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## Performance and GTA Training: Understanding an Adaptation of Boal's Forum Theatre for New Teachers

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PERFORMANCE AND GTA TRAINING: UNDERSTANDING AN ADAPTATION  
OF BOAL'S FORUM THEATRE FOR NEW TEACHERS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Tiffany E. Harbrecht

August 2013

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PERFORMANCE AND GTA TRAINING: UNDERSTANDING AN ADAPTATION  
OF BOAL'S FORUM THEATRE FOR NEW TEACHERS

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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August 2013

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## ABSTRACT

### PERFORMANCE AND GTA TRAINING: UNDERSTANDING AN ADAPTATION OF BOAL'S FORUM THEATRE FOR NEW TEACHERS

by Tiffany E. Harbrecht

The Communication Studies Department at San José State University adapts Boal's Forum Theatre to provide its graduate teaching associates (GTAs) a space for cooperatively re-imagining their way through challenges and concerns they may (or do) face during teaching. This research fills a gap in our disciplinary understanding of how new teachers experience forum theatre and the substantive differences and difficulties that arise when implementing it in trainings that are not focused on challenging oppression. Chiefly, participants risk conflating forum theatre with role-play and losing Boal's theory; while fusing its ideas this way might appear as a way to problem-pose with students, there is danger of new participants taking misguided actions in reality without considering the complex underpinnings of their performances. Thus, instructors trying forum theatre without adequate knowledge of critical pedagogy may oversimplify it and jeopardize these interactions.

Using grounded theory, this study identifies emergent key themes in GTAs' understanding and applied lessons from this exercise. Drawing upon Boal and Freire, this research bridges instructional communication and critical communication pedagogy to appraise its potential to prepare or hinder professional development. The study also considers broader implications of forum theatre's execution and assessment in higher education contexts and offers recommendations for employing it in future trainings.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the end of this undertaking, I understand now that this thesis is much more than simply a document for a degree. For me, the entirety of this experience is deeply personal and has changed how I view myself in relation to higher education and academic research. And, it would not have been possible without the help of several people to whom I wish to express my deep gratitude.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

It's a sunny, yet hazy, Thursday morning in late August, and standing outside this building, Hugh Gillis Hall at San José State University (SJSU), the air around me has a mellowness that does not quite match the churning emotions inside my stomach. I feel like I am on the cusp of one very long personal journey, with only moments left before I embark on a completely new era in my life. You see, for over ten years, I dreamed of becoming a college instructor and teaching students at a local community college. Ever since my former professor, a surfer-academic named Shawn with sandy blond hair and a wily air about him, told our class an inspirational story of how he became a college professor, I felt drawn to similar work. Shawn explained that he felt lost following his own graduation from college and spent a few years in jobs that did not seem to fill a sense of emptiness inside him. After much soul searching, he returned to school to pursue a master's degree in order to be able to teach at his (and my) former community college that we both loved so much. That college had a profound impact on him personally and professionally, and it did for me as well. Now that I am teaching in a college environment, I can't help thinking of his story and how it influenced me many years later. Although, I admit the way I recount this story sounds idealistic and lofty, it was neither a short nor easy journey to this significant time in my life.

Following an abnormally long stint of eight years to earn my associates degree in liberal arts in community college, I bounced through two schools and two majors before graduating with my bachelor's degree in Human Communication, three years later. After that, I did what I thought I *should*, what I perceived as expected for mid-twenties college

graduates, and I began a job search for corporate employment. I wound up working at a small company that produced arts and crafts and educational products for early childhood (birth-eight years) in the Brand Marketing Department. I worked in a relatively large, as far as standards go, cubical (cube), under fluorescent lights, for a supervisor who, depending on her mood, would hover over me at my desk, mostly fueled by her own stress and procrastination at the amount of work we had to produce. Day after day, working as a Copywriter and Marketing Coordinator, I wrote and edited copy about children's school supplies, feeling more and more disconnected from my dream. While I enjoyed the security of a salary, health care, and a retirement plan, I also faced frustrations with coworkers and lack of advancement opportunities in my five-person department. As I approached age 30, I started to reevaluate the choices I made up to this point, and I felt sadly unfulfilled. I realized that I compartmentalized teaching, long ago, in the back of my mind in a place that would require me to make serious changes in my life, choices such as going back to school for my Masters Degree, balancing between one to three jobs at a time to fund my way through school, and, most important, entering the graduate teaching associate (GTA) program.

A year and a half later, here I am, one of the fall 2010 cohort in Communication Studies and a new member of the department's GTA program. I take a deep breath as I walk into the building and prepare myself for the last phase of my training to become a GTA. With just two days left of orientation and training, I'm processing the tremendous amount of information my colleagues and I experienced together this week. I take a seat near the front of our classroom and glance down to look at the agenda for today. The

11:00 a.m. session reads: Engaging Critical Communication Pedagogy (Forum Theatre Workshop), Keith Nainby CSU, Stanislaus. “Forum theatre? What is that? Does this mean we are getting up and performing again?” My stomach slightly tightens. Only yesterday did the first-year GTAs, including myself, present our microteachings (small segments of a potential lesson plan) in front of a group of more experienced colleagues. Some of them gently rattled us with various, minor classroom disruptions to see how we handled challenges in the moment. I was incredibly nervous before my microteaching, but overall it was a positive learning experience. Yet, right now, the thought of another performance is as much unsettling as it is exciting.

Instantly thoughts are swimming in my mind. “What is forum theatre all about? How does it relate to critical communication pedagogy? In what ways is this going to be different than microteaching? Are we going to role-play?” While part of me is intrigued by the idea of performance in general, and I believe that it significant part of being a teacher, I still feel my anxiety heightening. I wonder if forum theatre will be more challenging for me than microteaching. Or, as rewarding? More importantly, “How does this fit into our training?”

### **Boal, Forum Theatre, and GTAs**

In order to provide a broader context for the role of forum theatre in this particular GTA training, it is important to understand how forum theatre exercises work and where they originated. Developed by Brazilian theater director, educator, and social activist, Augusto Boal, forum theatre is a collection of interactive theatre techniques and exercises that heighten awareness of participants’ social position, attitudes, and perspective. These

performance exercises assist participants working through various dramatic situations in their everyday lives. Everyone is involved in rehearsal; audience members move beyond their roles as spectators to become actors and work collectively to find cooperative solutions to the challenges they face (Boal, 1974/1985). The other actors must be flexible to the changes in the action, adapting as they repeat each scene with actors switching roles and trying out different resolutions. “Anyone may propose a solution, but it must be done on the stage, working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of his seat” (Boal, 1974/1985, p. 139). The participants are able to experience a rehearsal that is a concrete preparation for real situations they face. “In the forum theatre no idea is imposed: the audience, the people, have the opportunity to try out all their ideas, to rehearse all possibilities, and to verify them in practice, that is, theatrical practice” (Boal, 1974/1985, p. 141). Within the limits of fiction, spect-actors make connections with tangible experiences that cause them feelings such as anxiety, concern, and apprehension, so that they can grapple with them.

Therefore, Boal organizes this transformation from witness to actor into four phases: knowing the body, making the body expressive, theatre as language, and theatre as discourse. For the purposes of this research, only part of the third phase: theatre as language, which Boal calls forum theatre, is the focus. Consequently, this means forum theatre is a practice in which participants experience performance as a language that is centered in the present as a tangible rehearsal for action beyond the stage.

In a similar fashion, the training of GTAs in the Communication Studies Department at San José State University (SJSU) adapts Boal’s forum theatre in order to

provide new and more experienced instructors a space for cooperatively re-imagining their way through challenges, concerns, and anxieties they may (or do) face teaching. Therefore, this allows the current GTAs and GTA alumni to rehearse different teaching scenarios in a concrete manner without the same consequences of handling those issues in the moment and with hope that they can gain insight for the classroom. Although, they are not free from the evaluation of their colleagues, there is opportunity for constructive feedback for everyone involved, particularly the GTAs who are practicing and gaining new skills. While the forum theatre used with the GTAs is not employed to expose oppressive structures in their lives in the same manner in which Boal intended, in this context, it is a place where GTAs may confront their liminal state of authority, such as having to now defend and uphold university policies they did not create. In this explorative way, forum theatre serves as a tailored, practical supplement to GTA training in which conversations around the complexities of teaching begin.

In general, GTAs describe forum theatre in a positively manner, and it does help achieve the programs' long term outcomes at both San José State University (SJSU) and Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) where it is adapted for use in their orientations (Fassett and Warren, 2012). The orientation at SJSU consists of approximately 50 hours prior to the start of the fall semester, culminating in a week-long intensive meeting in August, in which forum theatre is strategically placed within the latter part of the week. The orientation in its entirety is presented solely by volunteers, esteemed professors, lecturers, and colleagues, who both participate and give their time to nurture and prepare these new college instructors, in order to help these individuals feel

like they will succeed in the classroom. However, the August training is open to all faculty, former GTAs, and lecturers to join in the collaborative meaning making and professional development throughout the week, but it is the session of forum theatre that typically attracts the most volunteers than other days in the orientation. All the same, it should still be noted that Keith Nainby and Amy Kilgard, the facilitators of forum theatre at this training, are both highly regarded professors in the discipline and among many members of our department, which also shares in the increased draw of participants who want to work with them in this session.

As less experienced, first-year GTAs enter this week of training and forum theatre they have many diverse questions and concerns they hope will be answered before they start teaching. Furthermore, as GTAs, we are the instructors of record for the undergraduate communication courses in public speaking to which we are appointed, meaning we are solely responsible for all lesson planning, grading, and classroom management record for those introductory classes. This is a daunting thought for some of us, but it is also exhilarating as we think about our new classes and teaching a college class for the first time. Many of the GTAs in the program hope to utilize their experiences with instruction after graduation in other teaching roles, and like me, many other GTAs hope to pursue teaching at community colleges or other universities. Accordingly, forum theatre provides a space to engage the concerns we have in which Fassett and Warren (2012) described as moving beyond role playing into a substantial exercise that considers multiple perspectives surrounding teaching and learning.

For instance, in small groups, the GTAs rehearse and re-envision the outcomes of

a variety of challenging scenarios that are on their minds about teaching, making these performances different than “skits.” “While instructors often worry whether they have the ‘right’ answer, that is less important at this stage; what is more important is that all the instructors in the room have now experienced an array of strategies for how to address that situation” (Fassett and Warren, 2012, p. 136). In this process, the GTAs are able to embody a variety of strategies for potential use in the classroom. Moreover, by collectively troubleshooting, they now have a better understanding of how, when, and why to seek mentoring or other institutional support. Following the exercise, a debrief highlights the subtleties of the scenario, with distinct attention on what they learned, the areas they can improve, and resources in which new instructors can draw on for their benefit (Fassett and Warren, 2012). Consequently, my own participation in these forum theatre exercises provided me the space to recognize both my strengths and limitations as an instructor, to learn how to work with these qualities in my teaching, and what I can do to continue to improve my competence in the classroom over time.

Although, as I delved further into my analysis of GTAs’ and my own experiences with forum theatre, I realized the exercise was not only more challenging than microteaching but infinitely more complex than I had previously understood. Because the practice is grounded in theory that asks its participants to challenge their assumptions, face their fears, and confront systems of oppression in their lives, there is a contextual shift that marks a difference in the experience when adapted into this particular training. And, while we did assume various roles in the process, these actions carried more weight than I anticipated. I eventually started feel unsettled about this integral part of GTA



training; were we missing the point? Were we possibly trying to make this practice something it is not? As a result, my changing perspective motivated me reexamine the impressions I had of forum theatre and the adaptation of this technique into GTA training.

Additionally, Boal's (1974/1985) central intention was for these forms of theater to create spaces for performance to be done by, for, and of the people to work against sources of oppression and abuse of power in their everyday lives. Similarly, Freire's theories, widely known as the foundation of critical pedagogy, are also aimed to empower people who are oppressed or marginalized (e.g., within a society or culture) through transformative education. Freire (2003) specifically foregrounds working *with* oppressed people to develop the skills to educate themselves through *praxis*, or reflection and action. Freire's philosophies are the basis of what is known as critical pedagogy. Therefore, when considered together, Boal's and Freire's work intersect in ways that are meaningful to critical educational research.

In light of that, I propose that research regarding GTAs' experiences with forum theatre fills a gap in our disciplinary understanding of how they encounter this particular performance exercise in their training. Specifically this study will explore their impressions of forum theatre, if it prepared or did not prepare them for the challenges they face in the classroom, and if forum theatre helped or hindered their professional development. Moreover, considering forum theatre's roots and theoretical framework of exposing and transforming oppression in participants' lives, there is an opportunity to also question if it functions similarly for GTAs or if the practice is performed without

theory. Additionally, I will address what strengths and limitations using forum theatre in the training of new instructors exist, as I hope to bridge instructional communication and critical communication pedagogy in a novel way.

In the following chapters, I will establish both the context for my research through a review of relevant literature and explain the methods in which I will approach my investigation. Drawing upon critical communication pedagogy, performance-based pedagogy, and the work of Boal and Freire, I attempt to illuminate how this community of teachers find (or began to find) their stride as instructors, feel confidence in their abilities, and shape their work in the classroom, following their orientation and experience with forum theatre. In this respect, there is potential for professional development and improved training materials for new GTAs and GTA supervisors, and also for teachers in communication studies. I believe a particularly unique opportunity exists for our discipline to also gain broader understanding of the role of performance exercises in enhancing teacher training from an inside perspective. Hence, not only will GTAs be a part of my research, but they will contribute to building literature that is uniquely designed to benefit their own and future GTA communities.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

In 1973, Augusto Boal created experimental forms of interactive theatre intended to help people who are marginalized to empower themselves. Inspired by the work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire's work, which influenced literacy programs in Peru, Boal (1974/1985) wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed*, in which he outlined his theories about how to use theatre as a vehicle and language for people's self expression and empowerment. In the text, he highlights the main goal of this approach to theatre as evolving the audience's spectator role from passive to active and ultimately changing the drama on stage and in life. Specifically, his interest was to empower collectives and promote community. Over time, Boal's innovative work with performance, particularly forum theatre, has been adapted by instructors to use with students in a variety of teaching contexts. However, there is limited research regarding how these adaptations of forum theatre, particularly participant experiences of these exercises, enhance or impede participant personal and professional growth as well as shed light on the applications and insights they glean from participating in forum theatre. More specifically, there is no research into how forum theatre can help or hinder graduate teaching associates (GTAs) in coping with, preparing for, and approaching challenges inherent to teaching.

In this review, I will first illustrate the relationships between critical communication pedagogy, performance-based pedagogies, and new instructor training, especially that of GTAs. I then explore the correlation Boal's work has with Brazilian educator and philosopher, Paulo Freire's work in critical pedagogy. Next, I provide a

brief discussion of implications of power for GTAs and instructors. Finally, I conclude by situating the concerns and needs of GTAs at the center of this research. Consequently, I hope to consider in this study whether Boal's work can fit into training within a higher education context, and if so, what is gained? What is lost? Is forum theatre a practice that truly supports the preparation of new instructors for the classroom and help shape their work as teachers in positive ways? Or, does it hinder more than help their professional development?

### **Performance and Critical Communication Pedagogy: An Environment for Learning**

When combined with critical communication pedagogy, performance creates a powerful environment for learning. These philosophies overlap in the ways they explore the multiple roles and identities of teachers inside and outside of instructional settings (Pineau, 2005). According to Pineau (2005), performance scholars, educators, and communication professionals have used performance as a qualitative research method for investigating aesthetic communication. Using the body to engage information provides insights otherwise not obtained by detached, disembodied reflection (Pineau, 2005). Additionally, critical communication pedagogy encompasses elements of self-reflection and social-justice that is also similarly engaged in performance through embodied actions. In other words, using the body to interact within educational contexts creates and explores new and unique ways of knowing ourselves and our world.

As Pineau (2005) suggested, performance in the classroom provides a valuable space to engage in critical pedagogy by confronting and reimagining controversial topics without the consequences life brings. Both the theater and the classroom can be places to

practice possibilities, explore new identities, and create social change. And, like the theater, the classroom is a rehearsal space for imagining ourselves and our lives in the future (Fassett & Warren, 2007). “It is play, but it is not simple, in as much as our classroom is a site for placing our bodies and minds, our theories, and our actions in tensions” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 70). In other words, the context of the classroom provides a dynamic space for (inter)acting and recreating ourselves and the roles we embody.

In Conquergood’s (1993) view, good or effective teaching is a threshold experience that pushes borders of vulnerability and encourages the willingness of the teacher to risk, to be surprised, to improvise, and to be spontaneous. These conditions arise best through a performance theory of pedagogy because “Knowledge and ideas are dynamic and coexperienced instead of static and transmitted” (Conquergood, 1993, p. 338). A performance paradigm, like critical pedagogy, also involves both teachers and students to learn together through action. Denzin (2006) asserted that critical pedagogical techniques that include a performance dimension can be transformative and empowering for those willing to challenge oppression and create social change beyond the classroom. Cooks (2010) agreed that there is great potential in performance as a teaching methodology. For those who engage in critical communication pedagogy, connections that are made between performance, embodiment, and reflexivity are useful (Cooks, 2010).

