REHEARSALS FOR CHANGE

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The exercises, games, and techniques in this toolkit are inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* (*TO*), and can be found in *Games for Actor and Non-Actors (1992)*. They are varied and open to interpretation, but some of their main goals are:

- to build trust among participants;
- to exercise non-verbal communication;
- to remind us that the conditions in which we live are not unchangeable, and that it is up to us to change them. "*TO*, in all its forms," Boal says, "is the place where we rehearse transformations" to create a better, more equitable and just world. We rehearse change, *for* change.

The first section of this toolkit describes the basic trust exercises, a series of exercises and games from TO, and two techniques from Image-Theater. The second section describes tips for being a facilitator.

1. Basic Trust Exercises

The following three exercises are done in pairs and without verbal communication between participants.

1. Participants stand facing each other with their toes touching and holding hands. Without arching their backs, they *slowly* lean away from each other until their arms are completely straight, forming an inverted triangle with their bodies.
2. Participants stand facing each other a few feet apart with their hands up at about ears' height and slightly in front of (rather than completely parallel to) their bodies. Without arching their backs, they *slowly* lean toward each other until their hands meet in the middle, forming a triangle with their bodies.
3. Participants stand facing in opposite directions with their heels and backs touching. They *slowly* move their feet away from each other until they are leaning back to back, forming a triangle with their bodies. If participants feel comfortable, they can *slowly* squat down until they sit on the ground, using each other for support as they do so. Then, with their hands on their knees and pushing against each other for support, they can try to stand back up.

These exercises can only be completed if partners rely on each other for balance and support, which is why they are great to start building trust.

2. Exercise and Games

PERSON TO PERSON

Participants get into pairs. One of the pairs stands on the side and gives a direction to the other pairs, calling out two parts of the body that the other pairs need to join together (for example, "head to shoulder" or "hand to knee"). Once they complete the first direction, the pairs freeze and wait for the next direction. Two other directions are added to the first, so that each pair becomes tangled. After the pairs complete the third and final direction and stay frozen for a few seconds, the pair giving directions calls out, "find a new partner," and the game restarts with a new pair giving directions. The pair giving directions should keep in mind that, although directions can be (and often are) tricky to complete, *the game should not be a physical challenge but one that builds awareness*. Finally, participants are not allowed to speak except when giving directions.

Boal calls this an "integration game," indicating that one of its purposes is to bring participants together in a playful way. *The game also emphasizes choice*. All pairs follow the exact same directions, yet each pair completes them in a different way. Every direction contains multiple possibilities of completion, and it is up to each pair to choose *how* they want to join "head to shoulder," "hand to knee," and so on. This is why the pair giving directions should call out the two body parts to be joined together but refrain from further specifications (for example, *right* hand to *left* knee).

CAR/DRIVER

In this exercise that Boal calls Car/Driver (*Games* 121) participants get into pairs. One person stands in front and the other behind. The person in front is the car, and the person behind is the driver. The driver guides the car through the space by *gently* pressing their index finger in the middle of the car's back (go straight), moving the finger to the left shoulder (turn left), to the right shoulder (turn right), and down toward the lower back (reverse). When making a turn (for example, a left turn), the driver moves their finger to the car's left shoulder and, once the car has turned left, brings their finger back to the middle of the car's back. Otherwise the car keeps turning to the same side, going in a circle. To hit the breaks, the driver simply stops touching the car's back. All the pairs move *slowly* through the space at the same time, without any verbal communication between cars and drivers. Cars must keep their eyes *closed* and their arms crossed over the chest for protection (like bumpers) the whole time. If two cars crash, both pairs of cars and drivers sit where they crashed and become observers. Once the game has been played for a few minutes, cars and drivers switch roles within their pair and the game is played again with the roles reversed.

Communication is key in this game, and it happens through touch—drivers "speak" with their fingers, and cars "listen" with their back (Boal includes this game in the "dynamizing several senses" category). Collaboration is also key—the driver gives directions gently and slowly so that the car can follow them; the car, in turn, moves slowly through the space so that the driver has time to correct the course and avoid crashes. Some participants are more comfortable being the driver, while others are more comfortable being the car. When you are the car, you have to trust the driver to take care of you and keep you from crashing into other cars. When you are the driver, you have to guide the car and ensure their safety so that their trust is nurtured. The game gives participants the chance to play both these roles, to become aware of their own preferences, and to think of them as changeable rather than fixed.

