A Tool for Becoming: Intersecting *Currere* & Theatre of the Oppressed

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There are many frameworks, theories, and methodologies that fall outside of traditional ways of knowing and knowledge production. As educators and scholars who often operate on the margins, working with populations that are historically vulnerable, we continually search for frameworks and theories that bring our own experiences and the experiences of the folks we work with from the "margins to the center" (hooks, 1984). When we function within the cold confines of the Eurocentric norm (i.e., whiteness), we begin to think something must be wrong with us. Some of us have come to understand that we all know differently, and our knowing is informed by different spaces, experiences, and ways of being in the world. *Currere* and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) offer counter-narratives to traditional narratives, also known as master narratives, which are the stories that not only get the most airplay, but are the broadly accepted and inherently deep stories orienting how we understand society (Ross, 2021; Zamudio et al., 2011). In general, counter-narratives create spaces for individuals to become active participants in the struggle for justice within educational, social, economic, and political contexts, and the *type of counter-narratives* will determine the functional limits of the created spaces (Ross, 2021). Counter-narratives aid active participation rather than passivity, thus, creating space for people to fully engage in all aspects of their lives. The merging of *currere* and TO draws out and excavates those counter-narratives that have been buried beneath the heavy weight of master narratives.

Through the use of *currere* and TO, we transcend traditional notions of knowing and knowledge production by examining the reasons why we act, think, and feel in ways that often align with the oppressor. In much the same way that William Pinar (2012), the pioneer of *currere*, suggests that we use the stages of *currere* (regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical), Augusto Boal (1992), the founder of Theatre of the Oppressed, uses games to introduce "de-mechanization" (p. 41) or breaking down the way that we have been trained to understand and interact with the world. The aim of both c*urrere* and TO is to deconstruct our personal histories and stories, allowing us to gain cultural awareness and insight into systems and structures of power and privilege. Intersecting emancipatory frameworks such as *currere* and TO aid self-reflection and create a path to examine historical trajectories to better understand past, present, and future decision making. We promise that this is a path worth taking. As Boal famously said at the beginning of his workshops, "come closer," and let us discover what is "not yet present" (Pinar, 2012, p. 46).

Intersecting Theatre of the Oppressed and *Currere*

If, as Shakespeare (1603/2018) posited, "all the world's a stage" (p. 45), then perhaps theatre is a revolutionary act that allows us to embody possibilities for a future that does not yet exist. Augusto Boal (1985) was firm in his belief that theatre cannot and should not be separated from politics and that theatre is the embodiment of struggle, "a rehearsal for the revolution" (p. 123). Boal, who was bold enough to conceptualize theatre as a revolutionary weapon, understood the importance of people moving from the position of spectator to actor. This idea connects to Freire's (1970) concept of the dualism of the oppressed:

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> The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being *spectators or actors.* (p. 48, emphasis added)

TO allows people to step outside of the tradition of being spectators into the role of active participants in the struggle for their own liberation. Boal (1995) writes, "Theatre or theatricality … allows man to observe himself in action, in activity. The self knowledge … allows him to imagine variations of his action, to study alternatives" (p. 13). TO allows us to step back and observe systemic oppression and then provides space for us to consider alternative pathways to work towards liberation. This process of engaging in various theatre techniques and games allows us to practice intervening in many different contexts, while exploring different possibilities for taking action and creating change. "In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for—to become what we have the potential to be" (Boal, 1992, p. 6). This process must also be collective. Boal (1992) passionately describes why this is the case:

> We cannot live in isolation, under arrest inside ourselves. We can learn enormously when we recognise ourselves in alterity: the *Other* also loves and hates, fears and has courage—just like me, like you, even though she/he, you and I have cultural differences. Precisely because of that, we can learn from each other: we are different, being the same. (p. 2)

Currere is also a process of discovery and helps us connect not only to ourselves, but to other people and our collective history.

Baszile (2017) states, "*Currere* is an attempt to reclaim education as a journey toward self-understanding or an understanding of self as it is always in relation to other selves and always positioned in the world at a particular historical moment" (pp. vii–viii). Therefore, when we embody our experiences through the merging of TO and *currere* we see ourselves in the *Other,* and our cultural differences become bridges of connection. An ecosystem relies on all of the various components within—a system that makes the connections and creates order out of chaos, responding to the outstretched hands of the various connectors (human beings) that are yearning for connection, cohesion, comradery, liberation, and the protection of their humanity. This does not mean we dismiss or minimize our differences—exactly the opposite—we find strength in our differences and only then can we truly know and love the other. Freire's (1993) words capture the importance of embodiment,

> The importance of the body is indisputable; the body moves, acts, rememorizes the struggle for its liberation; the body, in sum, desires, points out, announces, protests, curves itself, rises, designs and remakes the world. … I think it's absurd to separate the rigorous acts of knowing the world from the body. (p. 87)

As scholars, we believe it is absurd to situate our work and ourselves as active participants in struggles for justice but ignore the ecosystemic and epigenetic manner in which the body informs life (i.e., what was, is, and can become). The intersection of *currere* and TO helps us to become critically conscious of our bodies, emotions, thoughts, words, and actions.

