and means of knowledge transfer (Taylor, 2003), as well as a ground level, culturally- and site-specific counterpoint to the more distant and abstract textualism dominant in Western scholarship (Conquergood, 2002). However, in line with recent developments in neuroscience, there has been a growing interest in “enacting curricula” in the field of education (Munro, 2018; Nguyen & Larson, 2015; Stoltz, 2015), including how it can be used to critically engage questions of social power, oppression, and privilege that operate both outside and inside the classroom setting (Perry & Medina, 2011; Sutherland, 2013; Wagner & Shahjahan 2015).<sup>2</sup>

Despite the increasing interest in embodied pedagogy in the field of education, attention to embodied learning modalities in kinesiology has tended to be limited, which may seem paradoxical given that it is a field of study with an inherent physicality in terms of subject matter (see Nguyen and Larson (2015) on the latter point). This paradox can be explained by considering the historical trajectory of the field: in an attempt to legitimize and advance physical education (the precursor of “kinesiology”) as a field of intellectual inquiry, the discipline underwent a process of specialization and fragmentation beginning in the 1960s which resulted in the decline of teaching via movement (i.e., physical education) toward the creation of sub-disciplinary units that study—and create

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2. Nguyen and Larson (2015) acknowledge Dewey’s explorations of sensorimotor cognition and Freire’s understanding of socially conscious praxis as significant contributors to current scholarship around embodied pedagogy.

knowledge about—various aspects of the moving body (i.e., exercise physiology, biomechanics, motor development, sport sociology, sport psychology, sport history) (Andrews, 2008; Francombe-Webb et al., 2017). Undergraduate curricula have followed a similar trajectory, diminishing the presence of pedagogical spaces that encourage moving bodies in favor of spaces where static student bodies learn about the bodily knowledge that their professors (and others) produce. In step with this pedagogical shift has been the creation of an epistemological hierarchy whereby biological/human science orientated sub-disciplinary units are privileged over not only physical education pedagogy but also social science/humanities scholarship and pedagogy. Andrews (2008) notes that the scientific hegemony of kinesiology aligns with the neoliberal, corporate university model more broadly, whereby “rationally conceived, objective knowledge” has achieved primacy over “critical and reflexive forms of intellectualizing” (p. 49), with embodied pedagogy falling in the domain of the latter<sup>3</sup> (see also Francombe-Webb, 2017; Silk et al., 2015).

In response to this epistemological hierarchy, some scholars working out of the United Kingdom (UK) are advocating and implementing what they term a critical curriculum of the corporeal that centralizes the performance of the physical while questioning (and reshaping) dominant understandings of “(ab)normalcy, wellness, inclusion/exclusion, the presence/absence of the body, its experiences and representations” (Silk et al., 2015, p. 802; see also Francombe-Webb, 2017). Critical corporeal curricula attempt to center students by slowing down the learning process, thus providing opportunities for critical reflection through a range of techniques including engaging in digital public sociology and videographic practices as well as class assignments that encourage reflexivity with the aim of developing new insights about one’s self and “wider permeations of physical culture and everyday practices” (Silk et al., 2015, p. 804) more generally. However, while outlining several strategies to slow down the learning process, most appear to entail static, critical reflection upon (in)active bodies with less attention to using moving bodies in the learning process.

In contrast to the theoretical focus of critical corporeal curricula discussed above, curricula in physical education teacher education (PETE) programs continue to engage moving bodies such that movement and learning are inextricably linked, although such programs are in decline in the United States (SHAPE America/NAKHE, 2018); however, scholars working in this field are calling for the theorization of embodiment—and embodied learning—in physical education contexts in order to enrich learners’ experiences and the meanings they attach to movements, especially in relation to the world around them (Brown 2013; Standal & Engelsrud, 2013; Thorburn & Stolz, 2017). Despite this call, case studies of embodied pedagogy in action appear to be limited (although see Lambert, 2018; Sparkes et al., 2019; Standal & Engelsrud, 2013). Most relevant to our own project is that of Sparkes and colleagues (2019) who look to embodied pedagogy to better prepare physical education teachers to be inclusive educators. They share their analysis of a PETE class in which the lead instructor adapted the classroom environment to allow a person with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI), a rare fragile bone condition, to actively participate in the class. This process required the other students to better understand this condition as well as adapt their behaviors to create an inclusive environment which necessitated “a thoughtful awareness of bodies, sensations and movement in social space” (Sparkes, et al., 2019, p. 343)—or embodied pedagogy.

