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In a Democracy We Must Act! Theatre as a Tool for Developing Civic Engagement

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The development of civic values and skills is particularly critical in societies like Brazil in which political change has historically had little connection to popular action, and far-right leaders promote authoritarianism in ways that challenge the nation's commitment to minority rights and democratic institutions. This chapter explains how political theater can foster deep engagement with political issues and active citizenship among college students in Brazil. It presents our pedagogical approach, inspired by Freire's program of education as a promoter of emancipation, as well as Boal's theatre of the oppressed, both of which guided the development of a community outreach project. We also detail the development of the Interna-só-na-mente Political Theater Group and, through its assessment, demonstrate how art, including theatre, can promote civic values, knowledge, and engagement in a student-led community outreach initiative.

KEYWORDS: Civic Engagement; Education as Emancipation; Art In Education; Theater of the Oppressed; Brazilian Democracy.

Introduction

Civic engagement is not widespread in Brazil. It is a hierarchical society stratified by race, gender, and class, with limited opportunities for young people to actively participate in politics. In this context, we believe higher education can and must help students gain the knowledge, skills, values, and experiences required to make a meaningful difference through politics and community leadership.¹

Entering the University is, for most students, the gateway to adult life. In humanities courses, especially in political science and international relations, they are exposed to theories and critical views that prompt them to question reality and critically reflect on their experiences. However, these courses often are focused on content transmission and fail to develop the skills and competencies needed to put this knowledge into practice. Students cannot automatically convert theory to practice without an active learning environment that encourages them to practice and to develop active political participation skills. This chapter presents a community engagement initiative established by the Department of International Relations at the Federal University of Paraíba (UFPB). This project, a Political Theatre inspired by the work of Augusto Boal, succeeded in promoting civic values and skills among enrolled students.

The chapter starts with a contextualization section, which presents the political and civic engagement scenario in Brazil. We then present our pedagogical approach inspired by Freire's pedagogy of emancipation² and Boal's theater of the oppressed³ which, through a student led active learning methodology, promoted political discussions of social and political issues through theater. The project's stages are then detailed, followed by its assessment which was done through interviews with some of the participants. This case study reveals how participating in a theater group can engage university students in discussions of relevant social and political issues with their community, allow them to experience being part of a politically active group, and develop confidence in their agency, their civic knowledge, values and competences.

Democracy and Civic Engagement in Brazil

According to Putnam,⁴ communities with a high standard of civic participation and social solidarity, constitute fertile ground for democratic institutions. Civic engagement involves active participation in community life and seeking to influence it for the better. It demands work toward making a difference in one's community by promoting quality of life through processes and activities of public and personal interest. Civic engagement education cultivates a combination of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and motivations to make such differences in society.⁵ Developed individually, or as part of a group, civic engagement activities help students develop knowledge about the community and its political system. Such engagement teaches students to identify problems the community faces and to seek solutions. It encourages students to benefit the community by using the political system to participate in constructive deliberations on community issues, problems, and solutions.⁶

Civic engagement and political participation in a democratic system require active citizenship. Since democracy does not flourish as a spectator sport, participants who only watch political events and processes unfold are incompatible with an engaged citizenry.⁷ Unfortunately, in Latin America, and in Brazil in particular, social capital has not blossomed. Latin America is the most suspicious region on earth, and Brazil stands out from its neighbors for the lack of interpersonal trust.⁸ This phenomenon is attributed to Brazil's history of colonization and the legacy of its path to independence. That legacy was characterized by the Portuguese colonial empire transferring power to an embedded Portuguese elite and had little connection to popular action. The history of authoritarian governments also influenced Brazil, such that a tradition emerged that political change comes from the top down. Thus, the 'traditional political culture' that has prevailed in Brazil is characterized by authoritarianism, elitism, statism, anti-liberalism, patrimonialism, corporatism, personalism, populism, and anti-institutionalism.⁹

In 1964, a military coup was followed by more than two decades of a military authoritarian regime. The transition to a democracy in 1985 came about through an agreement between elites and an indirect election, which continued this tradition of political change detached from popular actions. This culture, marked by a mixture of democratic and authoritarian attitudes, still permeates social and political relations in the country. It manifests in political apathy, detachment from and distrust of political institutions, resignation regarding their inefficiency, and a general low regard for the institutions of representative democracy.¹⁰

Data from Latino Barómetro¹¹ shows that among Latin American countries, Brazilians are the least supportive of democracy and have the lowest confidence in institutions, political parties, and their elected representatives. In 2018, 41% of Brazilian respondents were indifferent to the political regime, while only 34% pointed to democracy as their preferred form of government. Citizens share a strong distrust and criticism of the democratic regime. Almost two thirds (65%) of Brazilians identify problems in their democracy while 17% say that there is no democracy in the country and 90% assert that the government only represents a few.