MIRROR EXERCISES

1. In pairs, participants stand facing each other a few feet apart with their hands to their sides. For 2 to 3 minutes, in complete silence, each person stands still and *gently* looks into their partner's eyes (*it's not a stare down*), without looking in any other direction.

2. In the same pairs, participants stand facing each other a few feet apart and *gently* look into each other's eyes, only this time they are free to make *slow* movements, which their partner must follow. Without saying a word, participants take turns leading and following their partner's movements in as synchronized a manner as possible, to the point that it becomes difficult to tell who is leading and who is following at any given point.

These exercises offer participants the opportunity to really *see* their partners by gently *looking* into their eyes (they belong to what Boal terms the "seeing what we look" category). Many participants express an initial discomfort with this exercise given that most of us put a lot of effort into making sure we don't look others in their eyes, especially for too long (and even more so after the intense isolation imposed by the pandemic). After the initial discomfort, however, barriers usually come down, and participants connect with their partners on a deeper level through eye contact. This connection provides the basis for the synchronization of movements in the second exercise.

THE HUMAN KNOT

In this variation of what Boal calls The Circle of Knots (*Games* 62), participants get into groups of 7 to 9 people and form a tight circle standing shoulder to shoulder with each other, all facing the center of the circle. Each person in the circle joins hands with two different people opposite them (in other words, you can't take the hand of someone next to you). Then, in complete silence and without letting go of each other's hands, participants *slowly* try to undo the knot until they end up in a wide circle in which each participant stands next to the persons whose hands they are holding (it's OK if some participants end up facing the outside of the circle).

To undo this human knot without speaking, participants need to find other ways to communicate with each other—for example, through their hands (which is why this game belongs to the "feeling what we touch" category), eyes and facial expressions. Collaboration is key. If each person tries to undo their own knot without regard to how it connects to the other knots, they won't be able to undo all the knots and form the final circle.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Participants form single-file lines of five people each. The person in front of the line is the leader, the others are the followers. The leader starts moving around the space doing whatever they want (dancing, singing, etc), and the other four people in the line must imitate everything the leader does. After a minute or so, the facilitator calls out, "new leader," and the leader moves to the end of the line, making room for the next leader until everyone has been both leader and follower. (This is the only activity in this toolkit that is not done in silence.)

As with Car/Driver, this game gives participants the opportunity to change from one role to the other and experience their different demands and possibilities.

Many participants express that the game makes them feel like children again, because it allows them to "be silly," that is, to move and behave in ways that are not part of their routines. A key aspect of this game (and of Boal's theater practice in general) is that it loosens our bodies and allows us to recover some of their capacity for play and expression.

TRANSFORMATION OF OBJECTS
or "THERE ARE MANY OBJECTS IN A SINGLE OBJECT."

Participants sit or stand in a circle (depending on what space the group is in, whether chairs are available, etc). The facilitator presents an everyday object to the group such as a plastic water bottle and places it on the ground in the center of the circle. Then, the facilitator asks the group, "what else can this bottle be?" Taking turns, participants go to the center of the circle and, using only their bodies and without speaking or making any sounds, assume a posture or perform an action through which the bottle is transformed into something else (a telescope, a cell phone, a baby—whatever comes to their mind). Once many possibilities of transformation have been explored, the bottle is replaced by another object (for example, a chair), and the game restarts. As the game progresses, the facilitator can increase the challenge by placing more than one object in the center of the circle (a bottle *and* a chair) and asking participants to transform both objects at the same time.

What do we need in order to transform the bottle? We need to use our imagination to picture the bottle in front of us as something else. But imagining a new object is not enough to transform the bottle. We have to step into the center of the circle and use the bottle in relation to our body to build a static or dynamic image of the new object to the other participants (*Jogos* 216). Our imagination enables us to look at the bottle and picture it as something else, but only our

intervention can enact the change. This game reminds us that nothing merely is "what it is," and will inevitably continue to be "what it is," because things can be changed with our imagination and intervention. If we can transform any object into something else, why do we often feel that we can't change the conditions in which we live, but have to resign ourselves to them as if they could never be otherwise?