We seek to build upon these attempts to embody pedagogy in kinesiology by integrating and implementing insights and tools from applied theatre, a field of study in which the body itself

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3. That said, the growing interest in embodied pedagogy is arguably tied, in part, to developments in the field of cognitive neuroscience (the interdisciplinary study of mind, brain and behavior) which have afforded a measure of scientific legitimacy to the notion of embodiment.

is considered a place of learning and experience (Bolton, 1979; Jackson, 2007). A strength of applied theatre is that it provides an array of tools for how to engage bodies and space in learning, thus facilitating a connection between the theoretical aspects of embodied pedagogy with concrete aspects such as bodies and space (see Nguyen & Larson, 2015). Nguyen and Larson (2015) argue that such a connection is crucial, explaining that: “[f]or a conceptual framework to be more than a collection of laudable ideals one must be able to discern concrete guidelines for implementation. Actionable curricula for embodied learning call for guidelines that describe *how* to engage bodies and space in learning” (p. 337, emphasis in original). With this in mind, we felt that bringing techniques from applied theatre to a kinesiology classroom that critically engaged bodies and health, but in static ways, would be a promising collaboration.

### Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre's three main tributaries are theatre of the political left, drama and theatre in education, and community theatre (Nicholson, 2005). As theatre artists and educators were looking to engage publics experiencing the upheavals and unrest of the 1960s, they began to outline alternative methodologies of theatre creation and performance that often aimed to assist leftist activism, and be a form of activism unto themselves by upsetting traditional, hierarchical theatrical models (Harding & Rosenthal, 2006). These endeavors demanded new theories that began to codify as fields of study and webs of practice in the 1990s as community-based performance in the United States, and Applied Theatre in the UK (Cohen-Cruz, 2005; Nicholson, 2005). Both interrelated traditions leaned heavily on the methods and theories of Brazilian theatre director and facilitator, Augusto Boal.

In the 1970s, Augusto Boal built upon critical pedagogue Paulo Freire and theatre director Bertolt Brecht in theorizing theatre as a site of action and reflection where participants could engage their whole bodies to understand and potentially shape their social realities (Boal, 1979). Boal was inspired by Freire's (1970) pedagogical intervention that theorized the teacher and student as co-intentional creators of reality who work together to understand and transform oppressive structures, as opposed to the traditional, hierarchical model where teachers interpret an external reality and deposit this knowledge in their students. Boal saw parallel hierarchical structures in theatre practice and concluded that the relationship between the actor and the audience required alteration (Vine, 1993). Boal was also inspired by Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, though he wished to move beyond it in key respects. Brecht's Epic Theatre used distancing techniques to highlight theatrical artifice and interrupt easy empathetic identification with the main characters in an attempt to engender a critical social analysis of dramatic works (Barnett, 2015). Boal applauded Brecht's theatre as a form of problem posing education, but he thought that the hierarchy remained such that “the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place” (Boal, 1979, p. 122). Boal wished to go further than Brecht in transforming the performer and audience relationship by applying Freire's co-intentional ethos to the process of *creating* theatre. The result was the proposal of theatrical methods in which a participant “...assumes the protagoic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, [and] discusses plans for change...” within the dramatic event (p. 122). In terms of theatre practice, this created a workshop style of theatre where audiences became co-creators with theatre professionals. In terms of education, Boal's practice added an embodied methodology to flesh out Freire's theories. While Boal did not theorize embodiment per se, he “saw in the language of theatre the means to help [audience participants] think through their whole being” (Vine, 1993, p. 111). In contrast to traditional classroom contexts where learning tends to

be static, Boal's system of *Theatre of the Oppressed* saw bodies in action as a site of knowledge and productive of knowledge, as evidenced by his system's first two stages, "knowing the body," and "making the body expressive" (Boal, 1979, p. 126). Our workshop shared these assumptions, and we structured our plans according to this map, starting with familiarizing our students with their bodies in space, moving to using their bodies to express thought, and then analyzing these enactments.