These attitudes are reflected in the country's 2018 presidential and 2020 municipal elections. Although voting is compulsory in Brazil, more than 21% of registered voters did not vote in 2018 and more than 45 million people (30.6% of the voters) abstained in 2020.¹² The campaign period

was polarized and marked by the aggressive use of fake news, social networks, and online messaging services and the President-elect Jair Bolsonaro waged a campaign marred by contempt for democratic principles. Threats of violence were made and, in some cases, carried out, against candidates, political supporters, journalists, and members of the judiciary.³³

Brazil is still recognized as a democracy, though flawed, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2019. Freedom House (an NGO that monitors regimes based on democratic principles) still ranks Brazil as free, though its score has fallen in the last couple of years. The country holds competitive elections, yet citizens are disillusioned with political parties due to corruption. Economic, racial, sexual, and gender minorities face violence and discrimination and are underrepresented in the government.³⁴ The assassination of Rio de Janeiro councilwoman and black lesbian activist Marielle Franco in 2018 is indicative of the social discrimination and violence against minorities which grows in the country, as well as the challenges that political activists face.³⁵

Artists have also been threatened and several artistic works have been censored in the name of preserving Christian values.³⁶ Despite Brazil being a secular state, the connection between the government and Christianity has been linked to the repression of sexual and gender rights, as well as Afro-Brazilian religions. This is especially notable in the policies of the evangelical pastor and Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights, Damarens Alves.

The area of education has had specific challenges. In the last couple of years, a series of five Ministers for Education have been appointed, with questionable credentials and limited experience in the field of education.³⁷ There have been dramatic budget cuts which affect governmental scholarships and reduce opportunities for lower-class students to attend universities.³⁸ The education sector has also been targeted ideologically. When a 30% budget cut of Federal Universities was announced, it was justified by confusing, vague, and unfounded claims of containing the "racket in these institutions," and false accusations that public universities do not produce research.³⁹ These initiatives indicate a strategy of delegitimizing and scrapping state-funded universities.

These challenges are also compounded by parallel attempts to curtail academic freedom, many of them connected to the Nonpartisan School (*Escola sem Partido*) project, which, since 2014, has promoted traditionalist norms and the exclusion of minority and vulnerable groups such as the LGBTQ community, women, and people of color, citing a need for political and ideological neutrality and the rights of the parents to control the moral and religious education of their children.⁴⁰

Even though this project was counteracted by civil initiatives such as the Association of Mothers and Fathers for Democracy, and was rejected by the Supreme Court in July 2020, it succeeded in fostering a climate of suspicion and vigilance in classrooms.⁴¹ These challenges, together with the curtailment of religious, artistic and academic freedoms, and governmental tolerance of violence and harassment against journalists and activists—discourage trust in the government. Cumulatively, this atmosphere fosters self-censorship and dissuades civic and political participation. In this context, it is more important than ever to promote civic engagement through education.

The *Interna-só-na-mente* Political Theater Project

This section presents the *Interna-só-na-mente* Political Theater Group community outreach project. It is divided into three parts. The first presents the theoretical references which inspired the project and its methodology, followed by a description of the project's goals. This is followed by a section on the implementation of the project. It details the institutional context in which the project was developed and the activities developed within its scope, outlining the different phases the participants went through on each thematic cycle to prepare for external engagements with the community. Specific outputs in the form of presentations and events the group organized are provided. Finally, the third subsection assesses the outcomes of the project in relation to student's learning and community engagement.

An emancipatory educational approach applied in a university community outreach project inspired by the Theater of the Oppressed

Although many students want to contribute to democracy, they often do not know how to do so.²² The democratic system is complex, and courses in politics can help students prepare for it. To do this, instead of relying on knowledge transmission, it is useful to create learning opportunities in which students take responsibility for their own development by engaging with their own community using their own political system.²³ Recognizing the potential of education to uncover ways to participate in the transformation of the world and to deal with reality critically, we structured a community outreach project inspired by Paulo Freire's vision of education as political and emancipatory.²⁴ Following Freire's lead, we use art and theater to foster civic engagement among the undergraduate students at the Federal University of Paraíba, in Northeastern Brazil.

Education for civic engagement can contribute to the democratic formation of students, by cultivating their interest in politics, helping them to be more informed and developing their abilities to become actively involved in political action whatever their ideological inclination.²⁵ It also builds a sense of responsibility and effectiveness, which contribute to the development of informed citizens who regularly and productively participate in their communities.²⁶

Freire's education as emancipation approach is a way through which civic engagement can be fostered while educating. Freire highlights the intimate connection between the students' perspectives and their contexts and histories, which are valued through dialogue and the relationships between the students and teachers. Rejecting more traditional, top-down, educational methods as an instrument of oppression which encourages authoritarianism, passivity, and a certain dependence and naivety, Freire emphasizes the value of dialogue, which presupposes mutual respect and reciprocity, as well as the awareness that everyone—including the teacher—is learning. His methodology instigates curiosity, experimentation, proactivity and critical analysis of reality, which is problematized and questioned, while respecting diversity and discouraging discrimination. By stimulating critical awareness of reality and the taking of action by students and teachers, who are recognized as political agents and citizens, it encourages responsibility and the development of autonomy through individual effort and maturing in the context of human interactions.²⁷

Interna-só-na-mente Political Theater Group Project Goals

Inspired by Freire's pedagogy, the *Interna-só-na-mente* Political Theater Group was established at the UFPB's International Relations Department in 2016. As a community engagement project, the main goal of the group was to promote discussions of relevant socio-political problems, using art as a way to foster the interest of students and members of the community in contributing to the debates. It was hoped that through theater the students would be able to learn about relevant political and social issues and engage with these issues at a deeper level, develop critical reflections, and take action to develop the project and produce plays which involved the community members in the audience in debates and even in the plays themselves, turning them into *spect-actors*.

