

Sarah Twomey  
University of British Columbia

## Contingent Conditions of Change: An Exploration of Feminist Theatre Practice

*This article explores how critical pedagogy and theatre arts can examine difference, change, and transformative possibilities in public spheres of educational practice. This narrative study offers a useful contribution on how theory, research, and practice can contribute to new ways of framing transformative feminist pedagogy in school cultures. I give an overview of critical pedagogy and the intersectionalities between concepts of liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970a) and the work of Brazilian theatre activist Augusto Boal (1979, 1992, 1995, 1998). I discuss how Boal's philosophy and techniques of theatre of the oppressed can intersect in various ways with theatre arts curricula and feminist pedagogy. Using a case study of a young women's theatre project Realtalk, I propose a postfeminist pedagogy and conditions for a form of radical education that offers a particular understanding of the complexities of how power is negotiated in schools across difference.*

*Cet article explique comment la pédagogie critique et les arts de la scène peuvent étudier la différence, le changement et des possibilités transformationnelles dans des sphères publiques de la pratique éducationnelle. Cette étude narrative représente un apport utile sur la façon dont la théorie, la recherche et la pratique peuvent appuyer de nouvelles méthodes d'intégrer une pédagogie féministe transformationnelle dans les cultures scolaires. Je présente un aperçu de la pédagogie critique et des chevauchements entre les concepts de la pédagogie libératrice (Freire, 1970a) et l'oeuvre de l'activiste de la scène brésilien Augusto Boal (1979, 1992, 1995, 1998). J'explique comment se recoupent la philosophie et les techniques de Boal dans son théâtre des opprimés d'une part, et le programme d'études en arts de la scène et la pédagogie féministe d'autre part. En m'appuyant sur une étude de cas, soit Realtalk, un projet en art dramatique mené par une jeune femme, je propose une pédagogie et des conditions postféministes pour une forme d'éducation radicale qui offre une perspective particulière sur la complexité qui caractérise la négociation du pouvoir dans les écoles, au delà des différences.*

from the depth of the pacific  
to the height of everest  
and still the world is smoother  
than a shiny ball bearing  
so I take a few steps back  
and put on a wider lens  
and it changes your skin  
your sex and what you're wearing  
distance shows your silhouette  
to be a lot like mine  
like a sphere is a sphere  
and all of us here  
have been here all the time  
(ani difranco, 1998)

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Sarah Twomey is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Language and Literacy Education. Her current research and teaching interests are in the areas of reading, poststructuralism, and teacher identities. This work is dedicated to Magda Lewis.

As Ani DiFranco (1998) suggests, being able to change how one sees the world, to expand the “constricted eye” (Pratt, 1984, p. 17), is like looking through a wider lens. A United States singer-songwriter, DiFranco is well known for her impassioned political music that challenges the intersection of rock culture and femininity. This song, entitled “Everest,” presents a paradox in how DiFranco sees and understands the differences between herself and those around her. This paradox represents the contradiction DiFranco experiences with difference/sameness, depending on the focus of her lens. The world that appears different simultaneously appears the same, creating yet another emergent possibility that reflects DiFranco’s seeing of the world. Pedagogy encounters a similar paradox. Ellsworth (1997) states,

Teaching about and across social and cultural differences is not about bridging our differences and joining us together in understanding, it’s about engaging in the ongoing production of culture in a way that returns yet another difference. (p. 139)

If, as Ellsworth (1997) says, teaching is about the “continuing and never finished moment of affirming and engaging in ongoing cultural production” (p. 141), what might this look like in our schools? How do teachers expand the lens through which they perceive their students and themselves and challenge the assumptions that define teaching and learning? I propose that pedagogy can embrace the complexities of both teachers’ and students’ realities and subjectivities in spaces that acknowledge the incompleteness of all subjects in the teaching and learning process. It is in the in-between spaces of assumed practices in schools that feminism has contested how notions of masculine and feminine constructs can be disrupted. It is these in-between spaces of the teaching and learning process that provide “the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). This project uses theatre as a way to disrupt and reimagine other possibilities of identity in the practices of school culture.