THE GREAT GAME OF POWER

Participants sit or stand facing the same direction. The facilitator places a table, a few chairs and a bottle in front of the group. Participants are asked to come up one at a time and arrange the objects so as to make *one* of the objects become the most powerful in the arrangement (in relation to the other chairs, the table and the bottle). Any of the objects can be moved or placed on top of each other, or on their sides, or whatever, but none of them can be removed altogether from the arrangement. The group goes through a number of variations of the arrangement until it arrives at one in which the majority of the group agrees that one of the objects is indeed the most powerful. Then, the next stage of the game begins. A participant is asked to enter the arrangement and take up the most powerful position within it, without moving anything. One by one, participants enter the arrangement and try to place themselves in an even more powerful

position, taking the power away from the person who preceded them. Once almost every participant has entered the arrangement (some participants may remain outside as observers) the facilitator asks participants to objectively describe what they see, *without interpreting*. Once the arrangement has been described in detail, the facilitator moves on to questions such as, "who in our society occupies these different positions?" and "what 'story' does the arrangement tell about power?" and, eventually, "what is power?"

In the first stage of the game, participants explore ways in which power is spatially and unequally distributed in structures that recall, for example, a family dinner table, a classroom or a courtroom. In the second stage, participants try to seize power by standing on top of the table or lying under it, pretending to hold a gun or a camera. Power shifts depending on how each person relates to the objects and the other persons, and depending on what we think power looks like—standing in a higher position? being oblivious to what's happening? perpetrating violence against others? intervening to stop violence? recording everything?

3. Image-Theater Techniques

ILLUSTRATING A THEME USING OTHER PEOPLE'S BODIES

The facilitator asks for a volunteer to build a sculpture of a theme that is relevant to the group by using only the bodies of other participants (and, if needed, simple objects that are available such as a table or chair). The sculptor has to work in complete silence, "molding" the participants into their positions through other forms of communication. When the sculpture is finished, the facilitator consults the group to see if everyone agrees with the representation of the theme. Participants take turns as the sculptor until someone creates a sculpture of the theme with which all participants agree. Once the group has arrived at such a sculpture, the facilitator asks participants to objectively describe what they see, *without interpreting*. Once the sculpture has been described in detail, the facilitator moves on to questions such as, "what does the sculpture evoke?" and "what does it say about the theme?"

In the ZCMP, the theme was Covid. "What comes to mind when you hear *Covid*?" As with Transformation of Objects, the sculptor needs to form a mental image first, then, using the bodies of other participants, create the sculpture for the group. As with The Great Game of Power, discussion begins with careful observation and detailed description before it moves to interpretation; it's about "seeing what we look" before jumping to conclusions.

IMAGE OF TRANSITION

This technique builds on the preceding one. The facilitator asks a volunteer to build a sculpture of the proposed theme, only this time the sculpture must show something about the theme that we want to transform. This is called the *real image*. Once the group has arrived at a *real image* of the theme with which all participants agree, the facilitator asks the same volunteer to create an *ideal image*—an image that shows the theme as we would like it to be (the "dream," as Boal puts it). Then, the facilitator asks the volunteer (and, subsequently, other participants) to create a third image, called the *image of transition*—an image that shows how it would be possible to move from the *real image* to the *ideal image*. The point is to have multiple *images of transition*, so as to generate a non-verbal "discussion" of how it would be possible to transform the unjust conditions depicted in the *real image*.

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In our Train the Trainers workshop, Diana Taylor made the following comment after we played Transformation of Objects: "How do we imagine a way forward and then get there? We're transforming an object, but how do we articulate what's happening now in our lives and what we consider the real stumbling blocks or obstacles? This exercise to me seems the most lucid and simplest way of inviting us to envision, imagine and articulate." Building on Transformation of Objects, this technique gives us a tool to articulate a major issue we are facing (in relation to a proposed theme such as "Covid"), and to imagine and give visible form to a "there" that is different from the "here" of the *real image*. Just as importantly, it gives a tool to try out "ways forward" and discuss their viability.

4. Tips for facilitators

From the [Train the Trainers workshop](#) led by George Emilio Sanchez

- Be who you are as a facilitator rather than conforming to a particular way of facilitating (00:54);
- Bring participants together in a circle.
- Start the workshop, by welcoming everyone, do introductions, and explain why we are there (00:01).
- Give clear and precise instructions to the exercises, but always leave room for choice (2:55).
- Demonstrate the exercises with the help of a volunteer (01:20),
- Ask participants if they have any questions before starting an exercise.
- Invite participants to do something rather than directing them, so that they can decide what they can and cannot do (4:50).
- During the workshop, especially after a long series of exercises and more complicated games and techniques, to give participants a chance to discuss what they have done so far (07:57).
- At the end of the workshop, to give participants a chance to reflect on everything they did and to be together before leaving.

📷 All photographs by Desiree Rios.