A Student-Led Learning Approach

The project's goal in relation to the students was to, through the practice of art, and more specifically theatre, educate and cultivate civic engagement among the participants by: (1) building the participant's knowledge about issues which were relevant to the community and the importance of civic and political engagement, (2) consolidating democratic values such as autonomy, responsibility and interest in contributing to the common good, (3) promoting a critical stance, (4) developing their confidence in expressing their opinion and defending their points of view, as well as their disposition to listen to others, and (5) enhancing their skills such as communicating and expressing their ideas and opinions in debates.

With the aim of changing the traditional and hierarchical dynamics of the classroom and developing an emancipatory education that promoted civic engagement, an active learning approach

was adopted. Active learning creates a more conducive environment for learning by basing its practices on the active posture of students who develop their leadership whilst performing activities, while the teacher adopts a supportive role that resembles tutoring.²⁸ By associating learning with the students' experiences, new knowledge is integrated in a way that makes sense to the pupil according to their individual experience. By valuing the student's previous experiences in the knowledge building process, educators can also reduce the influence of their own perspective, using their authority without authoritarianism.²⁹

Seeking to provide a political and artistic emancipatory education experience, a non-hierarchical, student led approach was adopted. That is, the students took on the main responsibilities involved in participating in the Political Theater Group and counted on the guidance of the supervising teacher playing the role of tutor. Even the initial idea of formulating the project was motivated by conversations with the students, where many indicated a desire to expand their knowledge on relevant political issues and express themselves artistically.

The topic to be worked on during each academic year would be chosen democratically within the group, and not unilaterally appointed by the tutor. The same logic applied to selecting the texts which would be read and presented within the meetings, and to deciding the format of the discussions—with the support of the tutor. The students were also expected to organize lectures, raise funds and develop publicization strategies. The aim was to make them responsible for different areas of the project based on the different ways they could contribute according to their individual potential, and in this way, encourage them to take responsibility for seeking and developing their knowledge.

Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed and Community Engagement

As a community outreach project, the Political Theater Group sought to engage the community in two ways. The first was to, within the creative process of studying a topic which guided the project within an academic year, invite people from the community to conversation circles and to lectures by specialists from the community. This way, members of the community shared their lived experiences and expertise, contributing to the formulation of knowledge about the topic being studied and having some of their experiences being (anonymously) incorporated in the plays. The second, and more ambitious way that the community would be engaged, was through the development of a Theater of the Oppressed. For Augusto Boal, oppression is operationalized by words, images, and sound. He highlighted the importance of art and aesthetics in the process of constructing a democratic society, since it allows developing awareness of oppression, and the desire to stop it, improving society. He proposes that a play's spectators should not be content with their "role of non-intervening witnesses."³⁰ To overcome oppression and acquire confidence, self-knowledge, and self-esteem all citizens should create art and culture, transmuting democratic ideas into concrete and continuous social acts.³¹

His Theater of the Oppressed—developed in the 1970s, during the Brazilian military dictatorship—is not intended to entertain. It encompasses different exercises, techniques and dramatic practices with the goal of serving as a political and social instrument to encourage the transformation of the oppressive reality. For example, through the Newspaper Theater, the artists identified social and political issues and denounced them in plays. In the Invisible Theater, scenes of oppression were staged on the streets, in places where the injustice being staged usually takes place, without the audience knowing that the act had the aim of emotionally touching passers-by and motivating them to intervene. The Legislative Theater, created when Boal became a municipal councilor in Rio de Janeiro, encouraged audiences to understand the mechanisms of law-making, and to develop their citizenship by demanding the creation of laws which challenged oppression.³²

The Forum Theater breaks the invisible fourth wall of the theater, inviting the audience to intervene directly in the plays, taking the actors' places, determining the protagonist's actions in the face of the oppressions enacted and presenting solutions to the social issues the play represents based on their own experiences and thoughts.³³ The goal is that, expressing their opinions, needs and desires and acting in the face of oppressions, the spectators become *spect-actors* and rehearse

social action, and are empowered to engage in civic and political action.³⁴

Implementing the Project

The group was formalized as a community engagement project at the university under the Continuous Flow of Community Engagement Program (FLUEX) in 2017 and, since 2018, was institutionalized as an option under the Community Engagement Scholarship Program (PROBEX). Currently community outreach projects can be formalized in a Brazilian Federal Universities such as UFPB in two main ways. One is the PROBEX, which signifies institutional recognition; implies that the project will be closely evaluated by the institution through periodic reports; guarantees that all participating students receive, at the end of the academic year, a certificate stating the hours dedicated to the project; and grants one scholarship (less than \$100 US dollars per month) to be allocated to one of the students in the project, regardless of the total number of participants.³⁵ The FLUEX program is more flexible and also grants certificates for the participants, but offers no resources other than access to university facilities.³⁶

Faculty in state-funded universities are expected to develop activities of teaching, research and community engagement, according to the constitutionally established principle of inseparability between them.³⁷ For students, at least 10% of their undergraduate course work must correspond to community engagement activities.³⁸ With these institutional demands and scarce resource allocations, most community outreach projects constitute small initiatives which are developed with few resources and depend heavily on the creativity and voluntary dedication of teachers and students to obtain funds.