Our employment of embodied pedagogy, anchored by Boal's technique of image of transition, was done primarily to foster a particular type of learning. That is to say, traditional educational models can leave social problems such as discrimination as abstractions, and often fail to connect students to the issues personally. We supposed that the thickness of an embodied process could engender within our students a "change in 'felt value'...in respect of [them] in the objective world" (Bolton, 1979, p. 90). Particularly, in our deeply polarized time both nationally and within our campus community, we were interested in fostering empathy for both those hurt by discrimination and those complicit within discriminatory systems. Theatre in general, and workshop theatre processes like those pioneered by Boal in particular, rely on empathy as a part of their functioning. In the history of dramatic criticism—which is the history and theory of theatre by its leading artists and thinkers—empathy has been theorized differently and to different ends by such prominent figures as Aristotle (Carlson, 1984) and Brecht (Cohen-Cruz, 2010). Most pertinent to our focus, however, is the recent scholarship of McConachie (2011), who has reached into the evolving field of neuroscience to better understand the cognitive and physiological processes at work in a theatrical event, thus adding empirical data to the theorization of empathy in theatre.

McConachie (2012) highlights how, in the field of neuroscience, empathy is now understood to be a cognitive process and not an emotion and draws upon two types of empathic responses that help us understand how audiences respond to theatre. The first is sensorimotor coupling. In this form of empathy, "[w]hen we observe actions performed by other individuals, our motor system 'resonates' along with that of the observed" (McConachie, 2012, p. 154). In theatrical events, spectators experience this sensorimotor coupling and resonate with the actions of characters on stage naturally, like an automatic reflex. The second type of empathic response, "imaginary transposition," is similar to the common-sense definition of empathy that "...can range from simple emotional agitation to a rich understanding of another's situation" (McConachie, 2012, 154). McConachie asserts that while this form of empathy requires more active cognition it is also "natural, easy, ubiquitous, and largely unconscious" (McConachie, 2012, p. 155). We took up McConachie's definition of imaginary transposition not only as an assumption of what was happening in our dramatic work, but also as a rubric in analyze student responses to the activity. We did this to see if the theory is as "natural, easy, ubiquitous, and largely unconscious" (p. 155) as McConachie asserts, even when being applied to subject matter as polarizing as social discrimination.

### **Methodology, Pedagogical Rationale, and Workshop Structure**

We chose Boal's image of transition as our core activity due to the first author's previous success with this technique as he and colleagues challenged workshop attendees to disrupt the rigidity of their thinking by exploring pertinent issues with their bodies in space instead of the typical linguistic mode of academic inquiry. Because of the large class size (129 students), we conducted the image of transition activity in each of 8 (50 minute) discussion sections as opposed to in the large lecture hall. The first and third author facilitated the intervention which occurred

near the end of the Fall 2018 semester. The first author identifies as a cis gender white male and the third author identifies as cis gender African American female. The remaining authors (the lead instructor and two teaching assistants (TA's)) participated in and/or took detailed field notes of the process.<sup>4</sup> The classes began with ice breaker activities to acclimate the students to embodied pedagogy, and to help mitigate anxieties about this pedagogy shift. These included a brief physical and vocal warm-up, establishing four norms (try and have fun, take care of yourself, there are no right or wrong answers, and lean into discomfort), as well as a "snapshot" activity in which students simultaneously froze in poses of their choosing. These mirrored Boal's first two workshop phases of awakening the body and making it expressive. The lead instructor (second author) also engaged in this activity so as to show her "buy in" and encourage student involvement.

For Boal's image of transition activity, students were placed in groups of 4-5, and staged binary snapshots that demonstrated an oppressive institutional status quo and what a utopian ideal of the same institution might look like.<sup>5</sup> In preparation for the staging of these binary snapshots, students had been placed in groups the previous week and engaged in a brainstorming activity in order to both save time on the day of the workshop, and to encourage students to engage the problem-based questions being posed. The workshop plan was to facilitate a discussion of the images created, focusing on what the oppression is, how the people and institutions depicted are enacting this oppression, and what the utopian ideal looked like. In each discussion section, one pair of oppressive status quo and utopian ideal tableaux would be chosen for further exploration. The students in these tableaux would then restage their images and the larger group would be asked to stage "images of transition" that provide one step from the oppressive tableau toward a utopian ideal. These images were to be made without discussion in order to privilege spatial and kinesthetic thinking.<sup>6</sup> These embodied interventions in the status quo would then be analyzed with questions such as "what was accomplished?"; "might there be any unintended consequences?" and "is this magical or wishful thinking?"