Likewise, Pineau (2005) advocated inclusion of performance workshops as a part of teacher education programs, calling student-teachers “. . . to experience, adjust, and re-

experience [themselves] in the ‘moment of doing’” (p. 31). These are moments of reflection and action, key components of doing critical pedagogy. Such work points to a question of whether GTA programs and mentoring training really prepare beginning teachers for their new multiple roles as comprehensively as possible. Pineau (2005) drew upon examples of instructional performance techniques used in a graduate seminar to explain why she believes the experience of using performance approaches in the classroom creates a constructive space to begin thinking and reconceptualizing education as performative. Thus, opportunities exist for the communication discipline by conducting research with GTAs about performance techniques used in their initial training and their applicability beyond orientation. In fact, Pineau (2005) stated that “. . . points of connection can be identified between performance studies and educational research in such areas as instructional narrative, teacher metaphors, kinesthetic learning, and critical pedagogy” (p. 17). In other words, the relationship between performance and education embraces multiple aspects of traditional and progressive approaches to teaching and to training teachers.

Accordingly, the Joint Task Force of the Speech Communication Association and the American Theatre Association (1975) support Pineau’s conclusions. They asserted that instruction that foregrounds the importance of speech and theatre techniques will enhance interactions, such as “face-to-face interpersonal communication, public speaking, mass media, and aesthetic experiences involving audience and performer” (Joint Task Force of the Speech Communication Association and the American Theatre Association, 1975, p. 345). Therefore, performance exercises, such as forum theatre, that

involve the audience in the action, are embodied and aesthetic experiences that function to improve communication. Furthermore, “. . . our bodies remain our mediators of the world; our physical and social deformities and our pain, far from marking us as deviants, teach us much about the limits of received knowledges” (Cooks & Warren, 2011, p. 212). Therefore, the extent to which a teacher aligns his or her understanding of communication with the performance of identity affects how effectively he or she can develop interactions and instruction with others.

In a like vein, Howard (2004) identified and critiqued ways to implement Boal’s interactive theater techniques in the classroom (or auditorium). Specifically, she examined Boal’s work “. . . as a critical performative pedagogical process . . . a learning community that empowers participants, generates critical understanding, and promotes transformation . . .” (Howard, 2004, p. 218). Therefore, Howard (2004) adapted Boal’s forum theatre techniques to create an interactive drama with student volunteers to explore issues of body image and eating disorders. Her students enhanced their understanding of themselves through their performances and were better able to dialogue about related matters, social norms, and cultural expectations around their specific body image/eating issues. Effectively, Howard fostered an environment in which her students reflected and acted (praxis) upon issues they experience in relation to their health with the intention that they could translate the knowledge generated in the classroom beyond its four walls. Howard expressed feelings of frustration with putting Boal’s (1974/1985) forum theatre into practice with limited guidance; because Boal left the details open for interpretation, Howard advocated that more educators should share their use of his techniques, so others

could reap the benefits they garnered from the practice. Therefore, Howard also called for increased research to broaden how practitioners and researchers of interactive theater can better theorize that process for their own agency as instructors.

### **Boal and Freire: An Intersection within Critical Communication Pedagogy**

According to Freire (2003), both students and teachers learn from and with one another and are not separate in that enterprise. “Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (Freire, 2003, p. 69). In essence, Freire called for emerging leaders (which I interpret to include teachers) to be in communion together as human beings, liberating one another in true revolutionary style. Likewise, Boal (1974/1985) maintained that while theater itself is not revolutionary, it is a “*rehearsal of revolution*” (p. 141, author’s emphasis). In Boal’s forum theatre, the participants have a concrete experience, a practice of a real act, and even though it is within fictional limits, the participants embody and co-create new strategies for approaching reality in a liberatory manner, which have potential to align with Freire’s work within an educational context. In this next section, I attempt to further understanding of how the work of Brazilian educator, philosopher, and social advocate Paulo Freire relates to and informs applications of Boal’s forum theatre in terms of critical (communication) pedagogy and praxis.

In his landmark text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2003) articulated the concept of a banking method of education that describes students as depositories, where they are only engaged to receive, memorize, and regurgitate the information provided by



their teachers. In this model of oppression, there is the assumption that there is nothing for the teachers to learn or gain from their students; the teachers' empowerment is at the expense of the students' individual humanity. As long as instructors perpetuate this banking system of education, the oppressed will be patronized in a state of ignorance, not deemed worthy of participating in the creation of knowledge. The instructors themselves will also continue to be dominated by the institution that supports that type of repressive instruction their actions maintain in a vicious cycle. Transformation of oppressive reality, such as what is created by the banking system, relies upon the ability and desire to reflect critically about and act from their current state of being or status (Freire, 2003).

Additionally, teachers who employ what Freire (2003) called a problem-posing approach, rather than presenting material solely as information to ingest, begin an investigation together with students as the information is now (re)presented. Problem-posing education challenges the banking system, and teachers cease to be the only ones who impart knowledge. And, these investigations can become a common ground for working toward self-awareness, marking the educational process as a liberating cultural activity (Freire, 2003).

In the truest sense of forum theatre, and other types of theatre for and by the people, the intent is to spark the desire to put those acts into practice in reality (Boal, 1974/1985); in other words, participants should feel unsettled enough by their actions in the rehearsal to take their newly generated solution(s) into action (Boal, 1974/1985). Similar feelings are also a product of a problem-posing methodology, as described by Freire (2003), in the ways it encourages critical reflection, awareness, and prompts a type

of discomfort that leads to transformative actions by participants. As a result, forum theatre can therefore provide a platform to engage problem-posing, particularly in its ability to create awareness of hegemonic structures in regards to educational contexts.

Further, Freire (2003) argued that a primary vocation of men and women is to seek their humanization and that a revolutionary, humanist educator must do what s/he can to free those who are oppressed in this banking system. Therefore, according to Freire, the goal of a liberatory education is to foster people's feelings of ownership of their thoughts and ideas through dialogue. "Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 2003, p. 80). Thus, together they are both responsible for each other's knowledge and growth.

Like this idea of teacher-student and students-teachers, Boal's ideas surrounding spectator-actors take a similar tone. According to Boal (1974/1985) the spectator ". . . must be a subject, an actor on an equal plane with those generally accepted as actors, who must also be spectators" (p.155). His interactive forms of theater are intended to free the spectators from the imposed ideas of traditional theater's ruling class creators because those ideas do not reflect that of lower and middle class. From Boal's perspective, his poetics of the oppressed of forum theatre are poetics of liberation and freedom. In the space of forum theatre, participants' vulnerability and response to others' vulnerability help build a cohort and community among the individuals. Therefore, these particular forms of peoples' theater are spaces where action works toward humanization and self-actualization, much in the same manner that Freire's (2003) assertion that people's

speaking and naming their worlds through dialogue marks their significance as human beings.

Moreover, dialogue is imperative in order to free communication from dominance and oppression and open our interactions up for reciprocal, engaged responses to one another. As Freire (2003) stated, “For the truly humanist educator and the authentic revolutionary, the object of action is the reality to be transformed by them together with other people—not other men and women themselves” (p. 94). Both Freire and Boal emphasized the importance of co-creation of knowledge and both spoke to educators in their respective ways. Within Boal’s (1974/1985) forum theatre, a particular political or social problem is improvised, rehearsed, and presented, and the solution opened to a discussion that becomes the springboard for a dramatized dialogue in which the participants rotate through different solutions, until all possibilities are exhausted. In this sense, performance is a dialogic, theatrical activity. In forum theatre, no one imposes ideas on others, and all have the opportunity to try out any and all ideas. The people come together to critically generate and explore multiple perspectives and solutions to apply to the challenges they face in their lives. Similarly, authentic dialogue also requires critical thinking, thinking that is not separate from action or the awareness of reality as a process of transformation (Freire, 2003). Overall, dialogue is about relationships with others and is constitutive of reflection and action (praxis), which are central to both Freire’s and Boal’s goals in their work.

Nainby, Warren, and Bollinger (2003) summarized Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as an argument that oppressive conditions are perpetuated by our own ideas

about the world, how we view ourselves, and our combined choices about how to live our lives. In this way, our social exchanges are evidence of the constitutive reality of communication, particularly how we are contained and freed by communicating with others, as we simultaneously relate to and transform ourselves and the world around us. Nainby et al. (2003) contended that traditional pedagogical theories fail to recognize the constitutive capacities of communication, as articulated by Freire's work; instead, they continually focus on curriculum intent upon upholding traditional "banking" models of education. More recent work by Freire reflected and expanded upon his previous theories of critical and transformative pedagogies further by implying that teachers and students collectively can discern what types of communication will critically impact our lives (Nainby et al., 2003).

However, Nainby et al. (2003) also recognized that despite Freire's acknowledgment of the constitutive qualities of communication and its relation to oppressive conditions, Freire's pedagogical model separates the process of becoming aware of and exposing oppression and our actual empowerment and transformation from oppressive conditions. Instead, they argued that these two endeavors are one, and "From this perspective, each of us is living through, in a multiplicity of ways, our world-constituting abilities" (Nainby et al., 2003, p. 206). In other words, we always have the power to enact change, even while under oppressive circumstances we have numerous perspectives to collectively transform our world.

In fact, Boal also recognized comparable challenges in proposing performance to those who have never heard of or have a distorted impression of theater (as recreation,

sentimentality, or via impressions from the media). An example of this can be seen in Boal's (1974/1985) experiments with implementing theater in Peru in 1973. His goals were to teach literacy in both indigenous and Spanish languages and in other artistic language capacities as well. By considering theater specifically as language, Boal proposed a new practice at the service of the oppressed to encourage their self-expression as they worked to become literate in this context. However, Boal acknowledged the fact that the educators working to eradicate illiteracy in Peru, and otherwise, may face resistance because the nature of their mission presupposes coercive and oppressive actions. He advocated they should not initiate interactions with the people using theatrical techniques that seemed like foreign concepts; instead they might encourage participation with specific exercises that increase awareness of the potential they possessed in their bodies. Through understanding and rapport building the people would have the opportunity to explore the process of self growth as they became aware of and exposed the oppressive conditions that restrained them. At the core of this endeavor, Boal contended that theatre should be produced by the people themselves if they are to utilize its outcomes in a revolutionary manner. Thus, his intent for the people was a space to reflect upon and engage multiple solutions for social change and develop tools for transforming their own lives and is also an example of Freire's (2003) concept of praxis: reflection and action.

While implementing philosophies in line with Freire's ideas may be difficult with university students who have been raised in a system of education that is counter to such collaborative and constitutive teaching and learning, that does not mean teachers and

educators should not make efforts to re-envision communication in the classroom along similar lines. As can be seen, critical communication pedagogy draws together a community of individuals concerned with finding successful ways to engage the classroom as a site for social justice and change, as well as dedicate research to the interconnections between communication and the classroom (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Further, as an intradisciplinary space for instructional communication, critical pedagogy, and communication education, critical communication pedagogy also fundamentally incorporates praxis by teachers and students (teacher-student and students-teachers) in order to collaborative effort towards social justice. Likewise, critical communication pedagogy is constitutive of “interconnected commitments” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 38) that bridge its tenets to as well as differentiate them from other scholarly disciplines, such as performance-based pedagogies and Boal’s interactive theater techniques. Critical communication scholars explore how they as educators (re)create what they observe in the classroom and are conscious of the ways our language shapes our understanding of identity and the actions they take as researchers when defining the role of communication around identity as relational and complex (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Therefore, as a practice for participants to specifically explore performance as language, forum theatre may also provide a space for new and less experienced instructors to bridge their understanding of Freire and critical communication pedagogy in developing an understanding of what defines themselves as teachers inside and outside of the classroom.

### **Critical Pedagogy in Practice: An Investigation of Power**

In light of his ideas and their foundation for critical pedagogy, Freire is a source

that Fassett and Warren (2007) referenced when introducing the subject of power in the classroom with GTAs during training. Freire's philosophy helps them understand the difference between banking and problem-posing models' approaches to teaching students. Therefore, "Situating his work in the context of TA training is exciting precisely because it does not speak fully to this particular, local context" (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 28). Additionally, the training for the GTAs in the Communication Studies Department at SJSU attempts to model a problem-posing pedagogy, concurrent with the GTAs' reading of Freire's work. As the GTAs grapple with his ideas, they wonder if they really are oppressors if they are student-teachers/teachers-students, and if (or how) such efforts to practice his way of teaching are in line with the university's general education outcomes (Fassett & Warren, 2007). While Freire's choice of specific language helps call attention this binary of oppressor and oppressed, at the same time it influences our understanding of how power is enacted through and upon our realities (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Of course, we are, as Fassett and Warren (2007) described, ". . . always already both oppressor and oppressed (though to greater and lesser degrees and with greater and lesser consequences, depending on context, to be sure)" (p. 28). Thus, when the GTAs raise questions about whether and how they are oppressed and oppressors, they are already hinting at the answers. Therefore, purposefully using the theoretical lenses of Freire and Boal, GTAs may undertake a thoughtful examination of how power is and is not distributed and (mis)used in situations that are different from theirs, yet are also related to their current roles as both teachers and students.

Additionally, as forum theatre is adapted for use in academic environments, it can

be a means of applying critical communication pedagogy that can also include investigating the power (or lack of power) teachers feel they may have and share (or do not share) with their students. However, power is not a simple concept, and teachers and students do not only experience power as a one-to-one relationship. Fassett and Warren (2007) maintained that power is fluid and enacted in and through our bodies all the time, and even when we are unaware of the effects it has, power still shapes our performance of teacher and student. Consequently, teachers who practice critical pedagogy are comfortable with heightening the awareness of power with their students in order to open their classrooms up into democratic learning spaces. Without deeper investigation, it is unclear if less experienced instructors and GTAs may be comfortable enough in their own teaching abilities or even prepared to handle the challenges of navigating a shared sense of power with their students, particularly if they are still students themselves.

Along similar lines of democracy, bell hooks (1994) explained that critical pedagogies naturally encourage climates that invite students to share their experiences as contribution to the overall knowledge generated in the classroom. hooks admitted that if her knowledge is limited, and someone has facts and experience that is new, she willingly will humble herself in order to respectfully learn from her/him. Inspired by Freire, hooks (1994) argued (and still presently maintains) for “Education as the practice of freedom . . . that can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge in a field in which we all labor” (p. 14). In order to experience the freedom that knowledge and education provides, we must practice learning together and from one another. Within the concept of liberatory pedagogies, many scholars, including Freire (2003), have maintained that



teachers have political power that can be transformative for themselves and their students, but they must be aware of its existence (Sprague, 1992). Liberatory educators should look at education from a critical standpoint that can engage students in provocative and empowering ways. However, they must remember to be reflexive and reflective about their decisions as educators and communication scholars (Sprague, 1992).

Therefore, it is important for teachers not to let the institutional ascribed power interfere with learning by either the students or themselves. For hooks (1994), simply acknowledging that teachers are bodies (and embodied) in the classroom assists in keeping the idea of an “omnipotent, all-knowing” professor at bay (p. 138) and supports Freire’s philosophy of teacher-student, student-teacher. However, “To educate for freedom, then, we have to challenge and change the way that everyone thinks about pedagogical process” (hooks, 1994, p. 144). Teaching in this manner prompts professors to take risks, to build communities, to be engaged jointly in the learning and meaning-making that occurs within the boundaries of the classroom, but that will also provide them with personal rewards and empowerment beyond what they might envision. “For [G]TAs, the risk-taking nature of such encounters may threaten their limited confidence in knowledge and process” (Galvin, 1991, p. 273). However, these interactions can also quickly be a source of excitement in a shared learning experience if GTAs find ways in which they feel comfortable to take personal risks and develop agency in and out of the classroom. In this way, forum theatre provides a vehicle to explore such concepts within a relatively low-risk environment.

As can be seen, encouraging GTAs to think critically about their own teaching philosophy with inspiration from Freire's work and critical communication pedagogy is one of the more conceptual parts of the training process within the program at SJSU. Fassett and Warren (2007) suggested that the personal desire to practice critical communication pedagogy is doing social justice work, being self-reflexive, and speaking with purpose to make change in the world. Throughout the process of orientation, each GTA is afforded many different opportunities and prompts to discover through her/his own praxis who s/he is in the classroom, one of which is forum theatre. For GTAs, engaging critical communication pedagogy through forum theatre is a window to begin investigating power structures and provides a space to use performance to explore their long held assumptions, expectations, and anxieties that shape their idea and practice of teaching.

### **GTA Training: Concerns, Needs, and Beyond**

In developing a sense of who they are in the classroom and what their identities as new instructors are, new teachers and GTAs need to also learn how to cultivate feelings of competence, confidence, and success. In order for teachers to connect students with the subjects they teach, they must rely on their own inner selves and be vulnerable enough to share that as part of the learning process. Also, teachers need to be able to accept students' candid responses to the care they give them as part of a larger cycle of energy they can draw upon for teaching (Sprague, 1993). Accordingly, new teachers, and especially GTAs, may need some additional guidance for figuring out how to balance their new responsibilities and multiple roles with self care and compassion, lest they burn

out early on in their careers.