The Political Theater project is open to any student, teacher, or staff from the university, as well as to those who are not part of the academic community and want to participate. However, to maintain the group's cohesion (as well as its identity and internal trust), participants for acting and supportive roles were selected from those who were genuinely committed to the project—not due to artistic or creative (in)capacity.

In the project's first meeting, 30 students showed up. Of these, 12 participated assiduously and became formal members of the group. Since the beginning, heterogeneity has been an important characteristic of the group, whose members reflect the composition of the UFPB student body, consisting mostly of women, many LGBTQ persons and black people, students originating from the Northeast, as well as more economically vulnerable students. The initial conversations within the group confirmed the students' interest in a student-led experience, and during the first year of activities, the actions focused on nurturing the group itself, with the aim of establishing a democratic and safe space where the students could develop their initiative and responsibility in building their own knowledge. During this period, through the weekly meetings and the theatrical exercises, the group's identity was strengthened, as were the ties of trust between the participants. It was also possible, through the exercises, to identify the areas of the project (i.e. artistic, staging, costumes, makeup, writing short plays with the aim of promoting discussions) where each student could best contribute based on their previous experiences and personal inclinations. This way, the students embraced the responsibility for seeking and developing their knowledge.

Depression and Mental Illness as a Theme

After this first year, with a more cohesive group and a more mature project, it was possible to advance to a new phase, which would be divided into five stages and repeated the following three academic years. The first stage was deciding on the main topic which would guide the group's endeavors. This selection was done democratically within the group. All participants suggested issues they considered relevant for the community, justified their position, and then voted.

The first topic selected was *Depression*, an issue which is extremely relevant for Brazilian society which, according to the World Health Organization, had the fifth highest rates of depression in the world, as well as the highest incidence of anxiety disorders.³⁹ This disease was also experienced by several university students, including members of the group. The Theater Group discussions on

this theme focused on how oppressions inherent in contemporary capitalist society, and pressures to be productive, happy, and fully satisfied in all aspects of life, can impact mental health. Students agreed the Theater Group should be a space of reflection, unburdening and joint reconstruction.

The second stage was the academic and theatrical study. On the academic side, during this phase, the members of the group read books and articles on the chosen topic, developed conversation circles with people who experienced this issue and organized public lectures by specialists to guide the group's approach to the issue. In the *Depression* cycle, the participating students organized a lecture by a professor from UFPB, which was open to the community, on "Melancholy, Depression and the Changes of Capitalism." They also set up conversation circles for students living with depression and psychologists. These circles were restricted in access to provide a safe space for those who were sharing their experiences.

At the same time, the participants also improved their artistic skills, studying theatrical techniques and focusing specifically on Augusto Boal's methodology, which involves exercises and theatrical performances which will later serve as the basis for writing a play. Collectively, from the exercises, the group assembles ideas on how to stage the chosen theme in the most persuasive, emotional, and comprehensive way possible. The goal is not to teach moral lessons or point to possible oppressors, but to facilitate listening and dialogue and to prompt questions about oppressions experienced by the spectators.

The third stage was the development of skits. The students opted for writing three skits with different styles (dramatic, comical and philosophical) to provide unity and dynamism to the piece. The writing reflects all the previous work developed within the group on the topic of the year. It is inspired by the texts read, the lectures organized and attended, and the conversations, debates and exercises developed. At this stage, the transformation is developed within the group, among the students. The community participates in the previous events and in the moment of the play's presentation as well as the debate which takes place after it.

In 2018, the result of the writing was the play *Depression*, which consisted of three skits. With the aim of drawing the viewers' attention, *Tobias' War*, the play's featured production, describes the internal struggle of the main character, Tobias, with his various emotions, which are personified and fight each other, causing chaos in Tobias' mind while he lies inert in a chair, until, exhausted, he screams silencing them. The second sketch, *Disguises*, focuses on the relationship between the individual and society, and how the latter can be exclusionary, while individuals follow social conventions seeking acceptance. Finally, to finish on a more relaxed note before the discussion, *From Sofia to Sofia*, is a comical skit which addresses the character's daily relationship with her depression, personified in a parody of herself. During the transitions between the skits, while the actors and scenery change, other characters disclosed information about the group and about how to access psychological assistance.