### *The Outline*

In the first section I define feminist pedagogy and give an overview of critical pedagogy. I examine the intersectionalities between concepts of liberatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970a, 1970b) and the work of Brazilian theatre activist, Augusto Boal (1979, 1992, 1995, 1998). I discuss how Boal’s philosophy and techniques of *theatre of the oppressed* can intersect in various ways with theatre arts curricula and feminist pedagogy.

In the second section I present a case study of a young women’s theatre project, *Realtalk*. I propose that feminist pedagogy can create the conditions for a form of radical education through theatre arts that offers a particular understanding of the complexities of how power is negotiated in schools across gender and sexuality. In this section I draw on particular examples of the young women’s work to illustrate the relationship between feminist pedagogy and *theatre of the oppressed*.

In the final section of the article I posit two critical perspectives (Fraser, 1992; Giroux, 1992, 2003) to augment a feminist pedagogy that might expand

the individual curricular experience and move into a form of participatory democracy as a site of cultural change.

*Feminist Approaches to Teaching and Research*

It is no easy task to define feminist pedagogy, just as it is difficult to unpack the term *feminism* itself. Western notions of feminism have contributed significantly to looking at the world differently across all disciplines. However, feminism from a Western perspective has also been radically critiqued (Bannerji, 2000; Grande, 2004; hooks, 1994; Spivak, 1990). My view of feminist pedagogy refuses to see the world exclusively through a masculinist, heteronormative, white lens. Work in queer and feminist theory has had a profound influence on how difference is negotiated across gender, sexuality, and language, and has expanded a notion of feminism into an understanding of how identity can exist in the contradictions and complexities of postmodern identities (Britzman, 1998; Ellsworth, 1989; Fine & Weis, 2003; Kelly, 1997; hooks; Lewis, 1993; McRobbie 2000; Walkerdine, 1990, 2003; Weedon, 1987).

Historically, Western feminism has challenged the normative assumptions about gender roles, language, and how knowledge is constructed and distributed. I use the term *feminist* to address gender inequity but also to explore the complexities of difference outside gender. I return to the tensions between critical and feminist pedagogy in the final section *Contingent Conditions of Change*, in which I problematize the complexities of empowerment and transformation in a conventional understanding of critical pedagogy.

This study's conceptual framework is positioned in a feminist praxis of critical theatre arts. A poststructuralist investigation theorizes gender in the categories of race, class, and sexuality. A postfeminist project creates the potential of linking practice with theories that address the institutional arrangements that might help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups (Fraser, 1992), creating conditions for a form of democracy and political dialogue in public education that includes women on the margin and incorporates their frames of intelligibility into theory and practice (Grande, 2004).

I use the term *feminism* as a conceptual framework of narrative interpretation that acknowledges how the project of *Realtalk* explores gender and interrogates the feminine and masculine constructs that often shape the day-to-day discrimination and challenges of working in public education in Canada. I do not presume to speak for my students or to define my experience as similar. The student's discourse of feminism was curiously an unspoken area. The process of developing material for use in the project was not limited to issues of gender. However, it became obvious early on that the stories shared by the actors felt understood and surprisingly similar at various levels.

Sharing the journey of *Realtalk* is shaped by my experience and multiple social locations. My wish is that this article will evoke responses that continue to question feminist praxis in education. My intention is that this article will further understanding of how theory, research, and practice can contribute to new ways of framing feminist pedagogy in school cultures and educational public spheres.

*Popular Theatre/Popular Education*

Augusto Boal, who sees theatre as way to influence personal and social change, has largely influenced the genre known as *popular theatre* in Canada. It is worth noting Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz's (1994) summary of Boal:

Boal's vision is embodied in dramatic techniques that activate passive spectators to become spec-actors—engaged participants rehearsing strategies for personal and social change. Although founded in theatrical exploration, the techniques, all based on transitive learning and collective empowerment, are not limited to the stage; educators, political activists, therapists and social workers devoted to critical thought and action have adapted the work to address issues ranging from racism and sexism to loneliness and political impotence. (p. 1)

Boal suggests that theatre can become a tool to dream, reimagine, reenvision the possibilities of everyday living and teaching toward transformation. Imagination, or a reimagining of one's ability to influence change by acting as protagonist in the story that is being lived out, provides a useful intersection between conventional drama curricula and reenvisioning such programming through a critical theoretical framework.