For instance, Sharpe (2000) appears to be especially mindful that GTAs are valuable resources for universities, and as such, they should be provided sufficient training to increase the likelihood that these teachers will feel more confident and competent in their abilities and able to meet the demands their new roles require. She pointed to strong research surrounding the need for improving training for GTAs and the similarities of their concerns about teaching across different institutions around the globe. Therefore, Sharpe created a GTA support-specific framework to assist their development. Within the framework, Sharpe focused on addressing the GTAs' concerns about their level of subject knowledge as well as the potential for coping with challenging situations they may find themselves once in the classroom. Sharpe additionally suggested training events that bring GTAs together with more experienced colleagues from their departments for support in order to be as aware as they can of the changes, patterns, and problems within the GTAs' experiences (Sharpe, 2000).

In a similar vein, Stanton-Spicer and Nyquist (1979) also conducted research about how the development of GTAs, particularly those who teach speech communication, and identified a need for programs that increase their competency as scholar-teachers in higher education. They paid particular attention to a program for speech communication GTAs at the University of Washington. The program holds five objectives to enable the GTAs to assess their strengths and limitations in their teaching abilities, set goals for improving their skills, choose and implement strategies to achieve those goals, and evaluate their overall growth and improvement in teaching (Stanton-

Spicer & Nyquist, 1979). “It meets personal needs and allows [G]TAs to set their own goals for improvement, select and implement strategies, and assess their own success” (Stanton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1979, p. 202). Thus, they can assess how they’re doing and pace their professional development throughout their teaching careers with the skills they gained from their training program.

Indeed, it takes a cooperative kinship to nurture and bring up a GTA. For instance, the training and professional development of GTAs is a comprehensive process that includes the community’s efforts to grow and learn together (Fassett & Warren, 2012). Orientations for new and less experienced instructors that provide discipline-specific information about the course(s) they will be teaching are essential (Fassett & Warren, 2012). According to Fassett and Warren (2012), not only do the GTAs benefit from the knowledge of their predecessors during the orientation, but their own development and growth is more fully addressed within that context. Orientations will vary in size and scale, depending on the university, its culture, and its resources (Fassett & Warren, 2012). Further, Fassett’s orientation was inspired by a model at the University of Washington (U.W.), brought to SJSU by colleague Jo Sprague in the early 1990s, and structured with the help of developmental work with GTAs that Nyquist and Sprague conducted (Fassett & Warren, 2012). (Southern Illinois University (SIUC) uses a similar program for GTAs in their Speech Communication Department that also evolved, via Jan Hoffman, from the U.W. model.)

During the Communication Studies’ GTA orientation at SJSU, workshops cover significant elements of the GTAs’ new roles, orient them to campus resources from a

faculty perspective, and encourage reflection and discussion around key readings and other simulation activities, such as microteachings, role-playing of case studies, and forum theatre. “In addition to microteaching . . . it is wise to engage new teachers in sessions and activities where they can confront the threatening and unfamiliar in structured and guided ways” (Fassett & Warren, 2012, pg. 135). Typically, first-time instructors are mostly focused on establishing their credibility as teachers, managing their classrooms, lesson planning, and combating their own fears (Hendrix, 2000). Using forum theatre provides the space for GTAs to “try out” new ways of seeing and being in the classroom. Developing personal mastery of their new behaviors and identities as instructors is a process that begins with an unconscious incompetence, which evolves as they work through uncomfortable and often difficult feelings of unnatural behavior, until they practice unconscious competence in their new skills (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991). Accordingly, forum theatre allows GTAs to decide the specific types of anxiety-producing scenarios and unfamiliar actions at the center of their interactive performances.

In a similar vein, the University of London created workshops were specifically designed to address consistently reported anxieties and concerns of the Graduate Teaching Assistants in the Imperial College of Science, Technology & Medicine. One of these workshops focused on role-playing a potentially challenging scenario in the context of small group instruction. Following the role-play, a group discussion identified the strengths and limitations of the exercise for improving their teaching (Goodlad, 1997). Qualitative comments made by the assistants conveyed the value that they took from the experience in regards to practice and providing a hands-on approach to their interpersonal

interactions with students (Goodlad, 1997). While role-play is a different concept than the interactive performance techniques used in forum theatre, the application of these techniques in the trainings at University of London takes a similar trajectory for addressing anxieties and concerns around teaching, as well as employs the same spirit of experimental and collaborative learning from those experiences.

As time goes on and GTAs garner more experience, they will continue to mature in their roles as instructors over time. Sprague and Nyquist (1991) described the development of GTAs in three stages that span their growth from students to beginning professionals: senior learner, colleague in training, and junior colleague. While it does take time to move through stages, GTAs will eventually feel the ability to transcend their own ego and defensiveness in order to best serve their students. Awareness of these stages shapes professional development exercises in training so that they can best serve the GTAs during orientation (Fassett & Warren, 2012). In that case, it should not be presumed that forum theatre automatically will serve GTAs' growth and help prepare them as teachers, but it begs the question of whether forum theatre might effectively play a role in shaping their actions and teaching philosophies in different ways. None the less, Sprague and Nyquist (1991) advocated that working closely with GTAs throughout the entire course of their development will also help supervisors recognize that they must navigate a changing set of relationships that develop together over time based on the needs of the particular cohort and context.

Consequently, supervisors need to consider there are diverse concerns GTAs should address so they can feel better prepared to teach. Gray and Buerkel-Rothfuss

(1991) recognized that research regarding GTAs' perceptions of their own ability is limited because the basis for which the GTAs judge their teaching ability is unknown. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) maintained that with a foundation of undergraduate education resting on individuals who have little or no prior teaching experience, it is imperative to continue to make effort to expand and increase effort to improve GTA training. Training that assists GTAs in acquiring the skills they need to be effective in the classroom may help them balance their conflicting roles as teachers and students as well as offset the lack of experience in the educational field (Gray & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1991). While there are several different approaches to addressing the multiplicity of concerns and needs of GTAs, forum theatre provides a different way to engage these concepts, both physically and cognitively, and that has a unique potential for helping prepare these individuals for their journey in teaching.

While my primary goal is to create a space for this community to share their experiences with and applications of insights from forum theatre in their work as instructors, I also want to explore the strengths and limitations forum theatre exercises have for GTAs. I am particularly interested in understanding how this exercise is working in their training. Therefore, what do their accounts illuminate? What might their experiences mask or camouflage about what they learned and are doing in the classroom following forum theatre? In what ways does this adaptation support and undercut its own stated goals? Above all, I would like to broaden insight about the parts of the exercise in which they may be struggling in implementation, adaptation, and assessment of forum theatre in hopeful benefit of future training, development, and

communication for this community of GTAs, as well as other communication studies GTAs, and less experienced instructors. Therefore, the following, overarching research questions were the focus of this study:

**RQ1:** What are GTAs' experiences with and impressions of the forum theatre exercises in their GTA training?

**RQ2:** What types of applications and insights emerged from forum theatre in GTAs' work as instructors?

As a GTA, I am uniquely positioned to explore from an inside perspective how GTAs perceive their experience(s) of the forum theatre exercises used in their orientation and training. Although, with this positionality, I believe is great responsibility to continually be self-reflexive and open about how I am directly involved, complicit, and contribute to this community because my relationship with them shapes my research. Thus, with a commitment to honesty and integrity in this process, I hope to provide a detailed account of their impressions and personal encounters this community of GTAs and GTA alumni from their perspective.



### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Every day I learned new things about myself from interactions with my students and my colleagues, particularly the other GTAs. Together we experienced the highs and lows that come with being new instructors. In our offices, we often asked each other's advice about what activities to use for specific lessons, how to handle challenging situations with students, and teaching in general. I also realized from the start of my first year as a GTA to the near end of my second year, my perspective on teaching has changed immensely. For example, when I was brand new and participated in orientation for the first time, I had so many questions surrounding classroom management, my own image to the students, and logistical issues, such as grading. I thought, "Do I tell my students that I'm a GTA? Will my students think I'm credible? Will they listen to me, or like me? How do I grade a speech when I'm looking for so many different criteria at once?" On the other hand, in my second year of training, I had different questions, such as "How might I help my junior colleagues? And, how do I make meaningful connections to the material in my lessons and best serve the needs of my students?"

In both years that I participated in forum theatre, embodying the variety of strategies to handle different situations that can happen in the classroom with my colleagues was very beneficial for addressing the shifting concerns and anxieties that I had. The actual rehearsal of trying these different solutions out in a way that I never experienced before boosted my confidence and provided me a means of seeing and being a teacher through a considerable exploration of multiple perspectives. I experienced a profound shift in the idea I held of theater as something you watch to one that can be

interactive, collaborative, and provided tools and strategies I actualized with my body and mind. Because I physically and cognitively experienced how these different strategies felt in my body, I also felt more comfortable with the idea of making them my own, should the opportunity present itself. And, even though I found strengths and limitations to the exercise, I still gained insights from participating that convince me of the value of implementing this in training.

However, I did not assume that my colleagues shared my thoughts. I started to wonder if they liked it as much as I did. “Did they find the same or different complexities arise with using this type of activity with new and less experienced instructors? What insights would they be able to share with me about their experiences?” As I reflected on how I would create a culminating experience that would bring to a close my time as a GTA and as member of this community in a meaningful way, I wanted to explore this session of our training more thoroughly, and give our collective voices a space to make an impact in future GTA training and development.

In addition to the fact that limited scholarship dedicated to the GTAs exists in our discipline, rarer is research that is conducted with and for the GTAs themselves. Sprague (1992) asserted that critically-minded scholars suggest research that is *with* teachers rather than *for* or *about* them (author’s emphasis) is necessary to prompt real change in the dilemmas inherent in their work. I found an opportunity for undertaking unique qualitative research that focuses on how critical (communication) pedagogy and performance methodology intersect in the context of speech communication GTAs’ training and development and potential to enhance future training of these individuals and

other novice instructors. In order to expand knowledge of how GTAs experienced this intersection and answer my research questions, I conducted interviews to provide detailed accounts of information not adequately gained by other means. Further, I incorporated my own experience through autoethnography throughout my analysis in order to help shed light on these accounts, as well as to maintain openness of my involvement in the community in which I ground this study. In this section, I will discuss how the methodology of autoethnography relates to the data, my involvement in the research, the method of interviewing I employed in my investigation, and the rationale behind my sampling, procedures, and analysis.

### **Autoethnography: Creative Accounts of Shared Cultural Experience**

In order to more completely articulate and to provide context for the role of autoethnography in my research, I turned to Goodall (2000). In his pivotal text, *Writing the New Ethnography*, Goodall stated that the “new” ethnography (also referred to as autoethnography) is developed from a writer’s creative narratives about her/his personal experiences within a culture for both academic and public readership (p. 9). In another way, an autoethnographer is someone who studies culture reflexively through her or his own lenses, actions, and experiences. This means the researcher must be living, reflecting, studying, interpreting, and writing it from the perspective of those cultural performances. In this way, I was absolutely positioned to accomplish this as a GTA in a study about, by, and for GTAs, but in true autoethnographic style, I continually reflected on and called attention to what my perspective shaded and obscured in these experiences, and acknowledged there is as much of what I could not see as what I could in any given

interaction.

Furthermore, autoethnography also sheds new light upon the mundane and amazing moments of our daily lives, showing that they are equally meaningful by the patterns and themes drawn across those moments. The fieldwork of new ethnography encompasses: talking and sharing with groups in their local hangouts, learning about their everyday routines and rituals, reflection on your own memory and making connections to these practices, making notes or tape recording interviews, writing representations of these experiences, and then reflection and analysis of the field notes into an engaging narrative (Goodall, 2000). However, it differentiates from traditional ethnography as meaningful insight is gained from understanding the writer/researcher's accounts of how s/he shapes (and is shaped by) culture intimately with and within the contexts of specific communities.

Similarly, Fassett and Warren (2007) related autoethnographic writing as a means to highlight reflexivity of the routine or ordinary times in our lives. In this way, this type of researcher demonstrates how s/he is at the same moment “. . . product and producer of culture, how the author's very (in)actions create and sustain complex social phenomena, including how s/he understands identity, power, and culture” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 47). As I maintained an open mind to my role in the (re)creation of cultural exchanges that took place and the intersectionality of power, identity, standpoint, perspectives, in my and others' narratives, then there was much to learn in, with, and from this process.

Be that as it may, there are many who are critical of autoethnography as good scholarship. Certainly, this type of writing breaks boundaries of traditional academic

standards of evaluation, which for some would automatically decrease its value. However, Goodall (2000) would say that new or autoethnography is misunderstood, and “. . . when it is done well, we can learn previously unspoken, unknown things about culture and communication from it” (p. 191). In other words, there are many things that we can only know from the inside, and autoethnography is the portal to that information in ways that far exceed “scholarly” writing. The professed scholarly or traditional academic writing “is disconnected from its cultural and institutional contexts . . . it is writing that dismisses personal preferences and matters of taste, ignores issues of sexual orientation, and denies the importance of the vast human landscape of emotions” (Goodall, 2000, p. 191). And, while autoethnography is not the main focus of my research methods, I employed it to underscore my relationship to data in a way that explicitly challenges and aesthetically illuminates my analysis.

Throughout this process, there were times that I struggled with getting distance on this topic. For example, I spent several hours in the transcription process with the interview data. Over and over, I reversed the audio and meticulously listened to make certain I was typing the correct words of my colleagues. It was difficult at times listening to their emphasis on certain words, particularly if they used inflections and shifts in vocal tone, and translating that onto paper. Often I would make notes about how the GTAs described experiences, use italics to indicate emphasis, and make side notes about how I felt each individual sounded. I grappled with the fear that I might hear something in a way that was different than intended. “What if I report that wrong? What if I take something out of context?” Yet, the fact that I took time to pause to consider these

questions points to care and sensitivity I had in handling this process and following the guidelines of the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Moreover, I believe there is also merit to not eliminating myself completely and foregoing comment upon the accounts my colleagues provided. In sharing their experiences of forum theatre, I also am included in the interpretation of the experience of it as a community.

### **Reflexivity, Positionality, and Self as an Instrument**

While there were benefits to my in-group membership for this study, particularly in regards to established cultural knowledge, degree of rapport, and personal insight for interpreting data, I was also aware of my limitations as an instrument in this study. McCracken (1988) addressed the potential strengths and limitations of the investigator's intimate knowledge of their subject and culture of inquiry. Although previous knowledge could restrict someone's ability to be objective and particularly analytical, there are extraordinary advantages for the researcher who familiarizes them self with a topic of interest (McCracken, 1988). "This acquaintance gives the investigator a fineness of touch and a delicacy of insight that few ethnographers working in other cultures can hope to develop" (McCracken, 1988, p. 32). From my experience of nearly two years in the GTA program prior to the start of this research, I had rich data to draw from before and after interviewing participants to aid my understanding. Under these circumstances, McCracken (1988) discussed a process in which researchers can also use their personal experiences with the topic to "match" the ideas or actions and even gaps in the information that they glean from their interviewees. By sharing short personal anecdotes or experiences with respondents, I found several opportunities for creating meaning in the

exploration of similarities and differences found in that moment, as well as my interviewees offering more information of their experiences. However, I realized that there is the possibility they shared more because they felt that was what I wanted in response to my sharing, but I also did my best to convey my experiences in a way that was meant to be dialogic and not elicit a response unless they wanted.

Additionally, I understood that listening was crucial to my interviews, especially in building rapport. I wanted to establish open lines of dialogue, to ensure the space for unity and disagreement, our separate experiences coming together in an active, meaningful exchange (Madison, 2005). Active listening requires that questions pertinent to the context or issue the interviewee is discussing break into their train of thought and talk (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Listening in this way demonstrated to my participants that I was present in that moment, which I also expressed strategically through sharing examples from my own teaching experiences. From a critical ethnography standpoint, the researcher should work to avoid gazing at interviewees as spectators and missing the opportunity to hear what they are saying in an invested, dialogic manner (Madison, 2005). In other words, researchers must work to be relationally and mentally involved, copperforming reciprocally in dialogue with those whom we work. Overall, the more I practiced empathic, reciprocal dialogue and actively listened in this process, the more I learned.

Equally important to this study was my continued commitment to transparency throughout the entire research process. I was truthful and open with my interviewees about the goals of this thesis, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity, and hopefully, I made that

apparent in my writing. I maintained awareness of the role I played in collecting and shaping my data. I knew that I could not erase myself from this research, but that was not and had never been my intention. My own experiences were intrinsically linked to this endeavor and also showed how theory is present and emergent in our everyday moments of communication. Naturally, my ongoing desire to teach and learn with and from students translated to this thesis work that explored and learned from and with my GTA community. Hence, in this thesis, I committed to research conducted by, for, and with GTAs.

### **Participants, Procedures, and Protocol Design**

In order to select participants, I inquired through online listservs of current and former GTAs from the Communication Studies Department at San José State University. I conducted interviews with 12 research participants, who were an equal number of GTAs who were in their second and first years (with the exception of one “first-year” who left the program after one semester due to personal circumstances) as well as former GTA alumni from this department. This was the number I believed data saturation occurred. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the central merit in qualitative research lies in its ability to provide understanding of “social reality in a specific context” (p. 109). Put a different way, the goal of this research is to not to generalize findings to an entire population. Hence, this group of participants is a snapshot of this GTA community, and each individual’s account established knowledge that expands our understanding of their experiences as new instructors.