The fourth stage is the play's debut within the university. After the play is elaborated and rehearsed, the Political Theater Group presents it to the university community. On September 20, 2018, the group made its first formal presentation, with two sets of *Depression*. After the presentation, the group initiated a discussion inviting feedback from the audience on how to improve the piece and contribute to the creative process and how the audience felt about the topic. There were few suggestions for changes, the viewers mostly contributed with more personal insights such as reporting experiences with the disease. These first presentations were important for the group because they demonstrated that the group had effectively used artistic expression to promote a deep and respectful discussion, unveiling prejudices and obstacles that viewers may have held around this sensitive topic.

The fifth and final stage entails performing in the community, presenting the play at cultural events, schools, unions, and other interested institutions. After the presentations, the group holds a conversation with the audience, seeking to establish a dialogue between students and community. Typically, this stage has proven very successful. Viewers offer their interpretations of the play and sometimes share personal and family experiences relating to the theme presented.

After initial feedback at the Professor Maria Jacy Costa School presentation, some in the au-

dience requested to talk to the theater group in a more private place. In the privacy of the school library, a group of 10 high-school students joined the members of the theater group for a more intimate conversation on personal experiences of mental health issues. Spectators from the presentations at the school and at UFPB exchanged confidences, emotions, and anxieties around their experiences with depression. Ultimately the theater group emphasized the importance of seeking psychological assistance and shared contact information for institutions that offered such assistance free of charge.⁴⁰

In this first cycle, three lessons were learned: (1) the group should keep costs low by avoiding elaborate scenarios and costumes due to scarce funding and the need to adapt the play/skit for presentations in different locations; (2) the importance of preparing varied skits so as to adapt the presentation according to the target audience; and (3) elect a skit to be the flagship, considering that in some events it is not possible to present the complete play. In 2018 we were able to present the *Tobias' War* skit on four other occasions, two of them before the full play even premiered.

Table 1. The Activities with the Community in the 2018 Cycle

Activity developed	Event	Location	Date
Visits to hospital patients	Taking humor to hospital patients	UFPB University Hospital	26 April 2018
Workshop Art as a social project: Society acting through theater	VII International Relations Academic Week (VII SARI UFPB)	Federal University of Paraiba	27 and 28 August 2018
Tobias' War presentation	Yellow September	Regional Council of Accounting	19 September 2018
Tobias' War presentation	II Brazilian Meeting of Peace Studies (II EBEP)	Federal University of Paraiba	21 September 2018
Depression play presentation	Presentation for public schools	Professor Maria Jacy Costa School	28 November 2018
Tobias' War presentation	Cultural Turn	José Lins do Rego Cultural Venue	30 September 2018

Religious Intolerance as a Theme

The second theme, developed in 2019, was *Religious Intolerance*. After researching about several religions, we focused on those which are more prevalent in Brazil: Umbanda, Candomblé, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, the Spiritist doctrine, as well as Wicca, representing new religions and faiths which emerged in the 21st century.

There was a noticeable difference in students' engagement and positioning in the organization of the first to the second cycle. While in 2018 the students sought leadership and direction from the teacher, in the preparations for *Religious Intolerance*, in the third year of the project, and with the presence of several veterans who had participated in the previous creation, the students assumed the lead in the project. Divided in groups headed by the veterans, students studied different religions, attended lectures on the topic and even organized visits to religious institutions.

During the academic and theatrical study, the students organized an event on Cultural and Political Roots of Religious Intolerance where specialists from UFPB's Department of Science of Religions gave talks to the community. Circles of conversation were also held with members of the community of different religions and representatives of Paraíba's Religious Diversity Forum with the aim of getting to know specificities of each religion and understand how their members experienced intolerance. This way the group identified that (1) people face religious intolerance from society, their families and the state; (2) prejudice can manifest in multiple ways such as physical violence and verbal abuse disguised as jokes; and (3) in Brazil there is a strong connection between

religious intolerance and racism with African-based religions being the most common target of discrimination.

Three skits were developed to constitute the *Religious Intolerance* play. *Religions* uses characters to portray what each religion preaches. Due to the use of similar garments and the preaching of similar precepts (love, faith in God, and respect), it is not easy to identify which religion each character represents. Toward the end, the use of recognizable symbols reveals which religion is represented by each character. The second and featured skit, *Between Heaven and Earth* illustrates how intolerance can result in physical violence using a fictitious religion, to avoid stereotypes and facilitate discussions with all viewers, regardless of their religion. Finally, *Faith Elevator* comically demonstrates the intolerance present in everyday conversations through interactions between members of different religions trapped in an elevator. The conclusion highlights how, regardless of differences, all are equal and respect is necessary.

The play *Religious Intolerance* was first launched within UFPB through two sessions presented on September 29, 2019. Once again, the debate provided an open environment for spectators to narrate personal experiences and exchange ideas between themselves and the members of the group, becoming *spect-actors*. Also, based on audience feedback, students decided to alter the order of the skits so that the more impactful *Between Heaven and Earth* would close the show. Students felt that concluding the show this way would impel the audience to question the discrimination previously presented in *Faith Elevator* and review their own prejudices. Another incorporated suggestion was adding, during the play's transitions, the disclosure of the possibility of calling the number 100, to reach a reporting hotline run by the government to denounce episodes of human rights abuses such as religious intolerance. The reformulated play was presented again to the university's community in two sessions on the 31st of October, as part of a larger event on Human Rights and Religious Diversity in Brazil, and on the 20th of November as part of a Black Consciousness and the Public Policies Followed at UFPB event.