Critical pedagogy stemming from the work of various educational theorists during the 1970s (Apple, 1979; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Freire, 1970a, 1970b) critiqued "how domination and oppression are produced within the various mechanisms of schooling" (Giroux, 1988, p. xxix). This theoretical approach to education questions how schools reinforce dominant notions of knowledge production in the practice of schooling. Freire, a Brazilian, was simultaneously writing about similar issues in popular education in Brazil. The notion of education carrying a political position and reinforcing this position brought up the important question of how teachers either reinforce or interrupt the status quo in what became known as the hidden curriculum in schools. This hidden curriculum refers to the belief systems and ideologies that often unconsciously inform one's pedagogy. Freire developed a form of social action associated with a call to action pedagogy that asks students and teachers to engage in a dialogic form of education that opposes the contradictions and inequities inherent in the systemic power structures of schooling and learning. This critique of educational practice in the West left much to reconsider in how teachers may become part of social and cultural change.

Freire (1970a) defines teaching and learning as a dialogue between students and teachers that addresses the relationship between thinking and life. This praxis, or relationship between learning and how one acts in the world, is paramount for social change. Freire states,

Finally, true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking—thinking which discerns an indivisible solidarity between the world and the people and admits of no dichotomy between them—thinking which perceives reality as process, as transformation, rather than as a static entity—thinking which does not separate itself from action. (p. 92)

Insightful from Freire's (1970a) point of view is the grounding of theory in experience; the relationship between what we think and how we act. Freire's insight becomes a departure point in which critical educational theory moves

toward a space that blurs the boundaries of abstract ideas of theory with everyday practice. Teaching that resists the notion of teaching and learning as a neutral, apolitical act opens up a pedagogy that might re/vision schools as places of transformation. In relation/coexistence with Freire's notion of teaching as dialogic, the question of the possibility of a critical dialogue between teacher and student may find form in the practices of popular theatre. Boal (1995) sees theatre as a way to embrace understanding and belief in the ability for a "continuing transformation of reality" (p. 81). Freire sees the need for a utopian view of education in which one can both enunciate and denunciate the impossibilities of cultural change.

Boal (1998) sends a provocative message to artists, theatre practitioners, and teachers:

And that is the role of art—not only to show how the world is—but also why it is thus and how it can be transformed. I hope no one can be satisfied with the world as it is; it must be transformed. (p. 5)

Boal believes that this transformation is done by "theatricalising subjectivity" (p. 5), by observing oneself and choosing to modify that image. The act of seeing theatre implies a suspension of the subject in order to project oneself into the action. Boal (1979) draws on this same principle to develop a method of theatre that invites the audience to participate in the action, believing that traditional kinds of theatre that separate the actor from spectator are repressive and perpetuate a passivity and cathartic immobility. He insists that the spectator become the *spect-actor* and by doing so, people may begin to "resume their protagonistic function in the theatre and in society" (p. 119). Freire's (1970b) notion of subjectivity is directly related to this intersubjectivity of learning. "True dialogue unites subjects together in the cognition of a knowable object that mediates between them" (p. 339). The process of learning to know, particularly reading and writing, is a form of word-and-action that is a necessary aspect of praxis, reflection, and action that is accomplished dialectally through a process that moves between the two.

Influenced by Boal, theatre becomes a form of knowledge in which one can act to change reality. Theatre then becomes a powerful tool of liberation in which "one can be without being ... everything is possible in the here and now, fiction is pure reality, and reality is fiction" (Boal, 1995, p. 20). Boal states, "That is why in the theatre we can have concrete dreams" (p. 21). If one can practice in an aesthetic space ways of being and *acting*, the potential to move outside the aesthetic space into the day-to-day reality of living becomes increasingly possible. One must first imagine possibility for change to happen. The dialogic must live in the impossible for change to emerge. I suggest that the project of *Realtalk* finds a trajectory from conventional theatre arts curriculum to a form of transformative theatre practice that extends Freire's praxis into a possible feminist framework.