Additionally, prior to contacting and recruiting potential participants, I applied for



Human Subjects IRB clearance. I adhered to the IRB procedures at all times when conducting interviews. I asked each participant to choose a pseudonym and maintained confidentiality for each of the research participants. I did offer to choose a pseudonym for them if they communicated uncertainty or discomfort with choosing one of their own. I obtained consent from each participant to be a part of the study, recorded audio from the interviews, and personally transcribed each one into electronic word documents, kept safe in password protected files. I based the design of my interview guide (App. A) on my two research questions. The questions are grouped in ways that indicate how particular questions address each specific research question. As outlined by Lindlof and Taylor (2011), I asked questions in a logical sequence in order to foster a sensible progression to the discussions.

### **Interviews**

Overall, it was my goal to achieve a broader understanding of both the constructive and limited ways the forum theatre exercises used in GTA training left impressions on us, shaped our development as instructors, and ultimately transcended our collaborative training in orientation into our teaching. In order to explore these concepts and answer my research questions, I invited my colleagues and alumni of our GTA community to share with me their feelings, perceptions, and overall reading of forum theatre in the orientation(s) they participated. I conducted in-depth, ethnographic interviews in order to provide a place for their voice, from their perspective, to become a part of discourse about this communication phenomenon. In-depth interviews created a space for them to share personal experience with the performance methodology of forum

theatre and what (if anything) they recall from those sessions in regards to their growth as instructors and whether or not they believe there were insights that prepared (or hindered) their teaching. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) explained that a major purpose for qualitative interviewing is to “understand the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations” (p. 173). This is the most compelling reason why interviewing is best suited to answer the questions I have posed for this study. Moreover, the GTAs and I both were at the heart of this investigation in our collective knowledge, worldviews, culture, and experience central to the inquiries I posed.

Other primary reasons for my choice to use interviews as a vehicle for my research included their usefulness for providing information not easily obtainable by other means, exploring how the GTAs create their explanations of their experiences, and efficiently gathering data in a personal manner. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) argued that “. . . qualitative interviews can be vehicles for exploring peoples’ *explanations*” (authors’ emphasis, p. 174). In other words, this method illuminates groups’ cultural sense making, as well as how they apply this to cope with challenges and solve problems they face. In order to answer questions related to how GTAs understood, processed, and applied lessons from their training experiences, interviews were the most effective way to gain these details, favorable or unfavorable. Furthermore, interviews also helped underscore the nuances of using forum theatre to support their GTA training in a way not observed by other means.

Admittedly, there were challenges and limitations to the interview process for which I thoughtfully prepared. At times, I patiently and delicately probed to gain more

understanding, and took great care with language I chose, in order to not interrogate or make the participants feel uncomfortable or shut down from responding at all. I did not want them to feel embarrassed by what they said, or that, as a fellow GTA, that I would judge them or report them as “bad” GTAs to our supervisor. Other issues that I considered were: the degree the interviewees remembered their experience(s), their generalizations of what they reported, their positionality in relation to their experience(s), the unconscious mannerisms or words they performed, as well as the ways they communicated social etiquette and cultural norms that hindered open expression (Madison, 2005). Even though these aspects of communication presented some challenges to the process, the overall experience interviewing my fellow community members was positive for this study.

### **Data Analysis**

In order to plan my analysis, I referred to Madison (2005) and Lindlof and Taylor (2011). First, I read the transcripts to completely familiarize myself with the entire collection of interview data. I grouped meaningful themes and categories that I collected in the field to make sense of the transcripts and best answer my research questions (Madison, 2005). I coded the data into reoccurring topics and key issues within these categories. Knowing that creating categories is not only about finding similarities, I allowed the themes to emerge in my process. As Madison suggested, when I came across overlapping topics, I closely examined, made adjustments, compared and contrasted ideas, and created linkages in the information.

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), grounded theory allows for logical

discovery within a system of organized rules and terminology and is guided by three key features: its emergent theory is based (grounded) in relationships between data and their categories, the categories come into being through a continuous method of comparisons, and their definitions change dynamically throughout the entire research process. Taking a grounded theory approach helped me to understand the categories I created, allowed me to note and compare the relationships between the data and the categories and the categories to each other, plus I maintained flexibility to change the categories as new data emerged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I found this approach most sound for my research because it emphasized the direct, personal contact with the evidence and the informed researcher's experience in the field. In this way, grounded theory is complementary to the autoethnographic accounts woven into analysis and discussion. I kept the emerging themes at the center of my analysis to guide my interpretation and considered my audience at all times. Above and beyond, this research opened a space for GTAs voices to be heard, with my own voice woven in and among the stories and insights they shared that are constitutive in our communication.

Subsequently, the chapters that follow are for and about the GTAs and their experience(s) with and impressions of forum theatre, both in training and thereafter. Their stories are the focal point of this work. I discuss their answers to the interview questions and indicate the strengths, limitations, and implications of what the participants shared. First I share the outstanding themes that emerged within the interviews, weaving autoethnographic moments throughout to clarify and enhance understanding, in order to provide a clear picture of the participants' collective responses. Next, I unpack some of

the struggles the GTAs expressed in the accounts that made a lasting impression. I finish with a discussion of the most commonly reported perceptions the GTAs articulated as more and less desirable aspects of forum theatre. Ultimately, giving intimate significance to GTAs' narratives not only pays tribute to their personal stories but also shows how they negotiate their experiences and impressions from an inside perspective, and hopefully fosters an appreciation of their thoughts and needs about their training and professional development, differently and with more practical potential than demonstrated by most previous research of these communities.

## Chapter 4: Results

I came to this research as a part of my own journey to understand and explore the development of myself as a GTA and where my story intersects with others in my program. Ultimately, I wanted to compare and contrast our humble beginnings as new instructors from our training and beyond. In particular, since I was influenced in vastly different ways by the experiences with forum theatre in my first and second GTA orientation, I began to wonder if that was the case for my colleagues. What, if anything, did we have in common about these experiences? Was there a foundation of knowledge, language, and culture that we made our own because of or that was shaped by the performances we shared in forum theatre? And, if so, how could I best illuminate our voices, create research that is by, for, and with my fellow GTAs for the future benefit of our program and other programs similar to the GTA program at San José State University (SJSU)?

I especially enjoyed engaging in dialogues with my colleagues throughout our in-person interviews. The stories they shared with me, along with their willingness to be candid and vulnerable, will remain with me long after this research study is finished. In the following pages, I chose particular moments that I felt best exemplified the themes that I found in their responses. I did not identify with everyone's experience, but I felt a kindred spirit in our collective endeavor to teach as close as we could to Freire's concept of teacher-student, students-teachers. I believe we are all still growing, and that was expressed by all participants, current and alumni GTAs. One of the biggest lessons that I am grateful I realized in this process is that sometimes we may be quick to believe our

lenses are providing us a clear picture of reality, yet reality is often obscured by our own perception in positive and negative ways. Therefore, if we enter into dialogue with others about our related experiences, we can effectively compare these lenses and reshape them together in a co-creation of new knowledge that helps remedy the distortion we had on our own.

Along similar lines, this community of GTAs and GTA alumni each viewed their training and orientation in unique ways. Their impressions of the forum theatre exercises were multifaceted and more illuminating than I imagined. While there are similarities in the accounts of their feelings, insights, and applications of their experiences, it would not do justice to lump their individual voices into one broad category. Several themes emerged in the dialogues we created together through individual interviews. I will focus on three overarching themes, weaving autoethnography through the intersections and deviations, in order to create a salient snapshot across the group's reported experiences as a whole. These themes also help answer my research questions: RQ1: What are GTAs' experiences with and impressions of the forum theatre exercises in their GTA training? and RQ2: What types of applications and insights emerged from forum theatre in GTAs' work as instructors? These three overarching themes are: navigating fears and concerns, learning multiple approaches, and emerging applications and insights. In this chapter, I will describe each theme, explore the GTAs' varied reporting of their experiences, and conclude with their most prominent perceived strengths and limitations of this performance exercise as a whole.

## **Navigating Fears and Concerns**

Overall, the forum theatre session of their training provided current and former GTAs the space to “try out” different concerns, anxieties, and questions they had about teaching, situated in an atmosphere of their colleagues, without the consequences of the classroom. However, as training is professional development, there was an understanding that all participants, to a certain extent, were accountable for their actions to their colleagues and peers (in particular the first-year GTAs were also evaluated by their supervisor). And, while the GTAs expressed that forum theatre was a positive, helpful experience that they enjoyed in their training, they did not find the same insights in this endeavor. There were commonalities as well as wide differences in their experiences, such as subtle shades of apprehension, expressed by some, about confronting their self-described “worst case scenarios,” while others experienced laughter and fun when performing in different anxiety-producing situations. For some of these GTAs, their nervousness about performing in front of others prevented them from joining in that much the first time they were exposed to forum theatre. Charlotte surprised herself when it came to participating:

I thought for sure I was going to be too reserved to participate in an activity like that because in the past I have found myself to not really appreciate performance and . . . I can recall getting up and trying different things several times. Me, somebody who at that point disliked performance, was not the type of person who chose to engage in performance at any point in my life ever was getting excited about this new process, and I think it was because I wasn't being judged on a performance. I was able to get up and try different things and see how it worked out for me.

Cassie echoed a similar sentiment:



I was mostly just really nervous, especially before my first semester. I didn't know what to expect then. . . . I literally had known everybody for a year by the time I was going in for my first year as a TA, so I should have been more comfortable, and I just wasn't. . . . So, nothing about forum theatre specifically left me thinking that I was too nervous to participate in it. I was just nervous in general. . . . And, of course, forum theatre is a very non-threatening practice. I knew that even back then. I was just a scaredy cat.

Cassie further described her thoughts about others' apprehension to perform in front of the GTA supervisor:

And, I was really worried, probably unjustifiably so, but I think a lot of people are nervous at that point when they present a lesson plan, about whether or not the coordinator and other people think that that person should still be teaching.

Rachel echoed this sentiment:

I was very nervous performing in front of my peers and even making mistakes in front of my peers that I didn't get to try things out as much. . . . And, I think it would have been more helpful for me if I had gone up and tried something. It was still really useful to see the different techniques that were used to fix different problem areas. . . . I didn't want to make a mistake in front of people I want to impress.

Orlando offered an explanation of this phenomenon:

Some of the limitations I think for people who are either not fond of theatre, or performance, or acting, who are nervous about that kind of stuff, or don't see themselves as performers, they may be reluctant to fully participate in the activity. They may not take away the same level of knowledge that other participants might. . . . For me I think it comes down to, if you're going to be teaching, you're going to be in front of the classroom. You're going to essentially be performing to some degree. And, if you can't through an activity like that because you're so afraid, or you're so nervous, or you just hate acting, or performing, or any of that, how can you expect to survive in the classroom?

However, many of the GTAs expressed that forum theatre was a space to confront their biggest fears and what they described as a "worst case scenario." Charlotte describes:

It's never going to be as bad as it's coming across in forum theatre. . . . So, I think that if you can handle it in the worst case scenario, once you get into the

classroom you should be able to . . . put an end to the behavior and refocus the group.

Veronica also described the impact this had for her, “I think it was useful because that’s your worst case scenario coming to life, and you already have been in the body of experiencing that as a teacher. I think it would be really powerful.” Lori further emphasized the benefit of having an extreme situation enacted in the forum theatre:

Some of those situations I feel were very, almost like worst case scenarios, and I know now that it could happen, but in reality it’s probably not. But, I have something to look back on and see, ‘Ok, this is how x number of people handled it, and so I have something to go back on.’

Some of the specific scenarios that GTAs explored in forum theatre included dealing with aggressive students; conflict between students; inappropriate sexual advances toward professors; challenges to authority, credibility, and grades; students with mental health issues and disabilities; and disruptive side conversations. A common theme expressed by GTAs was that these scenarios were often over-the-top, outrageous, and unrealistic, but not everyone believed this was negative. For a number of the GTAs, these extreme scenarios broke down fears they had, made them laugh, and helped to manage anxiety by prompting the realization that if these issues arose in the classroom, it would not be that bad. Frank explained:

I remember it helping a lot with, even though it loosens people up and people are laughin’ about this stuff ’cause you start to realize that some of these fears that you have are outrageous. . . . But, you also get help with some of these things because even though some of this stuff is outrageous, sometimes some things happen that you would never expect to happen. And, it helps you realize that there’s a lot of different ways to handle a lot of different situations.

Orlando found value in both unlikely and more realistic scenarios. He described:

. . . far-fetched [as] some of the scenarios may have seemed . . . when they actually came up, it was really nice to have had that experience. Also makes me think of when we had a scenario involving a grade and being challenged for the grade, and that was one my *biggest* (emphasis) fears. Having had the opportunity to go through that with the forum theatre, and then actually know what to do or say in that situation made it a lot easier when actually sitting down and talking to a student and keeping them calm. . . . In my head I had fabricated this idea of what that would look like, and forum theatre allowed me to prepare in a setting that was much more closely related to reality than what was in my mind.

In all honesty, the over-dramatization of situations did not closely translate to reality and was not always helpful for participants. Rachel described how this is true with her group's performance:

I think, on the negative side, our group was really, really extreme, and they did the worst possible scenario. It wasn't very realistic. So, it was a little harder to, to gauge those nuances, and there's so many nuances in the classroom, that you can't prepare for all of them, which isn't a limitation of forum theatre per say because it's just a reality of the way things are.

Veronica expressed a similar sentiment:

The part that wasn't so helpful, I think, was that it was so exaggerated. For me, almost all the experiences are the subtle ones are the ones that are hard to deal [with]. It's not hard to deal with somebody yelling in your class; it's hard to deal with the person who is silent or trying to be discreet and chit-chatting in your class. . . . That stuff was the stuff that I wanted to tackle more, and I felt like I don't know if it's because it's easier to perform an over-exaggerated problem rather than a subtle problem or more interesting. But, I feel we didn't deal with the more subtle problems that I wanted to deal with.

On the other hand, sometimes exaggerated situations performed in forum theatre proved fruitful as experience GTAs drew upon later, for example, when one "worst case scenario" actually happened during the academic year. In that case, the GTAs performed a scene involving inappropriate advances from a student, and when it occurred the very next semester, it provided multiple solutions for one of the participants to refer to when

handling what became a series of inappropriate, harassing incidents with one of his students. Orlando shared:

Of course, the actual situation was much worse than we rehearsed it in forum theatre, but I still think that at the end of the day, it did not necessarily fully prepare me but allowed me to have an idea of how to respond to that situation before it actually happened. So, I knew if a student ever approached me in a certain way, this is what I would do, and this is what I would say. Now, it didn't actually play out that way in real life, but I did use some of those responses that I used in forum theatre. And, I think it helped in terms of not being stuck in the situation, thinking 'Oh, my God. I don't know what to do. I was not prepared for this. I did not receive the training for this.'

In this way, pushing the limits of a situation worked to this GTA's benefit and allowed an embodiment of the experience to shape his work as a teacher when he later dealt with these inappropriate advances from one of his students. Accordingly, it seems there can be cases where extreme in forum theatre does not overshoot reality.

Other times there were deviations in the purpose of forum theatre that could not be predicted. One specific occurrence involved a lecturer who was not a member of the GTA cohort was not well received by the GTAs. He acted in ways they believed were inappropriate in forum theatre scenarios. Sonora described:

One of the concerns many of us had was, because we were so young as GTAs, that we would have inappropriate advances from our students, students asking you out, and that was the one that really stuck out in my mind because the [lecturer] I mentioned earlier, his response was, 'Oh, you know I can't. I know I can't go out with you now, but you know once the semester's over let's hook up.' And, he was serious though. So, we [GTAs] look at each other and I think to myself, that I still don't think that's ok. . . . So, I remember someone stepped in and did it differently, and there it was that extreme example of what I consider wrong; I would not do that, and then we got a range of a couple different responses.

Maria also mentioned the same lecturer when reporting her experiences with forum theatre, and what actions the GTAs took to regain agency in the session:

When he was in the role of the teacher, he was saying that all the women want to take his class because he's so handsome, and so the women GTAs at the time . . . swapped out for the role of the teacher, and we kind of tried to show him how he should be conducting himself. We were worried that . . . if he was going to conduct himself like this in GTA training . . . how he was going to conduct himself in our offices? And, so we tried to play out some of those scenarios, and that ended up being kind of funny. But, it was just also a really, really exhausting at the same time because he was just so arrogant and so just mean about some of the ways that he talked to women.

This was a case in which the forum theatre sessions took some unexpected turns by the GTAs using the exercise as a vehicle for teaching another participant a lesson of their own. Cassie further described how she witnessed a few GTAs using forum theatre to act out personal struggles they experience when teaching:

I know that people often used it as a way to express frustration about past teaching experiences, as a way to kind of bring that issue to light, and then say 'This is not the way that I should do things in my classroom, I saw it somewhere else, and, you know, I wanted to kind of like act out my frustration at that thing happening, but that's never going to happen in my classroom.'

Although these experiences were out of the ordinary, the fact that they surfaced in the interviews points to the implications of participants who act in ways considered counterproductive to the process. Not only did they present challenges for those performing with them, but these individuals upset the dynamic of the group as well, leading some to feel uncomfortable and potentially unwilling to participate.