Since the group of students was predominantly white—reflecting the demographics of the Kinesiology department—two choices were made up front to mitigate re-inscribing marginalization, particularly of people of color. Firstly, we purposefully put students of color together in groups so that no student of color was the only one in their small groups. Secondly, we used blue and green bandanas to demarcate social marginalization and social privilege in the tableaux the groups created. This was done to interrupt the often de-facto casting of people in marginalized groups into marginalized roles in the tableaux. This also offered the possibility of people with social privileges to play socially marginal roles and to alleviate the pressure to move or behave like their perception of the people of these groups in doing so. Our aims were to offer possibilities of building empathy by playing a role different than one's own, as well as discouraging the deployment of stereotypes in these tableaux. The use of bandanas proved quite fruitful and helped us successfully facilitate a racially charged moment in the workshop, as discussed further in our findings section.

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4. The second and fourth authors (lead instructor and TA, respectively) identify as cis gender white females while the fifth author (course TA) identifies as a cis gender Asian American female.

5. The students were asked to focus on a specific institution and were given the choice of: health care, fitness industry, education, criminal justice.

6. Howard Gardner (1983) defined bodily-kinesthetic intelligence as "an ability to use one's own body to create products or solve problems" (p. 205).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection consisted of field notes and photographs taken during the workshop activities, written notes based on between-workshop-discussions amongst the authors<sup>7</sup> and the subsequent changes in workshop structure based on these discussions, and a digital recording of the authors’ “postmortem” discussion immediately following the workshops. We also had students reflect (in writing) on the following question at the end of each of the 8 sessions: “Did this approach impact your thoughts and/or feelings on the subject of racism impacting public health outcomes differently than a discussion based inquiry would? How so?”<sup>8</sup>

Data analysis entailed two group meetings in the months following the workshop in which we collectively looked at the photographs of the tableaux created over the 8 discussion section periods and analyzed them for successes and failures in meeting our workshop objectives. In between these two group meetings, each of us spent time reviewing the photographs and were tasked with identifying three photographs that we found evocative and writing a paragraph as to why. Many of the same photos were selected across our respective analyses, and a consensus interpretation of the various tableaux was arrived at in almost all cases. The result of this group process was the identification of “important pedagogical points” that were grouped as follows: disruption of power hierarchies in the classroom; moments of student empathy; learning through physical discomfort; and, challenges to using embodied pedagogy and the image of transition, in particular.

The first and second authors also coded the written student responses to the above-listed reflection question. Student responses, which ranged from a few words to a few sentences for a total of 96 responses, were entered into an excel spreadsheet. Because responses were limited in terms of length and depth, we analyzed them at a semantic level (i.e., based on what was written) and created codes individually. We then compared our respective codes and created a collaborative codebook based on our discussion. Following this, and guided by our new codebook, we each re-coded the student responses. At a subsequent meeting, we found that we agreed on the majority of the codes that we assigned to the student responses and came to an agreement on the remainder through a process of discussion and consensus. We then further discussed, interpreted, and theorized the codes, identifying patterns that, in combination with the observational data collected above, were grouped into themes via a process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Findings/Discussion**

Our findings are grouped into two sections: “reflections on facilitation” and “evidence of learning outcomes.” The first section relies on our internal reflections of the process, either in preparation for the workshops, during the facilitation, or during the debrief sessions. In particular, we highlight some pedagogical choices made prior to the workshops, and one key change made early on (after the second discussion section) that could prove useful to future educational encounters. The second section utilizes our field notes and student survey responses, and evidences how our embodied pedagogical process helped to create more nuanced and concrete understandings of

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7. In these discussions we addressed the questions of “what is working?”; “what needs to be changed?”; “what are you noticing so far?”; and “which objectives are we achieving so far, which ones are we not, and why or why not?”

8. While our workshop explored multiple identity-based discriminations, not just racism, we are assuming students took “racism” to be an umbrella term describing this broader web of discriminatory practices.

structural discrimination within public health, while also engendering empathy across difference as students worked through the workshop scenes.