### *The Problem*

Teaching practices and school cultures are reflections of larger political climates and social norms. As an educator, I am conscious of the discursive political and bureaucratic constructs that shape both the overt and hidden curriculum of school culture. I believe that schooling can provide students with

critical skills that question authority and power and ways to think outside systemically reinforced limitations of identity. Giroux (2003) states that it is “necessary for students to participate and shape public life. It is not only possible to think against the grain, but crucial to act in ways that demonstrate political conviction, civic courage, and collective responsibility” (p. x).

Although Giroux’s words resonate with what every critical educator wants, it remains an abstraction. When I began my teaching career in 1990, I noticed that particular students seemed excluded from the day-to-day visible realities of school culture. My concern was that some students had become *invisible*. I wished to find a pedagogical space where marginalized<sup>1</sup> students could question, respond, and transform everyday learning into productive affirmations of the diverse experiences of school culture. *Realtalk*, one of the student groups at Murphy High, became a way to explore a space of change through theatre. Boal would argue that if one or more of a collective group of oppressed people can rehearse a transformative moment in an aesthetic space, the chance exists that this may translate into a cultural moment of possibility outside the fiction of the theatre.

#### *The Project: Murphy High and Realtalk*

Murphy High is a small urban high school in southeastern Ontario, Canada. It is situated in the middle of a predominantly working-class neighborhood. Most of the students live in the subsidized housing complexes that are in close proximity to the school. Many of the families receive government support in the form of social assistance.

The school has an *alternative* feel to it in that it houses various *countywide* programs that cater to a learning environment that is geared toward specific vocational goals and practices. This includes everything from a creative arts program that enables students to build a portfolio for postsecondary admission requirements, to a building internship program geared toward channeling students into the construction trades.

The student population is primarily composed of White students and teachers. There is little visible diversity of race and ethnic difference in the school. However, for the small amount of diversity that does exist, there was a certain color blindness to racial differences in the school. The purpose of this seemed to try to institute a feeling of unity in the community, but unfortunately did not address the tensions and contradictions that students experienced about other differences such as sexuality, class, and ability.

In the culture of Murphy High was a strong imperative for heterosexual romance. This was evident in the number of young women who seemed invisible in academic programming and were not offered a discourse that defined a possible feminine subjectivity outside the seemingly predestined future of motherhood. The young women that I worked with seemed to feel disempowered and limited in what they could imagine for their future.

The need to develop different, more inclusive programming also came as a response to the many stories shared by students in the small intimate space of my office at Murphy High. I had many conversations with students about what it means to be told that you have the ability to be anything, but are excluded from postsecondary programs because of exorbitant tuition fees and dwindling government assistance. Quite often female students would tell me how they

had been ignored in the classroom or made the focus of sexist comments or jokes. They would speak of the benefits gained in remaining silent, passive learners as well as the punitive response they received when they spoke out and demanded to be listened to. There seemed to be limited references or dialogue about the history and lives of strong, successful women in both the overt and hidden curriculum.

*The Realtalk Project and Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed*

The idea that female students experience school differently was difficult for many of my students to articulate in conventional language. Through the exploration of physical images one can find the expressive potential of one's body outside the usual language of words. Much knowledge is legitimized through spoken and written language, so when the opportunity is given to move outside the spoken word into images and into one's body, themes emerge that begin to uncover many of the contradictions young women experience but struggle to express in conventional curriculum practice. When a space is created that offers the possibilities for diversity of experiences to find expression, the result is an empowerment of self that brings confidence and voice to the often silent and diverse identities of young women.