While some GTAs seemed to take these anomalies in stride, choosing to learn "what not to do" from these unusual scenarios and accepting them as unrealistic, others write these off as unhelpful and frustrating. Sam's take on a different out of the ordinary scenario involving a conflict over a racist comment that quickly and unexpectedly escalated went like this:

GTA members that were playing student were not letting anything change their behavior, and I think that might've been a misunderstanding by some of the new GTAs that are in the program. They were not allowing any adaptation to happen because of the intervention of the teacher, so it got to the point where no teacher was really able to make an 'intervening change in behavior.' . . . And, there was a correction made by the people hosting forum theatre, saying that we are supposed to see how that particular behavior would change that actual situation. . . . And, that becomes one of the difficulties with forum theatre . . . allowing that to change or not, maybe that's a subjective experience. Maybe those students didn't feel those intervening things would change, so they didn't change their behavior.

Veronica took on the role as instructor in this situation, and was unhappy with her experience:

I just didn't feel it was effective. . . . It just felt like an unsafe space and . . . if somebody is not changing for you, you're like, 'Oh, they didn't change for me. Are they saying that I'm a terrible teacher? Are they trying to haze me and say that my teaching style is not effective?' . . . And, maybe it was because I was one of the first ones to address it with the people who were acting out, but I felt an uncomfortable forum experience. . . . I still learned a lot from it, but it just seemed a little bit less productive when the participants weren't changing.

As a member of the group of GTAs who performed in this scenario, Rachel stated her perspective:

I know I remember with the group I was in; it was a fight that broke out in class, hate speech was involved, and almost I think it almost escalated to physical violence. And, I think I was told it would never, ever get that bad.

Lucy offered that there may have been some confusion about how participants and audience members were expected to act in this case:

There was an argument that had broken out, and so, I think in terms of like having more clarity in what the audience is supposed to be doing. 'So, are they supposed to give a little bit? Are they supposed to respond? Or, are they supposed to not be responsive?' So, I think the first couple of them were a little bit rough for those who had never done forum theatre before, that we weren't sure how we were supposed to respond.

In regards to situations such as this, Sam expressed his understanding of the process of forum theatre:

So, if you don't allow it to change your behavior, we [the group of participants] don't get the benefits of understanding the forum theatre, and the different approaches, and how they yield different results. I thought that was the purpose of this, to test out different approaches to situations that we might be nervous about having in the classroom and see how different teachers approach that. . . . And, I found that one particular situation not helpful to what I would consider the basis of bringing forum theatre into GTA training.

Consequently, a conclusion might be drawn that if everyone is not on the same page before the action begins, the scenarios may not run as smoothly as expected. However, this has also not been detrimental to the learning process.

In the end, most of the GTAs who were present for these particular deviations from the intended forum theatre process put these instances in perspective and did not let them detract from the opportunity to glean insight from other situations they explored together. I was present for this scenario in which the fight was performed and not adapted as different GTAs assumed the role of the teacher, and it was clear that it was just on the wrong track. I waited for a break in the action, raised my hand, and asked the facilitator, Keith, "If my understanding of actions for the participants is correct, aren't the roles supposed to adapt and change as different teachers step into the scene to try a new solution?" I was nervous to ask because I had just read Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* and did not want to misconstrue his vision of forum theatre, nor Keith's facilitation by asking a question. Yet, I did not think the instructions came across as clearly as they did my first year of participation. I wondered if the other second-year GTAs felt similarly at the time, or was I reading into everything I was observing? The other experienced GTAs,

lecturers, and I could have easily taken our knowledge from our previous experience with the forum theatre as understood and not fully prepared the first years for what they were about to do. I think there is a shared responsibility for all of us in a collaborative exercise like forum theatre, and as good colleagues, to make sure that everyone is clear about instructions and purpose because the entirety of the experience affects and influences us all. In this situation, the constitutive qualities of communication are apparent.

Furthermore, the theme in such sticking points in this particular session demonstrates that the environment for forum theatre needs to be a place where everyone feels they are safe to make mistakes, ask questions, and take chances. Without a safe space to rehearse through concerns, the integrity of the exercise is in jeopardy of intensifying pre-existing or creating new anxieties for participants. However, there were GTAs who already believed forum theatre provided such a place to feel comfortable.

Cassie said:

I think forum theatre really provides that kind of open, welcoming, ‘This is a safe-ish space, you can be comfortable in, you can make mistakes, and it’s ok to make mistakes, some mistakes.’ And, to talk about, you know, why that’s a good thing, why that’s a bad thing, why you may not want to do that, and why you might want to do it. It’s a place where it’s ok to talk through mistakes without actually making them out there. Uh, so in that way I think it’s really useful.

Orlando agreed:

I felt like it was a safe space, and all of my peers were inviting. No one was critical of anyone’s performance up there, or the way that anyone responded to any of the scenarios. As a matter of fact, I felt like everyone was extremely supportive and even offering additional solutions to how to deal with certain problems.

Rachel described the idea of a safe space that forum theatre provided:



It gives you that safety cushion for trying out new things, but because it was under the preview of my colleagues and colleagues who have already done it for a year, I didn't want to seem foolish, or like I shouldn't be a teacher. And, so I think in my mind there was a huge potential for failure, and it wasn't worth the risk. This year I may participate more, but I don't know; I think in theory it's a great idea, a lot of it depends on the dynamic of the people who are participating in it too.

Likewise, the GTAs stressed the importance of a debrief, following the various scenarios acted out in the forum theatre session. According to Fassett and Warren (2012), the debrief is intended to be a platform for discussing the feelings that occurred in the process, the insights gleaned, and the information that the GTAs feel they still need to obtain following the experience. Several GTAs emphasized the importance of the discussion aspect of forum theatre. It helped them more fully appreciate what happened in each performance, as well as to provide them clarification and understanding. A few of the different perspectives were as follows:

CASSIE: I think that another great thing about forum theatre is the discussion aspect. It's not just, this thing happens, and we move on; it's this one thing happens, and then you get to talk about it. You really get to discuss things that maybe you didn't even know were really important to you and all of a sudden you realize, 'Oh, my gosh; they are. Now what do I do?' And, sometimes you just really need to have that kind of conversation in the moment to really see what's important to you and to really see again things about yourself that you really didn't know.

CHARLOTTE: As the person who's running the workshop or forum theatre, you should be aware of the time restraints and work through it in a way that would be beneficial for everybody. So, if that means only one group gets to work through their performance, then only one group gets to work through their performance, and you just have ample time to debrief. . . . So, maybe it's a paradigmatic perspective difference that some people feel the performance is more important and some people feel like it's what the performance creates, dialogic perspective, but I feel that it's more important that you get up and have enough time to try lots of different things, and then you talk about it and have that dialogue about it.

LUCY: I felt like we didn't debrief enough. I felt like everyone sort of had their chance to stand up and play the role as the instructor, but I feel like there wasn't

too much comment after in terms of what would be most appropriate. Or, maybe a professional stepping in and saying, 'Ok, these are other things you can think about.' . . . I think that didn't happen; it wasn't as prominent as I would have liked it to have been.

Furthermore, the importance of a debrief became even more apparent when the performances prompted underlying concerns for GTAs that they either did not know they had or were triggered by the events they experienced. Charlotte explained:

I honestly I think that this process for me brought up so many anxieties that I didn't know existed that once I got into the classroom, it was easy. . . . I'm thinking of the time this last year there was an argument going on, and the instructor was trying to stop the argument and physically put her body in between with this group of four girls, and they were still going around the teacher, trying to grab each other, and scream at each other. And, I'm looking around the room at all the first years thinking, 'I hope they don't think that this is what it's going to be like because I remember having these same insecurities [the first year]. . . . Gosh, this is what it's really gonna be like when I get into the classroom?'

Lori, a first year GTA, echoed this sentiment:

I was wondering like how many times these situation actually came up just because I've never taught before, and then having the situations put in front of you, and I was like, 'Ah man, does this really happen all the time?'

Hence, a careful debriefing can bring these anxieties to light in the moment and perhaps prevent further apprehension from occurring. If GTAs are encouraged to reach out for the appropriate resources they need post-forum theatre, such as counseling services, university police, their GTA supervisor, or other colleagues and mentors, then they can also feel more prepared should they come across similar scenarios in their classrooms (Fassett & Warren, 2012).

### **Learning Multiple Approaches**

Consequently, the application of multiple approaches to the variety of scenarios brainstormed by the GTA community in their forum theatre only indirectly addressed this

concern that Lori expressed above. Typically the forum theatre session of the GTA training attracts a broad range of participants, beyond the first- and second-year GTAs, and each individual brings different levels of experience to the table. In the ways that they handle the situations, the strategies they use, and the discussions following, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the frequency and severity of most anxieties and concerns based on the contributions from the participants. Thus far, the GTAs reported performing both “over the top” as well as routine types of situations in which they felt anxiety that they face in the classroom. And, as extreme as certain situations were, there is no clear ruling out of any specific challenging situation or concern that could occur while teaching. Fassett and Warren (2012) emphasize that what is most important at this stage of development for the instructors is that everyone present experiences a myriad of strategies for addressing a wide variety of concerns and situations. Therefore, this is precisely why generating a plethora of methods or “tools” to add to their repertoire is a useful outcome of the forum theatre experience.

I especially appreciated that the adaptation of forum theatre for GTA training provided us with different opportunities, not only to act through and embody different approaches to handle our concerns around teaching, but we saw and created new solutions with others. It showed me that teaching doesn't have to be a solitary activity, and that became especially important for me to recall in moments when I felt alone throughout these past four semesters as a new instructor. Before I started teaching, I could not completely envision how or what to do in a given anxiety-producing situation, and forum theatre was a means to realize, “So, there are many solutions that these other

people have. I can see there are several ways to look at each challenge as they come.”

Maria shared her thoughts:

It allowed me to think about things from multiple perspectives. So, I got it from the instructor perspective, from a bystander perspective, from a student perspective, or whoever else was involved in that skit. I was really able to think about not just how I would react, but the message the communication that other people in that scenario would receive. So, if I was the instructor, not just what I'm telling the student, but how I'm telling it to them, and the message that they're getting, not just the words that I would use if I felt threatened. If I had a situation where I might lose face or a face-threatening situation, it wasn't just about me putting a stop to it because now I had to consider what was happening with the rest of the students in the class. So, it allowed you to think through those multiple perspectives and to engage in better communication.

Effectively, the multiple perspectives experienced in forum theatre allowed Maria to consider teaching from more of a holistic perspective than before. Further, she reflected a lesson learned about the importance of the language and the tone she now uses while teaching, in terms of how they affect her credibility and classroom management.

Veronica also had positive thoughts about experiencing multiple perspectives:

I think it helped me be more comfortable with knowing that there's different ways of handling the situation, and my way may be right or not right or effective or not effective at different times. And, every teacher can give you advice 'cause they're going to have a different perspective of how they would handle it. So, it also made it more comfortable for me to go to other teachers and get their perspective on problems in the classroom in general and how they would handle it. . . . But, doing the forum theatre, I realized instantly that everyone had something to contribute to your situation if you went through that. So, that was very helpful.

Veronica's response reminded me of a similar conversation I had with a colleague about the difference in instructors' approaches in the classroom. Essentially, he told me, "What will work for one instructor, will not necessarily work for another." In other words, because our strengths and limitations as teachers are unique, our bodies and perspective

in the classroom also differ. This is not to say that there is not wisdom to gain from discussing and experiencing multiple perspectives, particularly in forum theatre. On the contrary, Veronica's notion that others "contribute" to your knowledge makes an interesting point that this is helpful in terms of providing examples for how to address various situations in the classroom; however, it is not a foolproof template for classroom interaction.

Accordingly, Sam provided an interesting insight about the performativity and embodiment of the experiences of forum theatre:

The performative of doing it, not only embodying that particular approach, you are more likely I think to remember it and then be able to use that and reduce that uncertainty. Then you see multiple people trying to approach it differently [it] . . . gives you different perspectives of how people address that uncertainty, and so, it can stimulate, I think, some thoughts in your brain on how you can go ahead. And, you may even come up with different ideas that aren't what people approached. That's the beauty of the more things you see, the more you'll make connections based on your experience, and then you'll go ahead and try new things.

Sam's response surfaces the opportunity forum theatre provides for making connections between our bodies and our cognitive development of new skills related to teaching. As we use our physical bodies in a space, performing those actions, we lock that in as memory, both in mental and corporeal forms.

However, not everyone benefitted in the same way from these performances prior to teaching. Rachel, a first year GTA, shared:

It gave me options for seeing other people, other experience, just seeing situations, seeing them, the different techniques they used, and how we actually responded to it. It was good. . . . I think it helps, but there's no substitute for the real thing. I think you can learn the techniques that you have, but . . . it's like rehearsal vs. performance. So, in the actual performance, you're live; you're there. It's not as easy as forum theatre.

In this way, Rachel did not interpret Boal's concept of a concrete rehearsal in forum theatre from her experience. While she drew from the techniques in which she was a part, she made a distinct separation between the exercise and her reality following training. Frank offered a perspective that illuminated Rachel's account. He explained forum theatre's multiple approaches as both limited and beneficial:

You see that there are more ways than one to deal with these things that could come up, whether positive or negative, but then at the same time, you may not see or get an example or what might work best for you. So, if we're doing a forum theatre exercise, and you see a bunch of different ways to handle it, but maybe you, somebody, not *you* (as in me, the interviewer), somebody needs, needed to see a way that works for them. And, they maybe they don't get that.

Clearly, the exercise afforded GTAs the space to acquire new ideas to use, but they also realized the value of others' insights they could seek and draw upon as resources long after their training. While some approaches are more helpful for the GTAs than others, taking on the different "characters" and feeling out the variety of perspectives sticks with them long after the forum theatre session is over (Fassett & Warren, 2012).

Overall, there appeared to be an underlying theme in the heightened awareness that seeing and interacting multiple approaches to various teaching scenarios brought the GTAs. For example, Orlando described how these perspectives were enlightening for him:

I'd say the role that they played is in making me aware of the possible things that may surface when you're teaching and dealing with students because I had a lot of fears coming into this position. But, having the opportunity to see them acted out through forum theatre and seeing the way that different people approached the situations made me feel a little more comfortable about the possibility of being in those situations. So, if this ever happens, I know I can do this and this and this. And, I noticed the people who seemed to really have a skill set during the forum theatre, where they just seemed to stay calm during the situation or seemed to

know exactly what to say and what to do. For me, it was the mental of it; I even need to talk to someone about this, that's the person I can go to.

Lori also found her awareness shift from her perspective as a student to an instructor:

I'm much more aware of what my students are doing and saying because of that, because now I have to react. You know, when I was a student, you didn't have to react; you'd just sit there. But, now you have to react and address and handle the situation in a positive way, a learning way.

Along similar lines, Lucy expressed her evolving understanding of role as an instructor, including unanswered questions that came up during the forum theatre:

So, there were scenarios that we ran through that got me to realize like what my position is as an instructor and what sort of boundaries we have with students, and then being able to watch different people react to these scenarios. . . . I think it just made me aware that there are policies that we need to adhere to, but it didn't really clarify for me what these policies are. So that was a little bit difficult for me.

Despite the questions she had, Lucy still found that the awareness she gained in forum theatre were applicable to lesson planning:

Almost every single one of my activities that I build, I always try to think of scenarios, 'Well what could potentially happen? What could somebody potentially say? Or, how would I answer this?' So, I think maybe sometimes I'm even more thoughtful than I should be. I think sometimes I should just let things happen, but I feel like I am now aware that there are multiple different things that could happen in the classroom, and that I have to be prepared for that.

As an alum of the program, Cassie's perspective following involvement in four different forum theatre sessions in GTA training was much different. She pointed out that there is a limitation to the awareness that the scenarios can have for GTAs and other instructors:

I think that the new GTAs have a lot to learn, and they can learn a lot from the experiences of their first year, of their second-year GTA mentors, but that there's kind of . . . a little bit of a saturation limit, something where along the lines of some things that happen to second-year TAs don't happen to everybody. Sometimes they're really unique experiences that some of them are really good,

some of them are really bad, but they don't happen to all the people all the time or to all teachers.

Yet Maria, also a GTA alum, looked at this differently:

Every year I think the same thing going in, and every year I'm reminded that I'm not the mentor, that I'm just a participant. . . . And, so, I feel like 'Well I've completed the program, so I should probably just help out whatever group needs more people.' But, that doesn't necessarily help them; I should go wherever I need to go and where I can work through some of the things that I might work through with some like-minded people who want to work through the same things as well too. And, that's part of the beauty of it, something that I'm reminded of every year, that I'm not just a classroom aide in the situation. I'm not just there to be a body that will run skits; I really am a participant just as much as first-years or the second-years.

In other words, the cumulative experience that alumni of the GTA program and the second-year GTAs have and share with their less experienced counterparts, appeared to provide a broader understanding of not only the multitude of ways that teachers approach pedagogy but the contextual implications of these approaches in specific scenarios.

Moreover, these accounts demonstrate that current and former GTAs are using critical pedagogy in their work as instructors, often as a result of the awareness they gain by integrating their experiences in forum theatre with their teaching. One particular way this is apparent is in the realization and embracing of the fact that there is often no "right" answer for handling difficulties and concerns they have with teaching. The fact that new instructors often worry about having the "right" answer is also acknowledged by Fassett and Warren (2012) when utilizing forum theatre in their orientations. Sonora described how this came to light for her during forum theatre:

There's no necessarily right answer, right way to solve or to act in the situation, but here's a variety of ways. And, when we would each go up there and take a stab at it, I could see situations could be handled differently. And, the way I think



is the 'right' way isn't necessarily the 'right' way. It's not the only way. And, that helped me.