Table 2. The Activities with the Community in the 2019 Cycle

Activity developed	Event	Location	Date
Religious Intolerance play presentation	Presentation for high school students from the João Goulart School	Educator Training Center	25 November 2019
Religious Intolerance play presentation	Presentation for high school students	José Lins do Rego School	26 November 2019
Religious Intolerance play presentation	Presentation for the staff	Brazilian Urban Trains Company (CBTU)	29 November 2019

Among the presentations made to the community, it was notable that most students from the João Goulart School came from Christian families, both Protestant and Catholic. They were very curious about other religions and actively participated in the debate, reporting personal experiences and discussing the issues raised in the play. The debate after the play at CBTU, with a smaller and older audience, was very productive. The *spect-actors* noted the nuances of the play and were very engaged, reporting personal experiences of intolerance.

Hunger and Food Insecurity as a Theme

The group began the activities of 2020 with the aim of further implementing Boal's Theater of the Oppressed through the Forum Theater and extending the audience participation from the discussions after the plays to the performances themselves. This way, as well as participating in dialogues, the *spect-actors* would experience acting and intervening in the show. To do this, it was necessary to (1) train some member students as jokers, who mediate the connection between the

audience and the show; and (2) to make this experience possible in presentations made to large groups.

A short skit with the expectation of direct audience intervention was produced through Forum Theater exercises on the topic of violence against women and was prepared to be presented on March 20, 2020, at Unipê college in connection to International Women’s Day celebrations. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic it was cancelled and the project of developing the Forum Theater was postponed.

The pandemic dramatically changed the circumstances: UFPB switched to online activities and the group had to reinvent itself and adapt its methodology. Members continued to work remotely, demonstrating students’ proactive attitude despite the challenging circumstances impacting their routines.⁴¹

To motivate the students, the coordinator proposed displaying the group’s digital performances on social networks.⁴² They focused on Instagram, formulating an aesthetic content capable of reaching a greater audience with three types of posts: (1) curiosities about theater; (2) information on the new chosen theme; and (3) the EnCena project, posting digitally staged scenes from classic plays which were played, recorded and edited by members of the group.

The chosen theme for 2020 was *Hunger*, a relevant topic in Brazilian society, where more than 10 million persons are undernourished according to data collected by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in 2018. The participating students took the lead in organizing several online lectures given by experts focusing on nutritional, political and cultural aspects of food and the consequences of hunger. In the process, students formalized a partnership with the research group FOMERI (Hunger and International Relations).

Table 3. Online Lectures Organized by the Participating Students in the 2020 Cycle

Date	Title
10 June 2020	Nutrition: Superfoods and Industrialization
23 June 2020	Hunger in Brazil and the North-eastern region
07 July 2020	The programs to Fight Hunger Nowadays
21 July 2020	Monitoring and Evaluating Hunger and Food Security: experiences beyond academia
06 August 2020	Intestine Connections: we want Food, Fun and Art

Next, the students wrote the first version of the play *Hunger* with three sketches. The first, *The Dispute*, presents a contest between the characters Hunger and Death to see who can take more souls, showing that death by starvation should not be naturalized. The scene includes the owner of a supermarket, his employees and a starving person, revealing a situation of squalor caused by the policies adopted by the Owner of Brazil (a character who is further developed in the second skit) and the neglect of the elite, portrayed in the supermarket owner. The second sketch, *Speak the Truth or Die Lying* depicts a television program where the interviewee—the Owner of Brazil—agrees to participate in the condition of dying if he lies, which is what ends up happening. The third skit follows the character after his death, where Death and Hunger duel and confront him to face his faults.

After writing the play, the group staged the second skit, considered the best to be digitally performed. On December 3, 2020, *Speak the Truth or Die Lying* was staged and broadcast live on YouTube to an audience of around a hundred persons. The experience was challenging and there were technical difficulties. Two of the actors had connectivity problems during the play and one had to be replaced in a hurry by the project’s coordinator and the General Director (the scholarship holder) until they managed to solve the issue. Regardless, the play was a success, highlighting the professionalism and dedication of the group.

Due to the difficulties in the pandemic context, the group was not able to fully implement the Forum Theater at this stage. However, it was possible to include audience participation in the play, through encouraging the interaction of the actors—especially the presenter of the television

program—with the audience of the online presentation through the YouTube live chat feature. In this period, despite the difficulties, it was also possible to publish an [e-book](#) authored by the coordinator and six participating students on the theater group and social change.

Assessing the Project

The project was assessed through interviews developed in December 2020 with nine current and former members of the Political Theater Group. The informants participated in at least one live performance of the plays and are either still part of the project or graduated at the end of the 2020 academic year.