In acknowledging the voice of female students' experience is an implicit acceptance of the personal and, I would suggest, the private, often silenced realities of young women. The content of popular theatre and creative drama comes from the stories of participants and their responses to daily situations. By acting out reflections through theatrical forms, students are able to put theory into practice.

*Realtalk* was a support group that was organized as one of the activities of the Student Services Department at Murphy High during my tenure as a teacher-counselor. Students were self-referred and/or invited to participate in the group. To complete this process students needed parents' and teachers' permission to miss one scheduled class per week on a rotational basis. The focus of the group was to address issues particularly relevant to young women; this ranged from anti-violence work, body image, healthy relationships, and discrimination issues. The work of *Realtalk* offered a possible pedagogical space in which marginalized students could question, respond, and possibly transform everyday learning into thinking of student agency as "instrumental actors who confront an external political field" (Boal, 1995, p. 13).

Although defined as a peer support group, *Realtalk* operated in the practices of popular theatre in that issues raised by the students were discussed and then formulated into vignettes. These explored the protagonist's attempt to change some aspect of her life. The audience was asked to respond to the scene and give suggestions to the protagonist or to actually take on the role of the protagonist with their specific idea or intervention. This technique used in Boal's (1979) *theatre of the oppressed* disintegrates the conventional audience-actor barrier through the suggestion of multiple possibilities for change from the audience members. The stories are often from the personal experiences of the students. The process of creating the vignette involves exploring the sociological and psychological contexts of the stories with the intention that such discussion will create a scene that portrays the complex layers, multiple meanings, and contradictions inherent in how individuals make choices.

The space in which *Realtalk* operated was defined early on by the group. Expectations and rules were developed that supported a space where confidentiality was honored, respect for other opinions was stressed, and a commitment to talk only for oneself and with personal regard to those who were present in the room. The relationship between the student and myself was based on the assumption that all knowledge, official or not, is important, and that students share the capacity and agency to think and act critically and creatively.

To teach critical thinking was to engage the students in materials and information where multiple perspectives were offered and questioned. Whether the group was discussing male violence or first romantic relationships, my role as a teacher was to bring forward questions that asked students to question what they thought.

#### *Behind the Wall: A Beginning Legacy of Realtalk*

*Behind the Wall* was the first performance of the early precursor to *Realtalk*, presented by The Not So Sorry Sisters. This was a group of junior and senior female students who had been meeting weekly over nine months to discuss issues that were important to them. The group had formed as a peer support group, in which as the teacher-counselor I was able to bring my background in popular theatre and social justice to the pedagogical framework of the group. The play used many elements of Boal's *theatre of the oppressed* to examine the cyclical pattern of domestic abuse, dating violence, eating disorders, and sexism in school. The first scene portrays male violence in the home and how the cycle of violence inhabits a honeymoon period in which the abuser is sorry, yet inevitably perpetuates more violence. The students were able to draw a connection between male violence in the home and what often happens in teen dating violence. A further connection was drawn between these examples and male violence in the school.

One particular vignette focused on what happened when a teacher confronted a female student undressing in the hallway. The students who created the vignette were parodying an existing problem in the school with male students changing in the hallways. Quite often boys wearing boxer shorts would be grouped in certain areas in the school hallways before and after football games. Many of the students felt uncomfortable having to walk through and past these groups of half naked male students. The vignette used the fiction of the theatre to point out the absurdity of male students using the school hallways as their change rooms by mirroring what would happen if the female students did the same.

At the end of the performance of *Behind the Wall*, the students presented a Declaration of Rights identifying the problems and asking for solutions from teachers and staff.

#### *Declaration of Rights*

*As a group, we've been meeting once a week to talk about issues important to us as young women at Murphy High.*

*This show is a result of many discussions and is our way of saying that we want our school to take action in stopping these problems.*

*The following incidents happen to us on a regular basis:*

1. Name calling/harassment and degrading comments.
2. Groping in the hallways. Male students touching female students inappropriately.
3. Threatening gestures: male students raising their hands, arms, and legs as if they are going to hit. "Play" pushing and shoving.
4. We have felt trapped in certain areas in the school where male students hang out and make degrading comments. These areas are:
  - (a) In front of Student Services
  - (b) In the main foyer in front of the gym
  - (c) Second floor hallway by room 211

We want our school to be a safe place for women. We feel that these sorts of things happen all too often and are not noticed by teachers walking the hallways. We want teachers to get involved to help stop this.