Currere and TO share important characteristics. Neither are fixed, both are in motion, and both are lived and experienced in and through the body. Freire (2005) suggests, "Whatever I know I know with my entire self: with my critical mind, but also with my feelings, with my intuitions, with my emotions" (p. 54). In order to truly know something, we must experience it in the body. We must walk in the spaces we seek to know and understand; we have to feel pain, joy, hope, and love. TO provides the mechanism to embody different ways of experiencing and knowing the world. It connects to our hearts, our minds, and our bodies. TO opens up space to imagine new possibilities, "imagination is one of the most powerful modes of resistance that oppressed and exploited folks can and do use" (hooks, 2010, p. 61). Educators must work hard to foster imagination because, as bell hooks (2010) teaches us, "in dominator culture the killing off of imagination serves as a way to repress and contain everyone within the limits of the status quo" (p. 60). This is similar to the progressive stage of *currere* in which imagination is an important tool in the process of becoming (Pinar, 2012). Merging these two practices taps into emancipatory possibilities, because it allows us to imagine, shape, and embody dreams that have not yet been realized. Similar to TO, the fourth stage of *currere* (synthetical) is transformative. Other stages are used to inform, analyze, and make meaning of the present. *Currere* begs the question, "Now that I understand where I have been and where I am now, what's next?" This is the stage where one can utilize insights from the past, present, and future to move toward transformation. One of the goals of *currere* is to learn from our experience and take action. TO gives us the ability to practice acting out those experiences and intervene to create a different outcome.

While *currere* and TO are standalone methodologies that allow individuals to broaden the scope of how they understand themselves and their ability to act, *currere* and TO make a powerful combination. This intersection provides a variety of tools, aiding people to embody and tell their stories in different ways. TO creates space for people to tell their stories (examined through *currere*) by embodying their past experiences and sharing who they are and how they show up in the world, while also imagining future possibilities. TO puts *currere* into action—building a bridge to bring our stories to life and place them center stage. The ability to express our stories outside of oral and written traditions creates space to recognize how our stories connect. This also allows us to appreciate our differences and expand on what we accept as valid ways of knowing and being in the world where "the only access we have to advocating with/for others is through the self (Baszile, 2017, p. viii). *Currere* helps us to better understand the self through reflecting upon and writing about the memories that weave our story together— sometimes an eloquent and complex pattern and at other times a messy, tightly wound, and bound knot. Regardless, both patterns are part of a beautiful tapestry that we can further bring to life through the use of theatre techniques and games that help us excavate, dig deeper, search for the root. This is a necessary and painful process that can lead to liberation—but we cannot fear entering into the unknown darkness of the rabbit hole; we must engage with courage and vulnerability, entering the deep caverns of the past that inform the present and provide a trail of cherry blossoms leading to the heart of the matter in a future not so distant, but still just out of reach. As Pinar (2012) explains, the progressive stage of *currere* is the search for "what is not yet present" (p. 46).

A New Methodology: A Contextual Example of Intersecting *Currere* and Theatre of the Oppressed

The intersection of *currere* and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) creates space for individuals to do self-reflective work. The intersection of these two methodological

frameworks is best suited as a process of exploration. Although we have shared some aspects of *currere* and TO, a deeper understanding of *currere* and TO as separate methodologies will help practitioners determine the best way to intersect the two within their specific contexts. In the next section we provide an example of how we intersected *currere* and TO, not as a prescriptive "right" way of engaging in this work, but to display how we used it in our specific context. Given the time constraints of the workshop model, we focused on the regressive stage of intersecting *currere* with TO. We recommend going through each of the stages of *currere* to execute a project using the intersection of *currere* and TO. In addition, there are multiple ways in which TO can be used intersectionally that are not explored in this paper.

COMPLETE THE CURREREIAN IMAGE
Part One- Currere: Focus on your Regressive

This was an activity used during a conference workshop. There were 18-20 participants who attended this particular session. Prior to the start of the workshop, participants were told that they could choose not to participate or to stop engaging in an activity at any time. These techniques can create emotional triggers, and so it's important to discuss the ability to step out of an activity before the start of each workshop. After a brief overview of the main stages of *currere* and some of the techniques and theoretical underpinnings of TO, participants were led through a series of warm up games that are typical in TO workshops (see Boal, 1992). Participants were then broken up into pairs and instructed to take three minutes to think back about an important educational experience or memory from school. The memory could be positive, negative, or a combination of both. The remaining time was used to share their experiences with their partners. The return to the past in *currere* allows for working through intellectual and emotional blocks to reconstruct one's relationship with oneself and the world (Pinar, 1994). As soon as the participants started to share their stories within their pairs, an emotional intensity could be felt in the room. After participants had the chance to share their stories with one another, the TO component of the activity was introduced.