As a first-year GTA, Lori compared how she felt in forum theatre with how she felt once she gained experience teaching:

It [forum theatre] was reassuring because there was not 'right' answer to handle it, and I was always looking for the 'right' answer to handle it. But, then getting in the classroom and understanding, each class is gonna be different. So, you have to deal with each circumstance, or what you're going to handle has to be different too. So, it made sense after I started teaching that there was no 'right' answer.

Lucy described how she felt about the multiple approaches as a first-year GTA:

It helped me to understand that isn't necessarily one 'right' way to handle something. . . . You have to gauge what you're comfortable with. So what somebody else is doing isn't necessarily gonna work for you or your students. But, it just really helped me to see how many options I had available, that I don't always have to be seeking for one 'right' answer but rather trying various different things, and that each class that I teach is gonna be different.

Maria described how the concept of "right" and "wrong" answers can evolve over time.

After participating in multiple forum theatre sessions, she said:

When you're a GTA, you wonder what the 'correct' way to handle a situation is, and that's the beauty of forum theatre, is that you don't get that answer. . . . So, the more you do it, the fewer questions you have about what's right and what's wrong, but you have more questions about: 'I wonder what would happen if I tried it another way? Or, Maybe I should try this new approach.' And, so, the questions become a little bit more reflexive, and internal, as you do it. But, at the time you really want to know the 'correct' and 'incorrect' things to do in particular situations.

Furthermore, many of the GTAs remarked their realization that every class is going to be different, and the students will have different needs to take into consideration.

For some, understanding these concepts came with the recognition that there is only so much preparation you can do as an instructor and in life in general. Frank shared:

Forum theatre, at least for me, the way that I took it, I didn't take it as something that was meant to prepare me in itself. It was just a part of orientation that as a whole it was meant to prepare you as best as it can to be a teacher because . . . every teacher is different. Every individual is different. Every class is gonna be different. Every student's gonna be different, and there's no way to prepare for all the stuff that could happen. So what forum did for me, just like the rest of orientation, but forum theatre, I remember specifically having that thought, 'Oh, yeah. I can't prepare for everything.'

While we may not be able to prepare for everything we face in the classroom, there are important skills that many of the GTAs similarly described as helpful tools or a toolkit from which they draw on as a resource.

SONORA: It served as a kind of bank of responses in my memory, so that when these did occur, maybe even though I was a new teacher, I didn't have previous experiences to fall back on. I had these memories of ways that you can respond that I learned through forum theatre and was able to use those, as if they were my own experiences.

ORLANDO: I think it serves as like a roadmap or a blueprint for what to do if you ever encounter a situation. I think a lot of times people are placed in a training, and they're provided with a lot of information that you're just expected to memorize. And, you're just expected to know how to act in certain situations, and the reality is that unless you have that opportunity to try certain things out, the opportunity to make a mistake during the training, or the opportunity to maybe say or do something that you should not do in certain situations, you don't really know what you do well and what you don't do so well. . . . I think forum theatre, at least in my experience, from what I've observed and what I've experienced myself, it provides that. It allows you to be better prepared for those situations.

SAM: Forum theatre can be a tool that reduces that uncertainty, at least expectations of what the areas of uncertainty might be, and when it draws from the actual questions that they may have that's uncertain, I think that's the benefit of the tool there.

Besides providing a toolkit of strategies for approaching a range of teaching situations, forum theatre also played a role in shaping the GTAs' work as teachers. While individual insights did vary, there were topics that recurred for many of the interviewees.

## **Emerging Applications and Insights**

First and foremost, there are specific ways that each GTA internalized experiences with forum theatre. This ranged from a lack of memory of the earlier experiences by more experienced GTAs and GTA alumni to vivid recollections of certain incidents, feelings, and nuances of particular scenarios enacted during orientation. The following accounts are some of the prominent highlights from the varied responses I received when inquiring about the ways that GTAs applied forum theatre and performance in their work as instructors, what they learned following these applications, as well as how what they garnered from forum theatre as a whole has influenced their teaching and pedagogy. Maria emphasized that knowledge she gained from forum theatre is highly dependent on the members of the community who participate in the exercises each year. In particular, she remarked that even though she is an alum of the program and has been teaching for five years after graduating from SJSU, it did not mean that there were not new things that she gained from others, regardless of their level of experience. She expressed:

I think different insights I've gleaned have really come from the participants . . . [and] sometimes a first-year GTA will say something that really gives me pause. . . It's very cultural and we create our own micro-culture in that room for that particular time. And, what I glean from them depends 100% on who's in the room, and where we're going with it, how we participate, and interact with one another. And, through forum theatre, I think I've also learned to expand beyond the learning outcomes, or the objectives for that class, whether it's for the class session or for that class as a whole. I've started thinking about learning and education beyond course learning objectives.

Sonora also shared that there were moments of forum theatre that made her stop and think about the ways she teaches students. She said:

Some of the ways that I've routinely respond to students about, what I consider routine questions or inquiries, [forum theatre] made me question, 'Should those be routine for me, or should I question how I'm responding? . . . Should I change something about that?'

Suki explained how forum theatre influences teaching methodology and how it shaped her work as a teacher in her first year:

Forum theatre informs who you are as a teacher, and really I think brings out our inside 'cause you're not relying on someone else. Or, when you are, you're saying, 'I like what she or he did. I'm gonna take that, and I'm gonna use that in my class. I'm gonna write down that language that they used and try to make that language my own.'

Above and beyond these insights that the GTAs gleaned following forum theatre, there are many different ways that they applied their experiences in their teaching.

Indeed, the GTAs' experiences transcended forum theatre into ways not initially intended or obvious from the outset of the exercise. A few individuals mentioned that their conversations with colleagues about teaching strategies were a way they saw an everyday application of their forum theatre. Others were prompted to use role-play with their students in public speaking classes. Very few try to use forum theatre in the same way as it is employed during training in their teaching. However, some current and former GTAs used a version of it in other trainings on campus and amongst themselves to generate solutions to problems they had teaching during the semester.

In my own work as an instructor, I have not used forum theatre with my students. I try different types of activities with my students, and some of them include role-play, but often there is dissent amongst the students about performance. While some students enjoy the spotlight and getting to try something besides a speech in front of their peers, a performance based activity can light up anxiety for others and occasionally resistance to

the learning objectives of that exercise. In either case, I continue to keep working with students, learning with and from them, to accomplish our course outcomes, and that means changing how I approach activities, semester to semester, class to class. And, although I had not thought of my conversations with colleagues as related to my experiences of forum theatre, Cassie posed this as a question of the role forum theatre can play in shaping our work instructors through our interpersonal interactions:

I think forum theatre really made it ok for you, for you to talk to other people about teaching concerns and what to do in situations. Once that you've made what you think is potentially a mistake, it wasn't a role-play; it was something that actually happened, and you need to debrief about it afterwards. You go talk to your colleagues, the same ones that you did forum theatre with, and you talk about it. You talk about what was ok, what would I do if this situation happened again, and what do I do now? So, I think that was one thing . . . that what is the role of forum theatre after forum theatre's over?

Perhaps using forum theatre in classes is difficult for GTAs to employ without experience as facilitators. Only one GTA reported trying a similar version of the exercise in his public speaking class as a way for the students to work through speaking anxiety, after being inspired by working through the worst case scenarios with the GTAs in orientation. Frank explained:

I had them in their groups come up with three things that they were scared of happening when they were speaking. . . So, what they did is they acted out what they were scared of. They acted out their best way to um to uh to combat that if it happens. . . . And, then other students came up from other groups. . . . There were other examples of what to do differently to stop that, so like the same idea. . . . What's your biggest fear of teaching? It's like, what's your biggest fear of public speaking? Which was super similar, right? . . . I told them, 'It doesn't have to be the best, just something different. What else, what are other ways to handle it?' And, they took that, and by the end of it they were running with that. . . So, I helped them realize, I think, that some of this stuff that you're scared of happening is not gonna happen. . . . I used it in both semesters of my second year.

However, this use of forum theatre is problematic because it oversimplified the objectives of the experience and strayed from its use as a problem-posing pedagogy; in effect, it fell short of encouraging students to challenge their limited situations.

On the other hand, Veronica was prompted by her experiences with forum theatre to promote performance in her class in general, particularly by acting out different types of delivery for her students herself. She elaborated:

I have used more performance than I thought I would as a teacher, and I didn't quite feel comfortable about that when I was starting the GTA program before orientation. . . . And, doing the forum theatre, and seeing how productive it was to see something enacted in somebody else, made me feel like 'That would be useful for students. It would be useful for students to see that this is what a delivery could be going well, this is how it could be going poorly.' Using forum theatre in the orientation meeting helped me implement using performance in my classrooms in general, I think, just being more comfortable with it, and also seeing myself compared to other people acting it out in forum theatre. I feel like I do a realistic model of what it would be, or I could do an over-exaggerated model, and both are useful because seeing how both of those are utilized . . . was still useful. It was nice.

Lori also implemented some performance into her teaching in the form of role-play. She described:

I kind of do a worst case scenario for them. . . . And, I'll show them how to do an audience, like how to be an ethical listener in the audience. And, I'll take out my cell phone; I'll be texting, or I get out my book, open it up, and pretend I'm reading. Kind of have them, what would they do if I was doing this? Would they walk up to me, closer to me? . . . And, how they would handle that situation? . . . I have them volunteer first and say, 'Who wants to come up and see?' And, then I'll have students actually in the audience do different things too, kind of like we did during the training.

Consequently, a seed was planted for the possibilities for employing performance based pedagogy into their teaching in different ways.

For this reason, providing some guidance for using forum theatre themselves may

be valuable for some GTAs. Although he does not currently use forum theatre in the classroom, Sam expressed his desire for the GTAs to be specifically trained to facilitate forum theatre with our classes.

SAM: I mean we're teaching teachers through this tool. How can we take these same techniques that exist in forum theatre and move that into the classroom also? How can we adapt that to something that has less to do with teaching and more to do with a public speaking class, having them become better speakers? I think that was something that I was hoping there would be, a little bit more on using it as a tool. . . . If we're teaching public speaking, which is in a sense a forum for making change in the world, being able to speak publicly and do it well and to persuade is an ability to make change in the world happen, and if forum theatre is rooted in that same idea . . . how can we use this in the classroom more so also?

Veronica shared a similar sentiment:

. . . how we could implement that in our class? If we could get our students to do forum theatre, was there anything we should be cautious about or not do or do? Kind of, guidelines for enacting forum theatre in our class, if we chose.

Hence, the desire for using forum theatre as a vehicle for rehearsing and dialoguing around multiple solutions for problems they face teaching extends well beyond their training.

Over the years that Fassett has used forum theatre at SJSU, there have been times when parts of the regular, biweekly staff meetings included space for some supervised forum theatre work. However, in the fall semester in 2012, GTAs conducted forum theatre in their meeting on a day that Fassett was not in attendance. Suki shared her perspective of the experience:

It was the middle of the semester . . . and Deanna wasn't there; she had a meeting, and so it was kinda student run. We had another second year running it, asking some of the questions that Deanna had wanted us to do, and then this first year . . . came with a problem. She had no idea how to handle the situation. And, people were trying to give her some kind of answer, but she didn't seem very happy with the answers. And, then we weren't all sure on the answers that we were giving

her. I think because we didn't have a Deanna who we could turn to. And, so I suggested that we do a forum theatre and have the first year work it out for herself. We did it, went to two or three rounds. She seemed to be a lot more comfortable afterwards. She was smiling again, and I'm not sure if her question was answered, but it seemed to me that she was happy with exactly how it went.

From Rachel's perspective, this application of forum theatre did not go as smoothly:

When we did it as a group, our own forum theatre, a couple people ended up taking over. . . . I didn't feel like had a chance to speak my mind, and it was actually really, really upsetting for me. . . . It sounds really dramatic, but I didn't feel like I got the chance to speak. . . . We decided to do forum theatre because we were having trouble addressing language, the chapter on language, and so, we wanted to know how to deal with students who overtly said racist, sexist, and homophobic things in the class and how to turn that to be more positive, to be a learning opportunity. And, I think the problem arose because maybe some of us forgot how it was supposed to go. It wasn't clear who was acting and who was observing, or who were the facilitators, if they were or were not actors, or who was the teacher role. . . . There was some confusion about when the start and stop began, and so we were all on different pages, and that at least for me, it made me really not want to go up and participate. . . . I was nervous, and then at the end it almost snowballed into where a couple people were dominating the conversation about what you should do. . . . I remember trying to say something, not having the ability to follow up with it, and feeling really unheard.

Yet, Veronica had a different opinion:

When we did it in our staff meetings, trying to get multiple ideas and perspectives with problems in the classroom, that was really useful, and I think we should do that more when we're talking about problems that we go through, actually acting it out and seeing it makes a huge difference.

The lack of consensus about how forum theatre worked in this staff meeting run only by the GTAs is an interesting and significant point. Thus, there is no distinct way to determine if this was an anomaly or if there are fundamental issues with using forum theatre unsupervised or without a trained facilitator.

However, there were other instances in which forum theatre was employed by current and former GTAs and lecturers: in the COMM Center on campus for training



coaches and in a Peer Mentor program. Much like the GTAs working through their concerns about teaching, the undergraduate participants in these trainings were able to have a space to rehearse situations and anxieties they had about dealing with students who would come to them for services in those contexts, prior to actually starting in those positions as coaches and mentors themselves. Orlando spoke about how forum theatre went in the mentorship program he oversees:

We will have the mentors volunteer to go up and sit down and start having a conversation with their mentee as if as they normally would during the school year, once the school year starts. And, through that, they start to extract certain information because it's something we expect them to do: ask your mentee how they're doing, how are their grades, and all these various things that often times personal issues start to surface. . . . Really getting them to think quickly on the spot of how they would respond to something like that. And, we'll often have the mentors rotate and have different people deal with the same situation, responding differently, and providing each other feedback and the opportunity to say, 'You know, I would send them here. Think about these kinds of resources.' And, I find that at least this past year, it seemed to work really well because that was one of the things that a lot of the mentors said really helped them in thinking of 'If my mentee did ask this, how would I respond?' And, for quite a few of them, once those situations actually came up, they actually felt like they were better prepared to handle those situations.

In this case, the application of a version of forum theatre appears successful. Yet, it conflated forum theatre with role-play, therefore minimizing the goals of the experience. Thus, misappropriations like this demonstrate how this combination reduces the meaning of Boal's theoretical framework and puts it in jeopardy of being lost altogether.

Likewise, the COMM Center in the Communication Department also has employed forum theatre to help prepare their coaches during their training. Although, in this context, the forum theatre was executed in a much shorter period of time because the overall training the COMM Center allots for their employees is over the course of one-

two days, unlike the fifty hours of intensive training used with the GTAs. Sonora provided a brief overview:

We've been using it since we started. . . . And, we run it just like at GTA training. And, the students at the end of the semester will say that it helped them out tremendously because we stress, 'There's no one right answer, no one right way to respond.' . . . It helps us because then we know, here's what they're having anxiety about, possible regarding what they're going to be doing and it's not necessarily things that I would've thought about because now, since I've been teaching for a while. . . . I feel like it's helped them the same way it's helped me because if they have never had any of these experiences, it helps give them something to fall back on.

Yet, for all the benefits that it appeared to provide the undergraduates in the COMM Center's training, Charlotte also articulated some concern for the limited time that was given to their forum theatre exercise, particularly the debrief. She explained:

In some ways, I think that because we only have an hour to do it . . . we don't have enough time to debrief it. And, that is a very, very big concern of mine. . . . We're working so quickly through the process that we push more the performance than we do the debrief, and I think that if we were to get through and have a really good debrief than it would be better than getting through three performances and not debriefing any of them.

Accordingly, this illustrated the GTAs' recurring concern for a detailed discussion following their forum theatre as well.

Above all, the application of experiences and insights from forum theatre by GTAs across contexts functioned successfully in building confidence for the participants and, subsequently, their students. For example, Veronica's use of performance in her teaching showed her students' capacities for expanding themselves as academics, growing as learners and researchers. Cassie felt as though she could more effectively draw upon bad days as learning experiences, as just one way to approach a situation, and that the next time would be different. She explained:

I can use that confidence to display it to [students], and then they kind of pick up on it and say ‘Well, she says it’s ok; then, it’s going to be fine.’ So, that’s a lot of just you have to experience things multiple times and every time might be a little bit different, but that all kind of adds up to your experience. So, I’m in no way finished learning new things about teaching, and I think in that way it’s very similar to forum theatre.

For Cassie, reflection on forum theatre taught her that making mistakes in teaching is not the end of the world; it can help teach you that teaching is relational.