## Reflections on Facilitation

### Meeting the Students Where They Are: A Dance Between Embodied and Discursive

Early in the workshop process (between the second and third discussion section), the facilitators decided to cut the third step of “image of transition” whereby the students use their bodies—without speaking—to move from the image of the oppressive status quo toward the image of the utopian ideal. While it could be argued that cutting the third step neuters the essence of Boal’s activity, and cuts out the embodied brainstorm of moving from “problem” to “potential solution,” we believe this was a fruitful decision. Firstly, due to the limited duration of discussion sections (50 minutes), we found ourselves rushing through the analysis of the status quo and utopian images in order to get to the images of transition, and even then we were only able to complete one or two per period. Additionally, the entire process felt limited in that we were unable to take the time to facilitate a deeper understanding of the workshop images. This was problematic because the facilitators also realized early on that the images of the oppressive status quo and the utopian ideal being created by the students were institutional in nature, as opposed to focusing on interpersonal manifestations of institutional discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Because of this scale issue, the images of transition tended to be overly simplistic and/or illustrative of magical thinking (e.g., making a door out of what was a representation of a physical barrier keeping people out of an institution like a hospital) and did not facilitate an understanding of the interpersonal aspects of discrimination. Thus, although our omission of the image of transition shifted focus away from possible solutions to discrimination, it allowed us to more robustly interrogate the interpersonal *how*, *why* and *who* of discrimination, while also meeting the students where they were in the learning process.

In order to facilitate this examination of the *how*, *why*, and *who* of discrimination, the facilitators applied thought tracking to our discussions of the images the students created. Thought tracking is a technique where the facilitator asks the participants to speculate on the thoughts and/or feelings of particular characters in an image. These questions can be answered either by the person portraying the character or audience members. For example, if the image was a stereotypical marriage proposal with one person bending their knee in front of another person who is standing, people might speculate that the person proposing might be thinking: “I hope they say yes!” or “Maybe this will finally get my parents off my back.” This addition, which was enabled by cutting the image of transition, directly asked the participants to take on the perspective of people within the aesthetic depictions of discrimination in public health. While it could be argued that this is a return to the discursive, we feel that embodied processes are not meant to completely replace more traditional, discursive classroom strategies; rather, the intent is to enrich and enhance them. In its purest, Boal’s approach gets people to think *through* their bodies by enacting their images of transition physically without discussion, and the results can be profound. However, as educators, we moved to meet our participants where they were by providing them with more guidance in the

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9. When the tableaux created in “image of transition” depict characters enacting an oppression—even when these characters wield institutional authority—there remains a possibility of interrupting the oppression by the people being targeted. These interventions are not without risk, but they are possibilities for enactment on a human scale, as opposed to the impossibility of acting against an entire oppressive structure.

process of using embodied pedagogy techniques. Indeed, their lack of experience with such a process, alongside the limited class time, was making for a superficial analysis of power hierarchies so that more facilitator guidance was required. This required cutting the element that can be thought of as more purely *thinking through the body*, but it retained its characteristic of being embodied learning in that the discussion was generated *because* of bodily engagement. In our view, there is a qualitative difference in discussing discrimination when the social actors are being represented by real people in aesthetic space. We believe this turn towards the discursive that was still grounded by an embodied process helped us to engender “imaginary transposition,” the deeper sense of empathy McConachie (2011) described, a point to which we return below.

## **Disrupting Hierarchy**

As discussed in the methods section, in an attempt to mitigate marginalization within our workshop, we used blue and green bandanas to demarcate social marginalization and social privilege in the tableaux the groups created. This choice proved useful on two fronts. Firstly, the bandanas as social signifier released the participants from needing to depict stereotypes in order to communicate difference to their audience. Theatre as a representational medium is particularly susceptible to the deployment of stereotypes, so their absence is a significant outcome. Secondly, the bandanas gave the participants and the facilitators a vocabulary to use in discussions that did not necessitate commenting on the actors’ bodies in order to unpack the images.

One moment in the workshop that crystallized the bandanas’ utility in both regards was when one group of four created a set of images depicting traffic stops. In the first image (see Image 1), a person with a blue bandana was arrested forcefully while a participant with a green bandana appeared to get off with a warning. In the second image (not depicted), both were ticketed, no one got off with a warning, and no one was arrested. We found their idea of utopia to be odd—everyone getting ticketed equally—but their comment on how identity shapes interactions with the police was well taken. However, in discussing the image, one class participant commenting on it as a spectator mentioned that the person in the blue bandana being arrested had brown skin, which was perhaps an accurate assessment but antithetical to our desire to refrain from commenting on actor’s bodies. From a facilitation perspective, it was useful to have set up the theatrical convention of the bandanas at the beginning of the workshop, because we were able to redirect this comment by reiterating the convention. The first author reminded the group that we were using the convention in order to refrain from needing to comment on people’s physicality, reframed their comment highlighting the bandanas as the mark of social difference, and asked everybody to stay disciplined with this discussion protocol.