Methodology and Teaching Civic Principles

To assess if participating in the group enhanced their civic knowledge, we asked the informants about their understanding of the concepts of political participation and civic engagement. They connected political participation to partaking in political decision making through exercising the right to vote, which is mandatory in Brazil. They also mentioned being aware of the political situation of their region and country, participating in demonstrations and demanding accountability of political representatives. They related civic engagement to taking action toward something you believe is right while being aware of what is going on in society around you, to being connected to the collectivity through a common cause, and promoting change through everyday politics.

The group selection was open to all interested in voluntary participation in a community outreach project to discuss social and political issues through theater. To detect if the project changed the student's attitudes and interest in political participation and civic engagement, we inquired if they participated in any social movement or political association before joining the group. All of the interviewees but one—who was a member of a Christian group—did not participate in political and/or social associations or movements. Most stated they had entered the group due to their interest in art. Other motivators, less mentioned, were the connection between art and politics, friendship with other participants and a desire to lose their inhibitions.

The majority of the participants entered the project at the beginning of their undergraduate studies and felt that the theater group was a turning point, changing them. One of the informants noted, "I see colleagues entering one way and leaving another." Most mentioned it increased their awareness of political and social issues and heightened their interest in engaging in social action due to their identity or religion, but also because of the empathy they felt for other minority groups.

All respondents acknowledged that the methodology enhanced their awareness of socio-political issues. Some mentioned the project was an "eye opener." The participants recognized a growth in their awareness of social and political issues that are relevant for the nation but about which they previously had little knowledge. They highlighted how engaging with persons from the community helped them understand how others are affected by social and political issues and enabled them to put themselves in other people's shoes. They also experienced a desire to learn more about social issues and were emboldened to act in the face of oppression. One respondent mentioned that during the project they started thinking about how to be an agent of positive change and fight oppression through social intervention. Another revealed going through an experience of religious intolerance and being able to act in this situation, believing "if it weren't for the theater experience I wouldn't react, I would be in shock."

Asked about the project's student-led methodology, which included readings, organizing lectures, conversation circles, visits outside the university, producing plays, and participating in debates, all respondents evaluated it positively. They mentioned that it was different from all their other experiences in the university. One stated that "many (of the exercises) take me out of my comfort zone, but in a welcoming environment." They highlighted the discomfort that emerged from feeling touched by the themes they explored; from hearing people's testimonies after the plays that were inspired by what had been represented; from participating in exercises such as interpreting someone professing a religion different from their own; from being shown their mistakes and be-

coming aware of their privileges.

There is pedagogical value in situations which take students out of their comfort zone and engage them in ideas and their consequences, contributing to the development of an emancipatory education that encourages and prepares students for civic and political engagement.⁴³ Learning can be a painful, scary and uncomfortable process. Renowned author, professor, and feminist social activist bell hooks distinguishes a safe space from a controlled space.⁴⁴ For her, disrupting the serious atmosphere of the university classroom with stimulating discussions can increase students' interest and commitment, stimulate their serious intellectual engagement with political ideas and values, promote critical thinking and catalyze the processes of finding their own voices. To create an environment of freedom and intellectual rigor, she proposes building classroom communities that share an appreciation for goals of learning and listening, thereby making higher education an exercise in recognition and democracy where everyone's presence is valued and recognized. We were happy to have achieved this within the theater group. The participants of the project described it as a place of "personal growth" and "empowerment," a "real healing space" where they reduced their fears and "shame" and developed their "self-knowledge" and "critical sense," widening their horizons and generating personal growth and self-discovery. Learning permeates the group in the sense that the participants recognize the oppressions experienced not only at the individual level, but by all members of the group who, despite being part of an intellectual elite which has access to higher education, identify as minorities because they are women, LGBTQ, black and/or Northeastern.⁴⁵ They learn from the experience of the other.

Teaching Interpersonal Skills and Perceptions of Competency

A few mentioned they used to feel very shy and insecure and were a bit uncomfortable in the beginning. The project's methodology was key in helping them to gradually increase their confidence and lessen fears of being judged, making it easier for them to express their opinions in other environments. They see the group as a safe space, receptive to different expressions where they developed respect for the others and were able to gain confidence to participate in discussions and to contribute to reaching consensus in debates. One student emphasized the project helped them feel part of a group and made them more comfortable expressing their opinions and participating in discussions. These learnings carried over to other situations and made the student feel like a different person from before joining. For many, the group provided a space where they could play a leadership role and assume responsibilities which built their "self-confidence," while recognizing the impact of their actions. Through the exercises and the coexistence, they "let go of the idea of ridicule" and, according to one of the interviewees "you lose your shame, and create trust, security, intimacy, with an absurd sense of respect for the other, with the body, talk, attitude of the other."

Asked about skills and competencies, the respondents mentioned that they understood they had become citizens more capable of putting themselves in the other's place. "Empathy" is a term that appears several times in the responses. They also highlighted that the theater methodology helped them learn to think "outside the box," to propose innovative solutions. They feel that they are better able to express themselves, both improving their communication skills but also feeling more comfortable expressing their views. The project helped students confront their fears, especially of other people's judgement. After participating, many felt better prepared to interact with others who think differently from them and to take on responsibilities and leadership roles, having lost the fear of taking action and speaking out.