The result was a dialogue between the staff and students about how to address this issue beyond the locker-room behavior and language of some of the male students in the hallway. A dialogue discussing the amount of sexism and misogyny in the school and how such incidents could be collaboratively addressed left all of us feeling as if some important shift had happened in the small space of the theatre. Following this was a meeting with the principal, who determined that a new space for lockers needed to be created in the school outside the male change room. The young women involved in the project were thrilled. We felt as if we had influenced a kind of institutional change.

The years following our first performance provided many more opportunities for audience participation and dialogue with the growing interest and development of *Realtalk* at Murphy High. Soon two groups evolved that addressed the needs of the junior and senior girls of the school.

I had been working with a group of young women in grade 9, meeting once a week. Our meetings were relaxed, but had fallen into a repetitive system of talking about the same things week after week. Although useful, the conversations seemed to be stagnating and not propelling the group in a direction where dynamic and meaningful dialogue was taking place. To justify the time spent out of the *official* classroom, I wished to engage the students beyond a simple social gathering. At the time I had been reading the work of Ellsworth (1997), and decided to bring to the group a question inspired by her writing as a way to shift our discussions. The question was phrased: "Is there anything that you do *not* want to know?" This question required that the students listen, if even briefly, to their unconscious. To be able to articulate what one does not want to know means knowing on some level. This is a concept that Ellsworth explores in a pedagogical framework. The result of our meeting this warm spring day was overwhelming. The students began to talk about their futures, their dreams, and what it meant to grieve. Meaningful dialogue began to happen as aspects of ourselves expanded in new ways.

Soon this junior *Realtalk* group prepared a piece of popular theatre for their female peers about the complexities of friendship, first love, and body image. A vignette on body image was about the fantasy that they all shared in wanting to look like *Barbie*. In the scene the main character falls asleep and her *Barbie* comes alive. Unfortunately, it cannot walk or function effectively because of its unnatural physical proportions. The protagonist, after seeing what her *Barbie* looks like in real life, says, "But you look so much more perfect when you're

plastic." She falls back asleep, wakes up from her "dream," and addresses the audience with, "You know, I think I'm perfect just the way I am."

This was a powerful scene for the students involved in the process of identifying how issues of dieting, binge eating, and endlessly criticizing one's body affects many of their lives. Being able to share their concerns through a vignette with their peers opened up space to begin to talk about what is seldom acknowledged in school culture.

The students produced vignettes that encouraged the audience members to intervene in the scene to try to change what was happening to the main protagonist. Finding a way to fit in and be accepted was an important discourse for the young women. Exclusion became a theme that they explored with the audience in a scene in which a new student is treated badly by a group of "popular" students. The scene was stopped at critical points in which audience members were able to act out suggestions that might improve the outcome of the scene. The interventions did not always work as the audience member had envisaged. However, the discussions about these interventions were rich with possibilities and led to topics such as trust, true friendship, and ways to assert oneself in situations that often felt disempowering.

Over the next decade, these experiences became touchstones at Murphy High. Dialogue continued among staff and between students through the aesthetic and creative space of the theatre. The Not So Sorry Sisters began a legacy that took on the name of *Realtalk* until the spring of 2001.

When female students create a piece of theatre from their experience that identifies an imbalance of power in a relational context and then asks the audience to intervene so as to improve the protagonist's situation, the praxis between theory and practice becomes seamless:

Maybe the theater in itself is not revolutionary, but these theatrical forms are without doubt a *rehearsal of revolution*. The truth of the matter is that the spectator-actor practices a real act even though he does it in a fictional manner. (Boal, 1979, p. 141)

Central to Boal's work is the idea that our identities are constructed socially. Foucault (1978) states that there is no origin of gender or authentic sexual identity, but these categories of sex, gender, and desire are the effects of particular workings of cultural institutions like schools. When we oppose traditional roles of how we see ourselves, we also oppose social structures. When young women of the project began to express divergent personal realities, connections were made between the personal and the social. The individual voice became part of the collaborative, relational analysis of social change.