The bandanas thus allowed the first author to disrupt hierarchy by interrupting the articulation of a students’ difference in our space, and the coupling of this particular students’ difference to the discrimination depicted. The larger point highlighting racism’s impact on traffic stops remained, but the student’s body was no longer the signifier, and the bandana gave the first author an avenue to redirect participation without attacking the person who broke protocol. The bandanas gave us this avenue, and it was useful in what was one of the most charged moments of our workshop.

## **Evidence of Learning Outcomes**

### **Nuancing Right and Wrong**

As mentioned in the methods section, one of the guidelines we gave at the top of each discussion section was that “there is no right and wrong.” We believe this guideline, the embodied nature of our workshop, and inquiry-based pedagogical choices led to a richer and thicker exploration of the issue of identity-based discrimination in public health than a solely linguistic and teacher centered approach. And, as discussed above, one of the reasons for engaging in embodied pedagogy was our experience of student reticence when discussing socially charged issues in a typical classroom discussion where the teacher remains powerful, centered, and armed with the correct answers to their questions. Our problem-posing workshop pedagogy—grounded in Freire’s praxis (1970) and highlighted by Nguyen and Larson (2015) as a bedrock of embodied pedagogy in higher education—troubled this hierarchy by asking participants to offer multiple perspectives to open ended questions. We asked questions such as “what do you think the discrimination is in this scene?”; “what do you think the bandanas signify?”; and, “what might this character be thinking?” By asking for their opinion, by emphasizing words such as “might,” and by fielding multiple answers per question, the fount of knowledge shifted from the facilitators, as is typical in traditional classroom approaches, to the participants. One student commented on this shift, writing that the process “left it up to us to decide what was the answer.” This openness enabled the discussion to begin to fill out the how, why, and, who of social discrimination, facilitating nuanced understandings of the complicated phenomenon of social discrimination in public health in a way the lead instructor (second author) had not been able to achieve in the typical classroom setting.

It is hard to pinpoint which choices exactly helped to engender this learning, but there is significant evidence from the student responses that, taken in totality, our embodied approach created these rich understandings. Of the 96 students who responded to our question about whether the embodied learning activity influenced their thoughts and feelings about the impact of racism (as a marker of social discrimination) on public health outcomes, 76 (81%) replied with an explicit or implied “yes,” while only 8 (8%) explicitly or implicitly replied “no.” It is important to highlight that we used this to gauge students thoughts and feelings on the subject—their opinions and their affective responses—as opposed to assessing the retention of facts that tests and essays often assess. While we de-emphasized brainstorming solutions to these acts of discrimination when we removed the “image of transition” from the workshops, a first step in creating social change is to impact people’s thoughts and feelings on our urgent social issues. The data from the student responses evidences success on this front.

Individual responses to the “how so?” part of our question provides insight as to the ways in which student perception and feeling were impacted. The responses were most notably expressed in terms of engaging the problem in an embodied fashion, visualizing the problem, demonstrating real world applications to the theories explored in class, and disrupting overly determined linguistic ruts on the issues. Speaking directly to the body being centered in the learning process, students commented: “it allowed me to have more in depth thought about the problems because I had to engage my body,” and “using our bodies allowed me to visualize each issue first hand.” In other words, the embodied process opened up a more nuanced understanding for the first respondent and implicated the second respondent in the issue by placing them physically within the scene of discrimination. As far as visualizing the discrimination in public health, students provided the following insights: “I was able to visually see and interact with the problems”; that it was “easier

to visualize [discrimination in public health] and the impact on multiple people”; and, that “this was a better way to visualize the issues and actually see how these issues affect people.” These responses suggest that an embodied process not only appeals to kinesthetic learning—as evidenced by the 81% “yes” rate—but it helped students to visualize and concretize the issues as well. As such, an embodied process like the one we engaged adds spatial/kinesthetic and visual pedagogical strategies to the dominant aural/linguistic mode found in universities.