All participants feel the group helped them to believe in themselves and their capacity, being more confident and feeling comfortable in themselves. They developed skills which they see as valuable for their undergraduate studies and applicable to their professional careers. They anticipated increased involvement in politics because they feel they are better equipped to participate in group activities and achieve consensus, to deal with differences and novelties, being more empathetic and sensitive to the issues around them and having developed a political consciousness, seeing how they are connected to society.

They evaluated the project's methodology favorably in comparison to other teaching-learning

experiences of their undergraduate coursework. They found it more practical, enabling them to better see how the theoretical aspects they read about were connected to their reality. The methodology increased their ability to share their knowledge with others while helping them better understand other people's perspectives. They mentioned other higher educational learning experiences felt dissociated from their reality and were, therefore, more difficult to grasp. Some students observed that the project's methodology is more humane and fostered a less competitive environment than they experienced in other university activities. One pointed out, "While in the undergraduate program some are successful, because they have a more solid background or adapt well to the traditional teaching model, others do not adapt so well. Higher education feels more like a natural selection... There is no such competition in the theater."

All participants consider the project life-changing, altering how they see themselves, allowing them to feel comfortable being themselves, generating personal growth and allowing them to feel useful, having achieved something in the moments they were engaged with the community. According to respondents it was "one of the best things which happened in my life." Another highlighted, "There is (name) before and (name) after the political theater... It defined where I am from... It kind of gave me a purpose in the (undergraduate) course, of wanting to work with art in the International Relations. It is my north, the center of where I want to go, what I want to do. It has had a huge impact on my life." They also mentioned that it is a place where they were happy, were able to make friends and a source of stability in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusions: The Possibilities and Limitations of the Political Theater

This chapter demonstrates how education and art can be joined to promote engagement with socio-political issues in a small university community engagement project which can be replicated at a low cost. Through it, learning and civic engagement were promoted by using theater with an active, student-led approach. The stages of the project illustrate the involvement of the students in different activities which allowed them to be part of a politically active group engaging in political discussions in a welcoming, collaborative and respectful environment. Participating in the theater group engaged students in the study of social and political issues which are relevant to them and Brazilian society. Participants also developed their active citizenship skills by devising creative ways to engage with the community in deep discussions on these topics.

Members of the community were included in the project by accessing the lectures the group organized and sharing their lived experiences in conversation circles which were anonymously incorporated in the plays. After the plays, the audience was invited to participate, contributing with their impressions, opinions and ideas in open discussions of the scenes of oppression the plays conveyed. In the last play performed online, viewers were invited to interact with the actors during the play. Through these engagements, the audience participated, raising their voices and becoming *spect-actors*.

The student-led methodology took the students out of their comfort zone while keeping them in a safe space while they took over the role of agents responsible for building their own knowledge through exchanges with the community while keeping the project viable despite the scarcity of resources. This gave the participants encouragement and space to develop their agency toward the advancement of the project, allowing them to learn how to navigate difficulties and solve problems and, by achieving their goals, to gain confidence and understand the importance of taking action. This project enhanced the students' awareness of their connection to the community and of their responsibilities toward it. They came to understand the relevance of their agency and how they can promote reflections on and discussions of relevant political issues among their community—an important contribution considering the scenario of increasing apathy of the Brazilian population in relation to political participation. This helped students appreciate the importance of civic and political engagement while addressing issues relevant to their community, all while acquiring valuable competencies such as critical thinking, autonomy, and a sense of civic responsibility.

The project will continue developing new plays on new topics while working toward better incorporating audience participation in the plays themselves and in post-play discussions of the scenes of oppression. To this end, the group members should be trained to become ‘jokers’ by a Theater of the Oppressed official member. This requires a substantial investment, and to that end the participants are seeking grants.

The project has faced some challenges, such as the limited financial support available (one scholarship), which is common for most community outreach projects developed in UFPB. Limited resources made it difficult for the program to grow and access other communities, but such obstacles encouraged the students to proactively and creatively seek ways to raise resources to bear costs such as transportation to present the plays, makeup to improve production quality and to make the project more sustainable.

Another goal is to improve the assessment tools used to measure the project’s efficacy. Given the project’s limited capacity, interviews with the students post-participation has been the only method by which results are measured. These evaluative tools can be unreliable in assessing changes in attitudes or quantifying differences in their levels of civic interest and engagement from before they entered the project. Assessing the program’s impact will be strengthened by using pre-project and post-project surveys. Such surveys can also be administered to a diverse group of students who are not involved in the project in order to provide a control group. Improving assessment methods may also strengthen the case needed to raise funds for the program by demonstrating the real impact this project has on improving citizenship among Brazil’s future leaders.

Even in the face of challenges due to financial and material limitations in the Brazilian public education system and the insecurity that federal policies have been generating in the pandemic setting, the *Interna-só-na-mente* Political Theater Group continues empowering students and members of society to actively contribute to deconstruct prejudices. The growth that the project allowed through student-led learning using art and the interactions between the students and the community strengthens our certainty that with empathetic civic engagement we can build a more democratic future.⁴⁶

Endnotes

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