



# Enhanced Forum Theatre

## 1. Introduction

The technique of theatre with active audience participation described in this section has been in use in educational theatre since the early 1970s. The specialised terminology is derived from Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed'. However, Boal's standard forum theatre is aimed specifically at revealing oppression and exploring ways of countering it. In the *Cooling Conflicts* program the technique has been adapted to explore conflict and conflict handling, making it possible for school students to actively experiment with conflict situations and with ways of managing a range of conflicts.

The use of forum theatre has been further enhanced with the inclusion of key techniques from classroom process drama and extension beyond the forum.

## 2. Enhancements

There are a number of key differences from Boal's classic forum theatre:



## Multiple scenes

*Cooling Conflicts* enhanced forum theatre involves three scenes, not just one.

## The Joker

To assist understanding of this role, Boal's *Joker* can, if teachers choose to do so, be referred to as the *Host*, or *Master of Ceremonies*, with responsibility to control the forum by introducing the scenes and characters, by explaining the rules of the interventions and drama techniques described below, by inviting the spect-actors to participate and by being the final arbiter of *magic*.

## Multiple interventions

Since Boal's theatre concentrated on providing the oppressed with means to resist their oppression, in his version the spectators were invited to intervene, but only as the oppressed person, the protagonist, to change the situation. In *Cooling Conflicts* the audience or spect-actors are invited to intervene not only as the protagonist, but as any party in the scene who they think might be able to de-escalate the conflict.

## Extension

In conflict management it is necessary to think beyond the moment of confrontation and responsible action is often not to intervene at that point. A further, essential step has therefore been structured into the forum theatre. (See page 6, *Beyond the forum*)

## Techniques from classroom process drama

Three process drama techniques are woven into enhanced forum theatre to make its use more effective in exploring conflict management.

### Forum hot seat

The audience of the forum performance can question a character to find out further information about the character or discover why they behaved in a certain way, or even offer the character advice. Any of the characters in the forum performance can be put in the hot seat. The Master of Ceremonies, or



Host, can invite the audience to hot seat a character after they have watched the first two performances. A member of the audience can also stop the second or later performances of the scene and ask to hot seat a character before taking that character's place.

### **Forum thought tracking**

A scene can be frozen by the Host and one or more characters asked to express what they might be really thinking, either at that moment or at a particular moment in the past or future. Often a scene is frozen and every character in that particular scene is asked in turn to speak their thoughts aloud. After the second performance of the forum piece, members of the audience can request thought tracking of a particular scene. A freeze frame of the scene is created and then characters in that scene asked by the audience to reveal their thoughts. In subsequent performances of the forum piece, the audience can request thought tracking at key moments to discover what certain characters are thinking and perhaps take their place.

### **Forum role circle**

Each member of the forum performance group in role as their character is asked questions relating to the conflict. The Host or members of the audience can ask the questions and the role circle would normally occur after the second performance of the forum piece. During following performances, a scene can be stopped and a role circle could take place where the audience could ask the characters questions about their involvement in that scene. The audience could also request a role circle involving characters important to the conflict but not actually seen in performance, such as the parents of a child being bullied or the police investigating a case of discrimination. In this case the actors in the forum theatre would take on these roles and answer the questions in character.

## **3. Implementation**

### **Devising the forum performance**

#### **Type A**

The performance is a fictional conflict devised to be as authentic in depiction as possible, presented non-judgmentally and very thoroughly backgrounded.



The headlines technique (see *Ways into drama work*) is a very effective method for devising this conflict.

## Type B

The performance is a reconstruction of a piece of conflict from the real life of a member of the group of actor-participants. However, this real life story is fictionalised as it is developed by contributions from the other actors and by the use of techniques such as role circle.

A video demonstration of a Type B reconstruction is available [here](#).

### For both Type A and Type B

The following should be made as clear as possible in performance and repeatable:

- the dramatic context and setting
- who is the protagonist
- the relationships of all the characters seen or mentioned
- the motives of the key characters
- exactly what happened, what was spoken and what were the characters' reactions
- and in the case of the 3-scene version, how the conflict escalated from latent, through emerging, to manifest.

## Playing the scene

The Joker or Host introduces the actors who perform the scenes, while the audience watches. This should be repeated to help the audience start to become familiar with the situation and characters. The play is frozen at the moment of breakdown.

A video of the play *What about the children* is available [here](#).





## The forum

The Joker or Host invites members of the audience to discuss the scene and to suggest behaviour changes and interventions during the action, by any of the characters portrayed, that might have averted the breakdown or resolved the conflict. These must be credible and authentic within the personalities and attitudes of the characters. At this stage the Joker or Host and the audience can request the use of the three classroom process drama techniques to enhance the forum. A number of characters can be hot-seated, chosen scenes can be freeze-framed and the characters thought tracked and a variety of role circles developed.