Boal (1979) believes that these theatrical forms evoke a desire in the spectator to "practice in reality when he has rehearsed in the theatre" (p. 142) and that this experience may spur the individual into real action. The participants, actors and spectators, are able to experience the feeling of change and transformation in the context of aesthetic, theatrical space. Experience becomes the ground for social transformation (Lewis, 1993). Much like the spect-actor being invited into Boal's theatre space, the young women move out of disempowering constructions of objectification and into the realm of subjective, dynamic

social agents. In becoming social, active agents, young women are given the opportunity to find new imaginaries. Expressions of difference affirm the often contradictory and hidden experiences of the day-to-day cultural interactions of being young women. If these differences are heard, the opportunity exists for a more just and transformative educational practice.

Boal's form of popular theatre has not conventionally been part of education theory in the development of arts curriculum in Canada. I would suggest that when conventional theatre arts curricular practice embraces critical pedagogy in a project like *Realtalk*, a form of feminist theatre arts emerges. This is a form of theatre practice in which the teacher and student are committed to thinking critically about how culture produces and transmits knowledge in relation to the construction of feminine subjectification; and to ask questions that challenge the dominant voice typically heard and represented in school culture

*Realtalk*, as a gender-based theatre program continued over a period of 12 years at Murphy High, beginning with the declaration of rights from the *Not So Sorry Sisters*. Throughout these years elements of popular theatre became a way for young women to challenge, resist, and disrupt school practices that they felt were unfair.

#### *Participatory Democracy as Educational Change*

Habermas' (1987) notion of the public sphere offers another framework in which to position the educational sphere as an essential apparatus of the public sphere. Habermas brings a critical theory of democracy that values the public role of language. In the public sphere Habermas presents a form of "communicative action" in which decisionmakers and institutional practitioners can dialogue toward change. Critical theory questions the role of institutions like schools in creating sites of participatory democracy. Giroux (1992), states that a lack of participatory democracy comes from a lack of "language of possibility" (p. 204) that can contest and question from within the institutional constraints of education. The ability to achieve change from within is difficult because it involves "trying to destroy and reconstitute an activity even while performing it" (Con Davis, 1990, p. 249). Giroux suggests that schools need to become sites committed to forms of democracy and self-empowerment outside the dominant discourse of school practice. This language of possibility that Giroux refers to is a direct link to Freire's notion of literacy or language acquisition as indeterminable from one's critical understanding of the world in liberatory education. The challenge is to create a pedagogy of opposition and hope "that provides the potential to expand the politics of democratic community and solidarity" into a politics of culture (p. 206). Giroux's belief that formal democracy in the US has failed and that language can become a way to create change is an important parallel to Freire's notion of literacy as empowerment and Habermas' notion of communicative action.

However, this deliberate and singular arena of the public sphere historically has excluded women and does not fully encompass the pluralistic world in which we live (Fraser, 1992). How the discursive relations outside the state apparatus and market forces enter the public sphere remains the challenge for liberatory education as well. Giroux's (1992) challenge to create "conditions for students to speak so that their narratives can be affirmed and engaged and

analyzed as a part of a broader politics of voice and difference" (p. 205), I suggest is what the project of *Realtalk* attempted. *Realtalk*, within the constraints of school structures and ideologies, used the aesthetic space of the theatre curriculum to create the conditions needed for competing spheres of public dialogue. However, I suggest that notions of liberatory and empowering practice in critical pedagogy do not address the complexity of gender relations and postmodern constructions of identity in systemic ruling relations of power.