Part Two-Incorporating TO

Each pair was asked to retell one of their previously shared educational experiences with the group. However, there was one important caveat—they had to share the story through an image, without using words. We asked them to use a variation of a TO technique called *Complete the Image* that was practiced earlier in the workshop with participant-generated words. In *Complete the Image*, one person starts the image by creating a shape with their body and their partner completes the image. Once they were finished with their images, each pair was asked to come to the center of the room and share their *Currereian Image*. Audience members were prompted to walk around the pair and write down or ask questions about the *Currereian Image*. Within TO, Boal (2002) suggests:

> Dealing with images we should not try to 'understand' the meaning of each image... but to feel those images, to let our memories and imaginations wander: *the meaning of an image is the image itself.* Image is a language. (p. 175)

The audience members respond by sharing how the image makes them feel or how they make meaning of the image. By hearing multiple interpretations, the people who created the image will understand "hidden aspects" of the image, as illuminated by the audience (Boal, 2002, p. 175). Further, Boal (1992) suggests that "art does not reproduce the real; it represents it" (p. 293). It's important to note that an image should not be interpreted

in just one way; clarity of what the creators meant is not important. In the case of one interpretation, "it ceases to be Image Theatre and becomes a mere illustration of the words spoken" (p. 175). The *Currereian Images* were very powerful, and many of the participants became emotional when they shared their embodied representation of their regressive educational experience.

After the completion of this activity the group engaged in a facilitator-led dialogue. First the participants were asked what this activity was like for them. Many of the participants shared that the experience was more emotional than they had anticipated. Some participants discussed sharing positive experiences, while others talked about negative experiences of school. The fact that participants shared different kinds of schooling experiences speaks to the power and privilege dynamics in the room. It came as no surprise that some of the participants who shared negative schooling experiences were *othered* in some way because of their personal identities (i.e., race, social class, or ability). Many of the participants who shared positive schooling experiences were in privileged positions in regard to their identities (i.e., white, middle class, and heterosexual). This is a powerful approach to deconstructing different experiences of schooling based on positionality. This could also be a valuable exercise to use with pre-service and/or in-service teachers to help them better understand the power dynamics in the classroom. Facilitators then led a discussion based on the following questions:

(1) How might people use this in educational spaces?
(2) How might this encourage a consciousness about diversity?
(3) How might this process facilitate remembering past experiences in order to imagine new possibilities?

During the discussion, participants were cautioned again about the use of these techniques in their own contexts. The facilitators advised them to be aware that this exercise may trigger deep emotional feelings for their own participants, and they should be prepared to address all potential outcomes. This is particularly important to keep in mind when working with youth and other vulnerable and/or historically marginalized populations. The key is letting participants know ahead of time that they can choose not to participate in certain activities or leave an activity if it becomes too intense for them. Prior to beginning this process, ideally, practitioners should have a list of resources for participants who may have experienced some kind of trauma, so they can seek professional care if necessary. This approach to self-reflection and understanding requires vulnerability and trust from both the participants and the facilitators. Therefore, it is important that facilitators navigate this process with care and compassion, attending to the needs of the participants.

Conclusion

Collaborative work both in and outside of the academy is essential. We must spend time reflecting, but we cannot do this in isolation. This is particularly important in a society in which:

Dominator culture has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connects us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that brings us closer, that gives us a world of shared values, of meaningful community. (hooks, 2010, p. 60)

Working with other scholars, educators, and activists can help us see the world through various lenses. By providing readers a glimpse into the collaborative space we created through our exploration of the intersections of *currere* and Theatre of the Oppressed, we hope to encourage other scholars, educators, and activists to engage in this work. We plan to continue exploring the intersectional possibilities of TO and *currere* as a way to move this work forward. Disrupting the master narratives and traditions that lead to the treatment of bodies as unremembering organisms is a necessary act of resistance to create inclusive spaces for human uplift. This also allows us to create and maintain space for different ways of knowing and being in the world. Radina (2018) speaks to the notion of being who you are in the world: "What a painful, yet beautiful, process it is to become someone—the person you can recognize when you look in the mirror" (p. 53). Using TO and *currere* as an intersecting methodology and sharing what we learn through our practice adds to the body of work on becoming. This powerful approach reinforces the notion that humans are diverse, evolving beings, rather than mindless objects to be manipulated. Instead of docile spectators, we are actors, engaging in a liberatory path toward a future that is more just and equitable—a future with a multitude of possibilities.

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