[A video demonstration of hot seating and thought tracking is available here.](#)

The Joker or Host then asks the actors to re-enact the scene exactly as before, but stops the play to substitute any spect-actor (audience member) who wishes to intervene as any character in the play at any time. If the audience is very timid, the original actor may be asked to enact the behaviour suggested, but this is only a last resort. Before actually taking over the role of the character, the spect-actor can request a hot seat or other technique first.

The Joker or Host and other spect-actors watch the scene and judge the appropriateness and effectiveness of the intervention. If they believe the intervention was unauthentic either an audience member or the Joker or Host calls 'magic'. This would include bringing in a convenient but unlikely device (such as a lotto win to solve a money conflict), or improbable behaviour from those characters as presented (such as a sudden burst of tolerance from a dedicated racist) as a solution. The spect-actors discuss whether the change was in fact unauthentic and they vote. If the vote confirms 'magic' then other solutions may be tried.

It is common for a number of solutions to be tried and the task of the actors is (within the bounds of the fiction) to make solution of the problem as difficult as possible, though without themselves resorting to 'magic'.

[A video demonstration of a range of interventions is available here.](#)

The kind of intervention permitted in forum theatre performance, while it makes for an entertaining and thought-provoking exercise, is in some ways not very authentic. In real-life conflict management and certainly in mediation practice, it is uncommon for the most appropriate intervention to be at the flashpoint or



during an episode of confrontation. Where the protagonists' egos are strongly involved they are likely to be most aggressive and defensive. Mediators often talk separately to the protagonists and try to resolve some of the most burning issues, to take some of the emotional heat from the situation, before bringing the protagonists together.

## Beyond the forum

After letting the forum performance demonstrate that there are no easy or immediate answers to that conflict, the Joker or Host divides the spect-actors into sub-groups of five to six students. He explains that the conflict is too difficult to solve on the spot and that a mediator would talk separately to at least one of the protagonists, to cool them down and get their help in resolving the conflict. The group is asked to nominate which one of the protagonists they think would be best or most appropriate to target for mediation and then to discuss how they would approach that character and begin the mediation process.

In addition, the group should:

- identify one person NOT depicted in the scene(s) performed who might be able to start the mediation process. It might be somebody already mentioned in the scenario, such as the parent or brother or sister of a protagonist. If nobody likely is suggested, then it might be a more detached or professional mediator, such as a teacher or counsellor
- nominate a time and place for the encounter (that fits in with the scenario)
- nominate one member from the group to take on the role of that mediator
- discuss and decide the strategy for addressing the conflict.

Then in turn each group announces their chosen protagonist and quickly sets up the space appropriate to the encounter. The group's nominee then plays out this scene with the chosen actor, whose task as the protagonist is to respond in role, but make it as difficult as possible (but just possible) for the strategy to work. Again, the audience observes, ready to call 'magic' if either actor bends probability too far. The three classroom process drama techniques can be used to enhance this extended forum work and any member of the performance group or the audience may request a hot seat, thought tracking or a role circle.

A video demonstration of a fourth scene is available [here](#).



## 4. Enhanced forum theatre example

This piece of enhanced forum theatre was performed by a group of Year 9 focus class students to the rest of their class as the outcome of their work in the *Cooling Conflicts* program. Although the key class group of Years 11 and 12 students initially assisted the Year 9s in developing the piece, in performance it was all their own work, except for the role of Joker or Host, which was taken by one of the key class senior drama students.

Their enhanced forum theatre piece was based on the experiences of Tranh, a Vietnamese girl in the group. She had described how she arrived at a new school in the middle of the year and was victimised because of her poor spoken English. Tranh told the story but did not want to act in it or contribute to its development. Her reluctance to perform or be a leader was characteristic of the other Vietnamese students in the class, particularly the girls. However, once the rest of the group started dramatising the story, Tranh stepped in actively, correcting the mistakes they were making and directing the action.

When developing forum theatre it is vital to background the story as Tranh did for the actors in her story. In this way the context of the performance will have authenticity. It is equally important for the actors to background their own characters to give them genuine motivations for their actions, rather than just presenting them as the heroes or villains of the piece. All the characters in forum theatre must be represented with integrity if the work is to be valuable in conflict management.

When Tranh's story was performed as a piece of forum theatre for the rest of the class, there were a number of interventions from the audience, none of them successful, until a final, ingenious attempt by a student de-escalated the conflict with extraordinary effectiveness.



## Tranh's story

The Joker or Host introduces the story and the characters involved, and sets the scene in the classroom, telling the audience Scene One involves latent conflict. The audience is instructed to watch the play through very carefully without interruption. At the end of each scene the Joker or Host introduces the next scene, describing the time, place and stage of conflict.

### **Scene One: Latent conflict**

The forum begins with the teacher in the story introducing Tranh to her new class. A number of students' mock her attempts at spoken English and two girls in particular, Libby and Tasha, tease her throughout the lesson. Tranh does not respond.