Adding to this, student responses indicate that the embodied learning process personalized the issue for these respondents. For instance, one student wrote, “I can see the way it translates to the real world better instead [sic] of theory only” and another explained that “it demonstrated [sic] the reality of structural discrimination in [a] real life situation.” Engaging our social problems linguistically alone can make the problems seem abstract or distant, whereas depicting the problems with bodies in space helped students think through the impact on real people. Another trap in spoken-language-only discussions on discrimination are the rhetorical patterns shaped by attitudes and ideologies. One student spoke to how this process disrupted this over-determination with the comment that: “Discussions are generic and tend to follow what is expected. This opens it up to more nuance and honesty.” Similarly, others gestured to how the process allowed for multiple interpretations as opposed to a “right” answer: “there are many interpretations of situation [sic] and scenarios” and “even if you have a solution, it can always be interpreted/analyzed differently.” Taken as a whole, these responses offer powerful evidence of the efficacy of this embodied process in creating more complex, concrete, and personal understandings of the issues than a teacher-centered, primarily linguistic, right and wrong educational paradigm.

### **Engendering Empathy**

As discussed in the literature review, empathy is a slippery term that has been debated throughout Western theatre history, but we looked to McConachie’s (2012) concept of imaginary transposition when evaluating our ability to engender empathy through our embodied learning process. Imaginary transposition, or seeing the world through someone else’s lens, is a natural and ubiquitous cognitive function that flows from watching people doing things, such as witnessing a performance event (McConachie, 2012). Based on our interpretation of student responses, as well as our analysis of moments within the workshops themselves, we feel that we found evidence of a broadening of perspective amongst the students.

In coding the survey responses, we found that 23% of the students provided responses that we interpreted as evidence that the workshop facilitated perspective taking or imaginary transposition. As we were addressing these divisive social issues in our polarized social climate of the contemporary United States, the fact that such a high number of participants spoke to this broadening of perspective is a substantial outcome. The responses broke into two groups: how the perspective-taking helped build understanding, and how the perspective-taking impacted participants’ affectively. Examples of responses that spoke to increased understanding included: “makes you go into the other person’s head;” “everyone has different perspectives;” and, “made me realize that I need to look at others[’] perspectives.” These are but a few responses that spoke directly to perspective-taking. The following quotation connects the dots on what kind of learning that perspective-taking engendered: “This helped me to better understand disparities people face.” Respondents also spoke to their affective responses to the workshop. For instance, one respondent indicated that the workshop “made me more aware of emotions felt by those unprivileged,” leading us to

assume that this is a person with social privilege, and that the workshop elicited in them a sympathetic affective response towards people experiencing health disparities. Importantly, one response also spoke to an affective experience in enacting an oppressive role: “I got to put myself in the shoes of someone of power. Realized how uncomfy [sic] it made me feel.” Imaginary transposition, according to McConachie (2012), ranges from “simple emotional agitation to a rich understanding of another’s situation” (p. 154), and our evidence points to both affective and intellectual shifts in relation to enduring health disparities.

The multivalent empathetic perspective taking was also evidenced by a moment of thought tracking within the workshop. In one oppressive status quo tableau about the fitness industry, two figures stood like guards at a door, and one guard had a hand forward like they were blocking access while the other guard stood erect, hands folded in front of them on the other side of the door (see Image 1).<sup>10</sup> The person being denied access was reaching in their wallet, with the implication being that they could not pay for entrance. An interesting feature to this image was that the people on the inside in workout poses wore green bandanas, the person looking for access had no bandana, and the guards wore blue bandanas. We asked the group what the bandanas signified, and the consensus was class. The first author then used the thought tracking technique to get the group to speculate on what the people in the tableaux might be thinking. One of the observers speculating on the thoughts of the “guard” said something to the effect of, “I don’t want to be doing this.” This led to a group discussion on how people that are lower on the socio-economic ladder are often coerced into guarding the privileged and their spaces. Instead of a simple binary of the big, bad oppressor and the put-upon masses, we got a more complex picture showing a broader complicity with oppressive systems, and some thinking on why sometimes people are complicit even against their moral compass.