In my first experience with forum theatre, I was terrified and intimidated by the thought of performing in front of my colleagues after being somewhat “hazed” during the microteaching activity the day before. I was more nervous about teaching, and I had never heard of such an exercise. In all honesty, I struggled with the concept of interactive performance as opposed to role-playing. Yet, the idea became clear once explained by our expert facilitator, Keith Nainby. After I understood that this was an opportunity to “try out” different strategies for potential difficulties that we could face as teachers and actually feel it with my body, I felt much more comfortable. I hesitated to jump into the stage as a teacher at first, trying to absorb as much as I could watching others, learning from others’ experience and contributions. When I did participate and try my hand with various solutions, physically and cognitively practicing what I might do, I didn’t feel completely satisfied with the ways that I handled the scenarios. Yet, I loved that this was a space where we did get to experience such a variety of outcomes and perspectives for a plethora of disconcerting issues about teaching. I immediately updated my Facebook status with an elated post about how much I loved forum theatre. Thus, without knowing it at the time, these experiences would be inspiration for this research study.

## **Strengths and Limitations**

Admittedly, no communication interaction or activity is without both strengths and limitations. I knew that other GTAs' experiences in the forum theatre I first participated in would vary from my own. Furthermore, the experiences of GTAs in previous and future forum theatre sessions would also be both similar and different than mine. While some researchers may consider a sample of twelve members of the GTA community (including current and alumni) small and not representative of the population, interviewing a cross-section of the group and engaging in in-depth dialogues about their experiences provides the discipline a broader understanding of this aspect of their orientation from their perspective and with the strength of their voices. Therefore, these individuals' candid responses to my questions present a picture of these exercises that include conclusions they have about the positive points and shortcomings of the forum theatre they participated in and the experience as a whole.

One of the most widely agreed upon strengths of forum theatre by the group was the facilitator, Keith Nainby. His style was described as friendly, sincere, welcoming and non-threatening, which helped to open the GTAs up to the exercise, particularly if it was the first encounter with performance work of this sort. However, the importance of a competent facilitator who is well versed in the theories of Boal and performance-based pedagogies was also a theme among interviewees. Cassie emphasized, "You are the responsible party over the situation and you're responsibility is over like each participant's physical and mental well-being." Further, if there are situations brought up that could be emotionally damaging or traumatizing in some way to any of the

participants, it may be wise for the facilitator to recognize and possibly discourage those from being acted out in the forum theatre. Additionally, facilitators may want to be aware of the dynamics of the group members. If there are conflicts that exist between participants prior to forum theatre, they may not conduct themselves in a manner that is appropriate for the situations at hand. Overall, the facilitator needs to provide adequate framing before the exercises and a thorough debrief afterwards to help ensure that the entire process is meaningful long after the exercises have finished. In short, this can help new instructors discuss and understand how to use what they learn from this emotional and physical experience to discern what pedagogy is applicable for handling these types of challenges that are a part of teaching (Fassett & Warren, 2012).

In general, the versatility of forum theatre was applauded. Whether it is used for with students and teachers in the classroom or other types of working professionals in trainings, many of the individuals expressed that they felt it could be appropriate for addressing anxieties or concerns regarding learning new skills or negotiating new identities and roles. The fallback in this case is actually getting individuals to be willing participants in the process. As Lucy stated:

Performance is not everybody's cup of tea. It can be very intimidating to stand up in a room full of your colleagues and demonstrate something that you think is gonna work and . . . to not know what you're supposed to be doing and then you're just sort of trying to do it in the moment.

For reasons like this, it is especially important that instructions are clear and understood by all the members of the group. Ensuring that everyone is on the same page helps reduce uncertainty that could otherwise hinder the process. Although, even with clear direction, as Lucy pointed out, there may individuals that do not like the idea of

performance work, and they may not be open to the experience. Forum theatre forces all who are present to be integrated into the action, and many of the GTAs expressed the importance of open-mindedness and a commitment to their learning in order for the theatre to work. Therefore, if there is no incentive for the participants to be willing to engage, the exercises may be ineffective at that point.

Still, when strategically used for navigating anxieties in GTA orientation forum theatre was a vehicle for helping GTAs and instructors prepare themselves mentally for challenges they may face. Even if they did not face those particular situations they experienced in forum theatre, the GTAs and lecturers found value they could take away and apply in their own work. Depending on the amount of experience each had, their insights would vary and their concerns would change, but having a space devoted to exploring critical communication pedagogy collaboratively was instructive for all participants. Rachel summarized strengths and limitations for forum theatre poignantly:

It helps create possibilities that could be really helpful, visually seeing, and if you are so bold as to physically acting out and having that response. . . . It's not an exact mirror of what is going to happen in your classroom, and there are certain things that you can't predict. It can be a good fear prevention in a sense. I guess the only possible downside is if you do feel really badly in forum theatre then it could potentially escalate the fear. I don't know if it's possible to fail in forum theatre; maybe it is. I don't know at the same time, all the different possibilities that arise in forum theatre can help give you an arsenal of tools.

All in all, at least for new teachers, there is a possibility that there is a reduction of fears by embodying them in relatively "safe" practice space.

On the other hand, because some scenarios were acted "over the top," there were some GTAs who described a sense of even feeling over-prepared by the scenarios explored in forum theatre. While having a range of strategies to draw from following

these experiences was a strength they believed forum theatre provided, there were a few individuals who pointed out that this produced feelings of overconfidence in the classroom. Upon realizing that it was not possible to prepare for everything, but yet having some tools they could refer to, some GTAs simply prepared less or thought they knew it all (or could handle anything). This could be problematic if a GTA with this mindset is faced with a challenge that s/he is not ready for that jolts this confidence to the point where consequences effects his or her teaching and students. Further, the question of the practical applicability of forum theatre came up for some GTAs; they wondered if there were certain situations that were even worth spending time exploring in forum theatre. Thus, a potential limitation here could be spending time on scenarios that may not realistically happen in the classroom.

Overall, most of the GTAs articulated that the amount of time devoted to forum theatre was a limitation; however, this was divided in terms of how this was perceived by the individual. Many wished there was more time for each scenario, so they could generate more solutions and have ample time to discuss the nuances of those situations, the feelings they brought up, and implications of the different approaches used to handle them. Lori mentioned that she felt the debrief did not include discussion about what were the best practices for particular scenarios, and Lucy similarly echoed this sentiment with her own confusion about what policies and procedures should be followed in stickier situations or grey areas, such as if it was ever appropriate to touch a student (e.g. on the arm or back). As both of these GTAs are in their first years of the program, adequate time for them to process the concepts and strategies that are raised in forum theatre was

especially crucial to the instruction this activity was meant to provide them in orientation. Conversely, Maria pointed to time as a constraint in terms of all of the other important topics and activities that are included in orientation. She said:

I guess just in terms of logistics is that it takes a lot of time, but it's worth every minute of it. And, Deanna gives, what, does she give two, three hours or something like that to it. It's really good. There was one time I think she did it where we had to break it up over two days, and that kind of created a kind of a sense of awkwardness to it.

In this way, using too much of the already limited time that is allotted for orientation may not be beneficial; there may be a saturation point in what forum theatre could teach the less experienced instructors, and they may actually need to more experience teaching prior to participating.

In my experiences with two different forum theatre sessions, I felt more time devoted to each scenario the first year I participated, and in the second year of forum theatre in orientation, I felt like each was rushed. I did not feel like we had as much time before we were moving on to the next scenario, and I had not quite thought of how I would try the scenario that we had just been working with differently. I needed more time to think about what to do, but I wouldn't want to compromise anybody else's time or learning experience because I necessarily need a bit longer to process in the moment. I did not feel similarly my first year. I remember discussing the approaches and pedagogical strategies of each situation thoroughly before continuing on with a different performance in the first year, which was part of the impact it had on shaping my work as an instructor. In my last year, I was unsettled by the fact that the bulk of the discussion was truncated and held to the end of all the exercises, and the debrief was not as



comprehensive. So, I wonder if that is a factor in some of the first year GTAs' expressed concerns and questions they had following their experiences.

As I revisited the data I collected from the GTAs about the ways they applied insights and concepts from their experiences with forum theatre, I came to an important realization: implementation matters. How this exercise is conducted with its participants, and particularly this group of less experienced instructors, is significant, and it needs to have a strong theoretical emphasis in order to arrive at the true essence of forum theatre, as outlined by Boal. We may not all have understood that forum theatre was meant to fit into our training as a vehicle for exploring problem-posing. We may not have completely understood what using problem-posing in our instruction meant, or how each of us could personally use this approach in our teaching. In effect, this analysis became a deeper re-examination of my own participation in forum theatre.

Subsequently, I felt responsibility to convey through this research what I learned: without better comprehension of the theory that informed our practice, we would miss an opportunity to learn important lessons about teaching and ourselves. We might ultimately do our students wrong by providing them a misinterpretation of what we experienced devoid of its theoretical basis. In other words, we could walk into a classroom or another training on campus and think that it is a really great idea to do critical communication pedagogy and forum theatre to help students work through challenges, but without an explanation of how it is supposed to work and a comprehensive discussion of what happened, what was seen and unseen, and why that matters, we do them, Boal, and ourselves an injustice.

In the final chapter, I will detail the implications of my findings thus far. I will illuminate the challenges that may be faced with the modification, execution, and appraisal of forum theatre when introduced to academic contexts. While there are benefits, there are also risks, strengths, and limitations. Further, I will provide recommendations for course coordinators, GTA supervisors, GTAs, and lecturers who intend to engage with forum theatre in the future. I will also share some final thoughts regarding the potential of critical communication pedagogy in this context and the meaning that can be found when we take risks to go beyond our comfort zone in the name of professional growth.

## **Chapter 5: Implications**

Primarily, Boal's forum theatre is built on the supposition that theatre is the rehearsal for the revolution. The application of forum theatre in SJSU's GTA orientation serves as a way for new and less experienced instructors to work through anxieties about teaching students, cooperatively try out different solutions to potential challenging situations, and see and feel through their bodies as preparation for their roles as college instructors. This type of simulation activity differs from microteaching in the sense that there is no prepared lesson plan that is to be administered by the GTAs for the group. Neither is forum theatre a type of role-play, as all participants are confronted with having to empathize with others' perspectives and consider multiple approaches and outcomes of the variety of scenarios performed in the moment. Furthermore, role-play also does not provide the same concrete rehearsal for real action as forum theatre.

Therefore, it was my goal to broaden our understanding of this process and illuminate the insights that these individuals gained and applied following their participation in the forum theatre. In this final chapter, I will elaborate on the implications for adapting implementing, and assessing forum theatre for applications in higher education and academic institutions. These nuances are important for educators, course coordinators, and GTA supervisors to consider prior to adopting this practice into their programs. Additionally, I detail recommendations based on suggestions reported in the interviews and my own experience for setting the best stage for forum theatre in programs similar to our GTA community in the Department of Communication at SJSU. Lastly, there are final notes to other current and future GTAs and lecturers who may find

themselves participating in forum theatre in the future.

### **Adaptation, Implementation, and Assessment**

Admittedly, there is a risk that comes with adapting practices and techniques from one discipline, area of interest, or field of study. It is unwise to assume that the original intentions and goals of the exercise remain true to the integrity of its creator. Therefore, as Boal proposed forum theatre with the agenda to unmask power hierarchies that exist within the societies and cultures, what does this mean for adoption into academic contexts? Further, when employed in higher education, in what ways is forum theatre really rehearsal for the revolution? Would this mean that classrooms must become a site of rebellion or uprising against curriculum standards, the department, or the university itself? Along similar lines, Fassett and Warren (2007) described befuddled reactions from others to their using Freire's (2003) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* with GTAs in training; instead they faced questions of their decision to discuss how to problem-pose with GTAs, rather than spending more time on logistical concerns, such as grading. In the way that Freire does not necessarily translate fully to the specific space that GTAs and new instructors occupy (Fassett & Warren, 2007), the same concerns and questions can be turned towards the choice to situate Boal's theories in GTA and new instructor trainings.

As novice instructors grapple with the power they both have and lack in their respective positions, forum theatre does not necessarily translate how to navigate these concepts across participants. Forum theatre works to empower those who are open to the process, but if misused by participants, it can produce overconfidence in some

participants at the same time. In the sense that Boal (1974/1985) described the rehearsal for the revolution within theater as a concrete experience maintained “within its fictitious limits” (p. 141), the over-dramatization of potential challenging situations by participants serves to reinforce negative behaviors and produce unlikely assumptions about what could happen or how someone should act. In other words, “while he *rehearses* (author’s emphasis) throwing a bomb on stage, he is concretely rehearsing the way a bomb is thrown” (Boal, 1974/1985, p. 141); consequently, when GTAs act out their fears and concerns in worst-case scenarios in forum theatre, do these performances (or should they) meet the same goals as set by Boal?

Furthermore, while Freire’s (2003) ideas of liberatory pedagogies advocate for eliminating traditional, banking models within education, which is also concurrent with the basis of forum theatre’s applications by Boal, is this practice of freedom lost to conformity, at least in part, when presented to a group that shares similar fears and concerns? As different scenarios are engaged and the different solutions are performed, there may be a predilection toward the solutions put forth by more experienced instructors as the “best” or “most appropriate” options by nature of the expertise held by those teachers. If there is not enough time to allow for generation of an exhaustion of scenarios as well, voices may be lost in the process, henceforth encouraging conformity among participants who may otherwise have moved into the action.

For example, I felt this way in the forum theatre I experienced in my second forum theatre session. While processing the vast amount of knowledge we were co-creating in the moment, I also wanted to share a new solution, but time restraints

prevented me from taking a turn before the group engaged a new scenario altogether. I left feeling there were other ways to address that particular situation, only there was no rehearsal of them for which I embodied that day. One GTA, Rachel, described a similar situation of lack of power and feelings of obligatory conformity in a forum theatre facilitated by her colleagues within in a staff meeting. While she tried to voice her concerns and hoped to embody more strategies in the exercise, the others appeared to form more of a groupthink atmosphere that shut down her participation in the moment. Granted, there were genuine intentions by community members in both these examples that demonstrate efforts to hold true to Boal's (1974/1985) instructions for those proposing solutions to be on stage, "working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of their seat" (p. 139). However, what happened also illustrates the need to take caution that all the ideas of the audience and people are rehearsed and verified in the practice, so that no one idea is forced on the group (Boal, 1974/1985).

In situations such as these, where tensions and anxieties are present, facilitators especially should pay attention to sensitive subjects brought to light in the process. While there should be a sense of discomfort brought about by the exercise, as it is a vehicle for problem-posing methodology and an opportunity for personal and professional growth, there may be scenarios that trigger strong negative feelings (e.g. traumatic experiences or personal, unrelated conflicts with others in the group) that may hinder participation. On the other hand, newer instructors may only need to see and experience a handful of strategies for which to provide foundation of their own ideas. The idea that solutions should be exhaustive may not extend to application in a higher

education context, particularly if there is a time constraint that may need to be negotiated. Boal (1974/1985) maintained that it is not the function of the theater to present the right answer but to provide a way to examine all possible solutions. Therefore, the particular needs of the GTAs, new, and less experienced instructors, as well as breadth and depth of these needs to be addressed during training, should be taken into account when allotting time for this exercise.

Moreover, when adapted into environments in which race, ethnicity, and gender of the instructors are disproportionate, forum theatre may not appropriately extend to engage the diverse ideological worldviews these dimensions of identity in the exercise. Certainly, the landscape of higher education today is plagued by conflicts in class, race, and a variety of contradictory subject positions instructors must navigate. For example, Agee (2004) posited that teachers of color often have different perspectives than White teachers that are rarely addressed in research focused on the formulation of teacher identity. Further, Agee contended that educators should address what she refers to as the hegemonic mechanisms that reinforce limited ideological conceptions of teacher identity instead of defaulting to culturally neutral models of pedagogy. Although, “GTAs, in general, and GTAs of color, of transgressive genders or sexualities or classes, in particular, are very well suited to exploring these tensions as they live them every day” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 28). Thus, if forum theatre is employed as a training tool that shapes GTAs’ and less experienced instructors’ work, and presumably their identities as teachers, difficult questions around race, gender, and ethnicity need to be incorporated in order to better prepare teachers for the increasingly culturally diverse student

populations they will encounter in academia. However, while the complex intersections of teacher identity are somewhat unpacked during discussion of the solutions generated during forum theatre, there may not be enough time within a limited training session to draw out racial, ethnic, and gender differences that influence perceptions of and actions in the different scenarios enacted.

While there are benefits for new instructors to use forum theatre to move beyond role-play and experience a multitude of strategies to handle thorny issues that are inherent in teaching, there should be awareness to the actions that take place among participants. However, if the practice itself is flawed, actions that result may be flawed as well. As previously mentioned in chapter four, forum theatre is at risk for being conflated with role-play following participation in the exercise by well-meaning participants. In this regard, they may recognize their lack of expertise to facilitate a complex exercise for others even less experienced with theater techniques than themselves, yet fusing forum theatre's ideas with a role-play exercise might appear attractive and a way to put their newly created knowledge and confidence to use. Hence, there is danger for misleading new participants to take actions in reality without consideration of consequences and thorough dialogue about the complex underpinnings of the particular situations they perform.

Therefore, when instructors who attempt to use forum theatre more like role play, fragmenting their own version in their classrooms, they fall away from the problem-posing they intend. At that point, they are no longer practicing critical communication pedagogy (while potentially thinking they are), and may never arrive at the point where



they can actually get their students to discuss these questions and engage in an examination of the structures which have oppressed or inhibited them. Thus, equating forum theatre with role-play in this context virtually erases any trace of Boal's original theory and reduces a meaningful exploration of power, options, and action toward transformation to a simple activity.