### **Scene Two: Emerging conflict**

A few days later after school, Libby and Tasha catch Tranh in the playground and begin to tease her, trying to make her say words she is unable to pronounce such as sorry. Again Tranh does not respond. The girls begin to call her names and physically bully her, pulling her hair and pushing her around. A group of Vietnamese boys arrive to help Tranh and Libby and Tasha run away.

### **Scene Three: Manifest conflict**

In the classroom the next day, Libby and Tasha have hidden some rotting fruit in Tranh's desk. When Tranh opens her desk, the smell is overpowering. The teacher blames Tranh and the two girls call out insults suggesting that Tranh always eats rotten food. The teacher hears and orders Tranh to tell her what is going on with Libby and Tasha. Tranh tells her about the bullying and the teacher sends the two girls to the principal. As they leave they tell Tranh she is dead meat. When the lesson finishes and Tranh exits the girls are waiting for her.

### **Freeze**



This was the end of Tranh's story. The Joker or Host invited the audience to ask any questions to clarify the story. One boy asked Tranh herself what had happened next and she answered that she had been beaten up, the three of them had been sent to the office and the bullying had continued until the ring leader, Libby, had left the school.

Here the boy from the audience enhanced the forum by actually putting Tranh herself in the *hot seat* and discovering more about the conflict from her directly. The Joker or Host instructed the actors to perform the play again, without interruption, and asked the audience as they were watching to try and identify places at each stage of the conflict where they could intervene as one of the characters to de-escalate the conflict.

The play was performed again without interruption.

A role circle could have been used effectively here to discover more about how the girls involved in the conflict felt about the situation. The involvement of other people such as parents and teachers could also have been explored by using a role circle at this point.

The Joker or Host instructed the actors to perform once more, but this time asked members of the audience to call out 'stop' when they wanted to intervene. She reminded the audience that they could intervene as any character in the play and if they belatedly recognised a place where they could have intervened after the moment had passed, they could stop the action and request a rewind back to that moment.

The play began again and in the second scene in the playground a boy intervened, taking the role of one of the Vietnamese boys who had rescued Tranh. In this role he pursued Libby and Tasha and told them if they ever touched Tranh again his gang would get them. The actors playing Libby and Tasha were briefly nonplussed, but then decided they would go home and phone up all the Australian boys they knew to get them to come to school to fight the Vietnamese boys.

There was laughter and cheers from the audience at this clever piece of improvisation and everyone agreed when the Joker or Host suggested that this intervention had actually made the conflict much worse. The play then proceeded to the end with no further interventions.





The Joker or Host asked if anyone had thought of another intervention and a girl put her hand up. Scene one was run again and the girl took the role of Tasha and told Libby that she should stop teasing Tranh as it wasn't fair. There were shouts of 'magic' from the audience and all agreed with the Joker or Host that this was completely implausible because it departed so far from the character of Tasha.

The play continued and in Scene 3 a boy intervened to take the role of the teacher and after the rotten food incident sent Libby and Tasha home with a note for their parents. They still waited for Tranh outside the school gate. The Joker or Host asked if the intervention was worthwhile and the audience agreed it was but pointed out that it did not work.

At this point thought tracking could have been requested and each of the characters, Libby, Tasha and Tranh asked their thoughts during the confrontation outside the school gate. This would have clearly established that the conflict had been escalated by the teacher and not resolved.

Next a girl asked for a re-wind to the moment after the rotten food incident. She took the role of teacher and separated Libby and Tasha, forcing Libby to sit with Tranh. Both Libby and Tranh objected violently. The teacher told them that they would be forced to sit together until they could get on. Libby again threatened to kill Tranh, blaming her for the teacher's action.

At this stage another girl intervened to take the role of Tranh. This was the first time this had happened in the forum. In role as Tranh the girl offered a deal to Libby – they would pretend to get on in front of the teacher and once the teacher was convinced and separated them, they could be enemies again. Tranh and Libby shook on the deal. *Cheers and applause from the audience.* In the discussion, a few of the audience claimed this was magic, but most disagreed, seeing Tranh's offer as a very clever piece of conflict management and Libby's response as believable in the circumstances. Whether the conflict would resume again was hotly debated, but the clear de-escalation was generally acknowledged.

The class took this particular piece of forum theatre no further. However, the kind of intervention they practised, while it makes for an entertaining and thought-provoking exercise, is in some ways not very authentic. In real-life conflict management and certainly in mediation practice, it is uncommon for the most appropriate intervention to be at the flashpoint or during an episode



of confrontation, where the protagonists' egos are strongly involved and they are likely to be most aggressive and defensive. Mediators often talk separately to the protagonists and try to resolve some of the most burning issues — to take some of the emotional heat from the situation, before bringing the protagonists together.

This would also have been appropriate in this case and if possible, you should move into *Beyond the forum* (page 6) of the enhanced forum theatre to give them practice at more sophisticated forms of mediation.

This piece of forum theatre very clearly illustrates how effectively it can be used to explore conflict relevant to students such as cultural conflict. It also demonstrates just how students can experiment with management strategies to increase their own skill in managing