*Image 1: Denied Access to Gym due to Class Tableau. Photo by Daylin Russo.*

10. All images are re-enactments by the authors and student-actors. As such, they do not depict students from the class.

Another anecdote is illuminating in that it suggests how the physicality of the embodied learning activity facilitated student learning and empathetic perspective taking. This occurred when one group created an image depicting the violence and intimidation prisoners experience at the hands of prison guards. One student playing a prison guard had their finger pointed at the head of a student playing a prisoner (see Image 2). The student playing a prisoner was bent forward and to the side at the waist awkwardly, showing the painful contortions as a result of the guard's behavior. The student playing the prisoner mentioned that it was uncomfortable to hold the pose. The first author said that they should adjust as needed so they could continue to hold their pose for our discussion; however, the third author urged him to "use it!" and when asked for clarification she said to use the physical experience of the student to infer about the experience of the prisoner. She proceeded to ask a series of questions designed to link the discomfort of the student playing the prisoner, and what it must be like as a prisoner under threat by those tasked with "guarding." Our embodied process offered avenues for dialogue that a strictly linguistic approach would not have opened up; the image work gave this student an opportunity to *feel* an inkling of what the effects of living under threat could be, and the other students got a chance to empathize with someone in a social position—that of a prisoner—that is often dehumanized.



Image 2: Prison Guard Intimidation Tableau. Photo by Daylin Russo.

Empathizing with people being *hurt by* and *participating in* oppressive social systems are both important precursors to changing systems. Thus, while we were not able to measure and/or quantify the desire to create change, the evidence that we have shared in this section regarding participants' experience of imaginary transposition suggests that the activity helped to foster perspective taking, a precursor of sympathy (McConachie, 2012). In turn, we hope that engendering empathy is also suggestive of the *potential* for a desire to create social change.

## Concluding Thoughts: Lessons for the Future

In this paper, we articulate a pathway for using performance in critical health education, more specifically, a kinesiology class with a social justice orientation. We reflect on relevant aspects of the facilitation process (what worked well, what did not, and changes made), and also assess the efficacy of our intervention, with a specific focus on if it facilitated the examination of socially-charged topics and if/how it engendered empathy, and the intellectual and affective impact of this perspective taking on students. By way of conclusion, we identify three insights for future research and practice using embodied pedagogy in critical health education contexts.

Our first point of reflection concerns a process change that we were unable to make during our workshop, but which we would recommend for the future. We had the students brainstorm aspects of the oppressive status quo and utopian ideal of various institutions in the week prior to the workshop so as to save time on the day of the workshop. However, the unintended consequence of this choice was that when the students were tasked with creating the tableaux, they represented an idea that they had previously generated in a linguistic modality which mitigated against one of our primary objectives: to privilege the body in thinking through these issues. The embodied experience of creating the images gave us thick material to facilitate from, but it was more of an embodied representation of predetermined ideas than embodiment as its own thinking process. Moving forward, we would use an embodied process for the group to brainstorm, or “bodystorm” about the status quo and utopian ideals prior to the workshop.

Secondly, and as discussed above, we feel that using McConachie’s concept of imaginary transposition as a rubric was useful, and could be applied by other educators desiring that their students take on the perspective of what life is like for people across difference. McConachie claims that imaginary transposition is “prior to the kind of judgment that induces...sympathy and antipathy” (McConachie, 2012, p. 155). As educators with a social justice orientation we clearly were more interested in engendering sympathetic feelings across difference, but our data did not speak to this. This theory of empathy could use further study within embodied pedagogy to look at the relationship between imaginary transposition and sympathetic feelings.

Finally, we wish to emphasize the utility of having a diverse team in both identity and expertise. The first author’s professional experience with and training in *Theatre of the Oppressed* and related pedagogies enabled the substantial mid-workshop adjustment to cut the “image of transition.” Indeed, while these techniques were disseminated for broad application, the chance of success in deploying them is directly related to having highly trained and experienced facilitators (Howard, 2004). Other diverse elements of our team were also beneficial. The third writer’s identity as a person of color as well as her experience as a diversity facilitator helped us think through how to mitigate oppressive structures at play within our workshop. The second author’s mastery of the course content and modeling within the workshop were hugely beneficial. The TAs’ direct experience with the students, organizational skills, and ability to take photographs and field notes helped the facilitators prepare for the social dynamics in the classroom and lead the workshops without worrying about data collection. In short, we advocate creating a team of people who can bring their expertise to bear on discrete elements of the process. Like any social process, there is no “right way” to engage embodied pedagogy as a way of interrogating social problems, but we hope this paper opens up possibilities, strategies, and mistakes to avoid for future educators.

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