Above all, as demonstrated by this study, the nature of forum theatre itself presents complications for assessment when utilized in a higher education environment. There are no clear cut instructions for implementation, as previously argued by Howard (2004), and therefore no existing means for assessing its effectiveness, applicability, or ease of implementation. However, as performance and communication are subjective endeavors, with guidelines for best practices, perhaps departments and disciplines would need to first outline the goals they have for their training and determine if forum theatre is appropriate to the needs of its members, after considering the implications presented. With every new activity we attempt, there are always risks involved, but there are also great possibilities for growth and reward.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Course Coordinators and GTA Supervisors**

With this in mind, there are certain implications and recommendations I drew from the dialogues with my fellow community of GTAs and GTA alumni. When considering an exercise this complex, there are a few particular aspects that require attention to detail. If course coordinators and GTA supervisors are inspired and interested in adopting forum theatre into a similar program for their students' benefit, here are a few things to take into account.

**Importance of debriefing.** As previously discussed in Chapter 4, the GTAs agree that a substantive debrief is important for completing the process and making forum theatre meaningful to their lives. A first-year GTA did not feel that the exercise was discussed enough:

I think that if we had more time and that we had more time after each scenario to discuss, 'Ok, so what exactly happened? What were things that were good? What were things that maybe you don't want to do?' So, being able to synthesize what the experience was . . . and that can kind of be overwhelming. So, to be able to sit down, debrief what happened, take some notes, ask some questions, and then move on to another scenario.

Indeed, Fassett and Warren (2012) have encouraged supervisors to pay close attention to the resources their GTAs might need for information and assistance; those sources may function as inspiration for using new materials to enhance their classroom environments. In other words, there are opportunities for growth by the community of GTAs, lecturers, and supervisors alike.

**Highlight teacher responsibility.** Additionally, debriefing can be a place in which attention to teacher responsibility is highlighted by the facilitator. This is not to say that participants do not already take their roles as teachers seriously, but they should be especially mindful of the power (or lack of power) they have in the classroom. As they are in a liminal space between identities as graduate students and instructors, they may grapple with how to appropriately conduct themselves in certain situations, particularly if they deal with students in conflict in the classroom. They must be able to step in if they see things escalate towards violence, at a point where there can be something productive that results from it. Moreover, because dimensions of power often mask themselves from our view, less experienced GTAs and instructors may

unintentionally mis-use the authority they do hold in the classroom based on feelings of over-preparedness and overconfidence they may gain from their participation in forum theatre.

Furthermore, if these new instructors decide to use forum theatre in their own classrooms without adequate knowledge of Boal's techniques and without awareness and self-reflexion of their actions and consequences, then they risk doing more harm than good in these interactions with students. Granted, Boal has been criticized by other scholars for a lack of detailed instructions or implications for using his interactive performance methodology, but it is still the responsibility of the instructors who employ it to be mindful of how their participants experience the exercises. Hence, GTA supervisors may want to put emphasis upon the complexities of facilitating their own forum theatre sessions.

**Increase trust with a warm-up activity.** If there are going to be participants who are not familiar to your current group of GTAs, it may be prudent to use a warm-up or icebreaker to encourage trust and rapport. There may also be some first-year GTAs who are completely new to the program and the school who could benefit from an introductory activity that would also serve to reduce some of the anxiety they might have in that context. While including multiple viewpoints into the dynamic assists in generating more solutions for everyone to experience, completely new faces in a space that can be risky and vulnerable for some GTAs might make them hesitant to swap themselves into an instructor role. Once the action is in motion later in the session, you may also want to have a minimum number of times someone can perform in order to

encourage more people to try different approaches and discourage repeat performers from monopolizing the stage. In every group, there are natural leaders, yet the focus must be on the collaboration and array of experiences.

**Hold multiple sessions throughout orientation.** While the current placement of forum theatre at the orientation at SJSU is strategically in the latter half of the week of training, some of the GTAs thought it might address their concerns in a more immediate manner if there were multiple, shorter sessions of forum theatre held periodically over the course of training. Maria imagined a potential set up of forum theatre in this way that could involve some practice of this exercise every day. For example, it might be positioned as a closure to the day, leaving participants with insights to reflect on at home, therefore providing a space for the GTAs and instructors to evolve skills gained through forum theatre over the course of training.

**Real time scenarios.** Supervisors may also want to work with their facilitators of forum theatre to expand the scenarios that are performed to include ones that did happen to second year GTAs, GTA alumni, or lecturers. There may be potential benefit to exploring how certain scenarios really happened, reenacting what the instructor did do, and then providing both opportunity to discuss why the original instructor handled the incident the way they did, the nuances of that approach, and envision how it may be approached otherwise. This may have value for less experienced GTAs or those who have not faced that scenario before. As Lori, a first year GTA, suggested:

It would be interesting to see if we had real situations that happened to real GTAs, and then have them explain to use what they did after, just so we could see so this really happened, and this is what they really did. And, it might not work for everybody, but this is what they did. So, not a closure, but a concrete answer of

what actually happened. . . . As a first year, it was difficult for me to try to wrap my head around all these different answers, what they did, at once. . . . So, it would be nice just at the end to say, ‘Ok, this is what they did and how it worked,’ kind of like, this did work in real life, almost like reassurance.

However, the same result might be achieved by exploring one or more case studies with the group either before or following forum theatre sessions.

**Pre-assigned reading.** If supervisors pre-assign reading of parts of Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* before the forum theatre, there may be less burden upon the facilitator to frame as much prior to the start of forum theatre exercises. This could be some heavy lifting on its own for GTAs, but properly grounding their performance work ahead of time may provide relative background that could aid understanding. As Maria suggested:

Because there’s a specific pedagogy behind performance theatre, you might be able to assign a reading ahead of time, so that you have a little bit more understanding of forum theatre. . . . [So] you already have some knowledge coming to the table.

On the other hand, the reading may also need framing itself, so that GTAs conceptualize how and why the forum theatre has been adapted differently for the orientation and training. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of Boal’s work could prompt GTAs to think in different ways about how they could apply forum theatre that are more in line with Boal’s intended actions of resistance to oppression through the theatre exercises. As Sam explained:

Teach me forum theatre and how I can use it as a tool for me in a new space, and then teach me how to use it differently for what its intended purpose of creating maybe social change or resisting, as a tactical resistance in order to get to social change. How can we use that in the space of students who are COMM 20 [public speaking] class students? And, how can we get them to understand this too?

With such a novel undertaking of the forum theatre, ample time may need to be provided to explore this application, and that may not be feasible in the short time that is typically afforded in orientations. However, this could be a special project or workshop that a GTA may want to take on in an independent study and share later with colleagues, or it could be a follow-up activity that is explored in a subsequent training or staff meeting during the academic year.

### **Implications and Recommendations for GTAs and Lecturers**

Accordingly, there are a few insights other GTAs and I realized are important to share with other GTAs and lecturers who participate in forum theatre in the future, chiefly: attitude is everything. In order to optimize your experience with forum theatre, or any type of performance-based exercise, you must have a positive attitude. While this seems obvious, an optimistic outlook can feel difficult to achieve when confronting anxiety is at the forefront of the activity. Admittedly, trying new things in front of peers can feel risky and vulnerable. Yet, as Cassie put it, “if people didn’t trust each other, and didn’t trust the [facilitator], it wouldn’t work.” Trusting each other, especially some of whom are strangers, is not easy, but if individuals keep in mind that this is a collaborative exercise, that everyone is a spect-actor, and all are implicated and exposed, it may help them begin to feel safer in the space. As Maria honestly explained:

There’s an opportunity for growth, and there’s an opportunity for pain, there’s an opportunity for it to light up people’s fears and anxieties. . . . So, I think it takes a commitment from everybody in the room to be willingness to learn something from it.

Therefore, participants must be open-minded to what they could learn, putting opportunity for insight ahead of any fears they might have. If they can stay focused on

how much the potential benefits outweigh any risks they might be taking in the process, this will help them make the most of their participation.

Furthermore, respect is also key to helping maintain a good attitude in the process. We do not have to get along or even like everyone in the room, but we can respect their contributions to the exercise. If we are already committed to keeping an open mind, that can assist us in suspending our judgments of one another in favor of respect for what we can offer each other.

### **Final Thoughts**

Throughout this process, I've realized forum theatre is a much more complicated endeavor than I believed after my first experience. There are tremendous benefits this technique can have for a group, particularly if they are in a position where they are confronting new identities and learning new skills. The application of forum theatre in an educational setting with participants, who are arguably more privileged in their status as instructors than they are oppressed, may appear on the surface to run counter to Boal's intentions for forum theatre. Yet, the spirit is the same; it allows a space for a group to collectively take charge of the fears that oppress them internally and collaborate upon multiple strategies to approach these challenges that are present in their reality in a productive manner.

According to Freire (2003), the oppressed are suffering from the systemic forces that are preventing them from seeking knowledge that will free them from a banking model of education. At the heart of forum theatre, there is the means to rise against this, to encourage GTAs and lecturers to generate ideas together, to fight the banking model in

their own classrooms, and to transcend the exercise by applying this new knowledge, these new strategies, in their lives. Forum theatre gives the GTAs an opportunity to engage in critical pedagogy and critical communication pedagogy. Once these ideas, the concepts, and the commitments are embodied in that space, the memories and the experiences of the exercise continue to be instructive. However, while forum theatre can be an empowering process for GTAs and new instructors, there may still be a need for further understanding of about how forum theatre is a problem-posing paradigm and not a simple way to engage their students in a performance exercise that is more like role-play than a critical way to practice pedagogy.

Likewise, the terms *critical* and *critical educator* do not need to immediately connote something that is negative. While that implication may make some people shrink back for fear of negative evaluation, the meaning behind those terms can also be reframed in a more favorable light. Fassett & Warren (2007) contended that “. . . ‘critical’ does not simply mean locating and naming the bad, the incomplete, the oppressive in a given instance, but also means considering the possibilities, hoping for and imagining something better” (p. 26). “Critical” in this way can be a locus of positive change. When combined with pedagogy, critique can be a way to reimagine teaching and learning in a way that questions our long held assumptions, the oppressive systems that perpetuate society, and strives to create new pathways collectively, in acknowledgement of the experience that each individual brings to the classroom. In this way, engaging critical pedagogy in the form of forum theatre can be seen as an opportunity to embody different approaches to communication and instruction in ways that realize the potential



of everyone involved.

Assuredly, some may not believe that it is responsible to challenge new and less experienced instructors to become critical educators at such an early stage in their training, particularly with a practice such as forum theatre. However, if we think about the term “responsible” in the sense of sensible or conscientious, this could be reframed in this way: Is it conscientious *not* to help GTAs realize their positionality and how that shapes who they are as educators, how they perceive their students, and the ways they interact interpersonally with them? I believe that the GTAs should be challenged to be as critical as educators as they feel comfortable, continuing to grow in this process throughout their teaching careers. An exercise, such as forum theatre, that promotes the embodiment of multiple strategies for challenging issues in teaching that these instructors can and often do face, when adapted with purpose and careful thought, will assist their professional development and self-reflexion process (or praxis, in Freirian terms).

However, it is important to consider the fact that some GTAs must be resistant to be challenged to be critical educators. In this case, the question comes back to the GTA supervisors, who must then decide if there is penalty or sanctions for not approaching their instruction from a critical perspective. Or, would there be space for those GTAs to simply abstain from this process? I am divided about whether we can necessarily separate ourselves completely from a critical perspective once we have been versed in knowledge of the practice. Furthermore, once we are aware of our condition as oppressors and oppressed, we are only perpetuating oppression if we do not push back against the injustices of which we are a part. Still, for GTAs who are still navigating the

responsibilities of their multiple roles and are uncomfortable developing their critical capabilities (as if they might feel they would be too “critical” of their students) while gaining experience as new instructors, participating in forum theatre may be a middle ground to bridge understanding between critical communication pedagogy and their work as teachers. Thus, supervisors may provide guidance and reassurance that doing critical communication pedagogy is a journey and a process.

In summary, this research demonstrates that forum theatre is not guaranteed to be helpful for everyone. Nor is forum theatre foolproof against misunderstandings, frustrations, hurt feelings, and even misguided applications. But, it does have true grit. The exercise is capable of teaching how to, how not to, and everything in between. This research shows the different ways extreme and mundane situations can prove beneficial for our professional growth. And, one of those most significant insights that can be gained for new instructors who use forum theatre, as well as those outside of the academy, is that there is no one “right” answer for a given situation; there are many ways to approach the challenges we face in life, and even the ones that we choose that do not go the way we expect can ultimately add to our knowledge and our personal and professional growth.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB Approval to Conduct Research



**SAN JOSÉ STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

To: Tiffany Harbrecht

From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D.  
Associate Vice President  
Graduate Studies and Research

Date: January 29, 2013

**Division of Academic Affairs**

Associate Vice President  
Graduate Studies & Research  
[www.sjsu.edu/gradstudies](http://www.sjsu.edu/gradstudies)

One Washington Square  
San José, California 95192-0025  
Voice: 408-924-2427  
Fax: 408-924-2612

[www.sjsu.edu](http://www.sjsu.edu)

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has registered your study entitled:

“Engaging critical communication pedagogy: understanding experiences of forum theatre in GTA training”

This registration, which provides exempt status under Exemption Category 1, of SJSU Policy S08-7, is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the confidentiality of the subjects’ identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject’s portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond January 29, 2014 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject’s participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2427.

Protocol #: S1302009

cc. Deanna Fassett 0112

The California State University:  
Chancellor’s Office  
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills,  
East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,  
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay,  
Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino,  
San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,  
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

## APPENDIX B: Agreement to Participate in Research



College of Social Sciences  
Department of Communication Studies

One Washington Square  
San José, California 95192-0112  
Voice: (408) 924-5360  
Fax: (408) 924-5396  
Email: comm@sjsu.edu  
www.sjsu.edu/comm

www.sjsu.edu

### Letter of Consent for Adults

**Responsible Investigator:** Tiffany Harbrecht

**Title of Protocol:** Engaging critical communication pedagogy:  
Understanding experiences of forum theatre in GTA training

1.) I am a student under the direction of Dr. Deanna Fassett in the Communication Studies Department at San José State University. You have been asked to participate in a research study investigating Graduate Teaching Associates' (GTA) experiences with and impressions of forum theatre exercises in their GTA training at San Jose State University in the Communication Studies Department.

2.) You will be asked participate in 1-2 individual interviews (each approximately one hour long) with Tiffany Harbrecht at times, dates and locations that are mutually convenient; these conversations will be audio taped.

3.) While you are participating in this study, you may choose to reflect on personal experiences that are challenging or unsettling. You may also benefit from and enjoy sharing your experiences as a member of this community.

4.) Although the results of this study may be published, I will take great care in removing information that could identify you in the final document or in any file, notes, or subsequent papers.

5.) I will not provide monetary compensation for your participation in this research study.

6.) Questions about this research may be addressed to Tiffany Harbrecht, (408) 218-2554, tiffany.harbrecht@sjsu.edu, or Dr. Deanna L. Fassett, (408) 924-5511, deanna.fassett@sjsu.edu. Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. Stephanie Coopman, Department Chair, Department of Communication Studies, (408) 924-5360. Questions about research subjects' rights, or a research-related injury, may be presented to Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President, Graduate Admissions and Program Evaluations, (408) 924-2488.

7.) No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose to not participate in this study.

8.) Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with San José State University or with any other participating institutions or agencies.

9.) At the time that you sign this consent form, you will receive a copy of it for your records, signed and dated by the investigator.

- **The signature of a participant on this document indicates agreement to participate in the study.**
- **The signature of a researcher on this document indicate agreement to include the above named participant in the research and attestation that the participant has been fully informed of her or his rights.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The California State University:  
Chancellor's Office:  
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills,  
East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,  
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay,  
Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino,  
San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,  
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

## **APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol**

### **RQ1: What are GTAs' experiences with and impressions of the forum theatre exercises in their GTA training?**

1. How long have you been teaching, and how many times have you participated in the GTA orientation training at San Jose State University (SJSU)?
2. Describe what you recall about your experiences in orientation.
3. Describe what you recall about your experiences with forum theatre in GTA training.
4. In what ways do you feel the forum theatre performances prepared or did not prepare you for the challenges/situations you face in the classroom?
5. What questions or concerns emerged for you from the forum theatre exercises in GTA training?
6. In what ways do you feel your experience(s) with forum theatre has or has not played a role in shaping your work as a teacher?

### **RQ2: What types of applications and insights emerged from forum theatre in GTAs' work as instructors?**

1. Have you ever used forum theatre exercises or performance exercises similar to forum theatre in your teaching? Please describe.
2. If so, would you describe the insights or lessons you learned from applying these exercises in your teaching. How did they help or hinder your teaching and your development as a new instructor?
3. Do you feel there are certain concerns or situations for which forum theatre is ideal? If so, what are they?
4. Do you feel there are certain concerns or situations for which forum theatre is inappropriate? If so, please explain.
5. What strengths and limitations do forum theatre exercises have for GTAs and new teachers?
6. How could we improve forum theatre as a part of GTA training to better serve the needs of future GTAs?