#### *Contingent Conditions of Change*

Boal's transformative possibility inherent in theatre of the oppressed relies heavily on individual experience as a starting point for dialogue and change. Also needed is a rigorous self-reflexive quality, in which one is able to question critically if the work that is being done simply reifies what it is trying to displace. I suggest that this was one of the more challenging aspects of the work of the feminist theatre project. It began to feel comfortable and accepted in the culture of the school to be positioned and largely speaking from the margins. For example, whenever issues of sexism arose, I was consulted, even though the overall systemic problems of the school were outside my formal teaching capacities. The project never truly threatened the functioning central practices of the school that blurred distinctiveness such as sexuality and constructed femininities in a rhetoric of community and tolerated differences. Projects like *Realtalk*, it could be argued, reinforce the phenomenon of how "othering" difference maintains the dominant systemic inequities in schools. This phenomenon benefits those in power by suggesting that such difference is an acceptable and integrated aspect of the community while exclusive and oppressive practices remain normalized.

Missing from Western adaptations of Boal's work is an analysis of how the power structures implicit in institutional programming like *Realtalk* respond differently to racialized and sexualized expressions of experience. There is more at risk for certain students' expressions of these experiences than others. For a teacher involved in the transformative practice of pedagogy, the ethical dimensions of this work require much more analysis than what critical pedagogy and popular theatre neatly present. The day-to-day experience of working with students and the barriers that remain unnamed is demanding and often dangerous work for the students and teachers involved.

The use of popular theatre as presented by Boal offers a theory of change that assumes that a subject can articulate experience in a particular way. Schools, like other institutions, are positioned in a dominant sphere of communication. The challenge is to find how curricula like *Realtalk* can support a plurality of public arenas that embraces the "combining [of] social equality, cultural diversity and participatory democracy" (Fraser, 1992, p. 128) in its practices.

Boal's techniques outlined in his work of theatre of the oppressed provide tools to reimagine how theatre curriculum in Canada may integrate social justice with learning. However, Boal's theories of social transformation rely on a universalized notion of oppression and liberation that rests uneasily with feminist approaches to teaching (Ellsworth, 1989; Luke & Gore, 1992; Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Middleton, 1993; Weiler, 1991). The young women of the project were constituted in a discourse of exclusion and erasure from school

cultural life. Finding agency seemed fixed in the margins of school culture. Boal's work has trouble addressing the fluidity and intersectionality of categories of identity both from the margins and the center, at times simply reifying what it is trying to transform.

Nonetheless, I suggest that Boal provides an important departure point for developing a postfeminist pedagogy that supports change and reimaginings in the fissures of categorical assumptions of identities and experience. I am not suggesting that Boal's theory of transformative practice ignores the complexity of experience, but rather that it seems to find its coherence in the ability to articulate what at times remains inarticulate. Implicit in Boal's theory is that to be heard, students need to dialogue with a teacher. It assumes that stories can be told, when perhaps as Richardson (1997) says, some stories are untellable.

How does one begin to address the connections and disconnections between what desires school culture produces and how teachers can interrupt the status quo and explore the "relatively unnavigated political contingent which lies beyond equality and difference" (McRobbie, 1994, p. 73). This means exploring the impossibilities in differences by not necessarily seeing all as equal, but by looking to an equitable response to those differences. Living divergent and complex realities resistant to the dominant constructs of masculinity and femininity may begin to take shape in the possibilities of new language and cultural texts expressed through theatre.

Creating "school programs that move the private into public emancipatory tendency" (Johnson, 1983) is an exciting and promising pedagogy for the teacher who sees himself or herself as a facilitator of creative cultural possibilities. Teachers embracing a form of postfeminist pedagogy can be instrumental in linking practice with theories that disrupt dominant discourses of schooling by facilitating programming that questions the contradictions and complexities of identity, gender, and power. I suggest that theatre curricula can create this contingent condition for dialogue in public education. Projects like *Realtalk* can be useful in informing how both teacher and student can call into question the role of public education not only in the subjective, but also in the cultural and political spheres of influence and change.

#### Note

1. It was clear during my time at Murphy High that marginalization was read in many ways. It was marked by social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. This project primarily explored issues of gender, with the assumption that other markers of identity and difference intersect in various ways and in various contexts.

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