

Empowerment of Citizens in a Multicultural Society

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Abstract

This article is based on the project: Empowerment of Citizens in a Multicultural Society. We wanted to explore theatre as intercultural communication related to the challenges faced by our diverse society. Drama students and immigrants worked together based on Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed". They participated as actors in "Forum Theatre" where they staged their own experiences with oppression. Through the medium of "Solidarity Forum Theatre Performance" (SFT) the spectators were invited to discuss and find solutions to oppression in a multicultural society. The spectators took on the main role in Forum Theatre as spect-actors, and through acting they explored different strategies to challenge oppression. The key question is: What potential do phases six and seven in Solidarity Forum Theatre have to empower immigrants and drama students as citizens in a multicultural society?

Keywords: *Theatre of the Oppressed, multicultural society, empowerment, citizen, diversity, drama students, immigrants, spect-actor, solidarity, Solidarity Forum Theatre*

Introduction

In this article we present findings from our project researching Solidarity Forum Theatre (SFT) as a means of intercultural communication and as a tool for the integration process. SFT is built upon and is a further development of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). The Brazilian Augusto Boal is the founder of TO, which consists of a variety of theatrical forms and methods whose main objective is to fight oppression. Forum Theatre is one of the theatre forms in TO. The Latin word Forum means marketplace, and in Forum Theatre we highlight problems and open for debate through theatrical fiction. Augusto Boal claimed that the participants in Forum Theatre ought to be homogenous groups, so that they would have a common identification with the oppression being explored. We have further developed Forum Theatre into Solidarity Forum Theatre, which lends itself to the meeting of two

homogenous groups, namely immigrants and ethnic Norwegians represented by drama students. We have taken the concept of solidarity to mean unity, cohesion, loyalty, mutual responsibility and respect. Together these two groups explore challenges that arise in the meeting of different cultures, religions, values and attitudes through the medium of confronting dialogues. The main objective is to enable the participants to challenge oppression without succumbing to the role of an oppressor themselves and to empower themselves by taking on different roles. To become empowered means going from being a victim to becoming an active participant, from spectator to doer, from recipient to contributor, from weak to strong (www.imdi.no). The intention of SFT is to strengthen the participant's ability to take on the role of the protagonist in their own lives. In this article we will give a detailed account of SFT, research methods, practices and findings. In addition to this detailed account of our research findings, we will discuss results and implications.

The Project, Background and Description

The background for the development of SFT was our participation in the multinational EU-project: Act and Change (2004-2006). The main objective of this project was: An Educational dimension of conflict resolution through cultural production. The result of this is a net-based handbook: (www.actandchange.eu). The experiences from this EU project led to the method of SFT.

The testing and exploration of SFT has been in association with the Drama Studies programme at the University of Stavanger and the Drama and Theatre Communication course (DTK) at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences.

The drama students are mainly ethnic Norwegians. Our students are future teachers and/or future cultural workers in schools, and community cultural workers for both youth and adults. The immigrants in this project are mainly refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants joining their family in Norway. They come from countries in Asia (including Turkey), Africa, Eastern Europe and a few from South and Central America. Many of them received little education before coming to Norway, and some can be considered illiterate. They are youths and adults, aged nineteen and upwards, some of whom have as goal to pass the Norwegian compulsory education examination in order to be accepted at schools for higher secondary education. The project has been undertaken in cooperation with Johannes Learning Centre, Sandnes Learning Centre and Rosenhoff Centre for Adult Education (introductory courses for immigrants).

Solidarity Forum Theatre consists of Seven

Phases

Phase 1: Contact and Contract. The project leaders and the teachers at the learning centres for immigrants discuss time, place and duration of the work.

Phase 2: Knowledge About Solidarity Forum Theatre is given to the drama students.

Phase 3: Mutual Knowledge About Each Group. The drama students receive knowledge about the general situation of the immigrants. The immigrants acquire knowledge about “Communication and Cultural Understanding” through their training course.

Phase 4: Encounter Between Immigrants and Drama Students. This phase involves introductory training with cases from Augusto Boal’s work.

Phase 5: Experienced Life Stories Become Theatre. The drama students and immigrants share their experiences of oppression with each other. They choose every day cases from shops, schools, asylum; restaurants, buses, law office or jobs to be performed on stage where oppression is part of the experience. The forum play is a presentation of reality as we do not wish it to be, an anti-model, in which oppression is evident. The forum play ends when the oppression is at its worst or most tragic. Both drama students and immigrants are actors.

Phase 6: From Spectator to Spect-Actor. The Solidarity Forum Theatre is performed in a canteen, a library or a hall at the training centre for immigrants with larger audiences. The spectators are invited to take the role of the oppressed on stage and explore other forms of reacting to oppressive situations. The spectator then becomes a spect-actor on stage. The Solidarity Forum Theatre is led by a joker, an anti-authoritarian play leader. The joker warms up the spectators with games and exercises.

Phase 7: Experience, Acknowledgement and Reflection. The participants: drama students, immigrants and instructors share their experience from the event.

The key research question is: *What potential do phases six and seven in Solidarity Forum Theatre have to empower immigrants and drama students as citizens in a multi-cultural society?*

The research question is both directed towards the immigrants and the students and their interaction. Can SFT contribute to the integration process and give the participants intercultural competence? What role can SFT play in an integration process between students and immigrants? Can SFT be a tool to stop oppression and

contribute to competence in strategy change?

Research method

In the implementation of the seven phases of SFT our research method has been action research, and what Paulo Freire calls emancipatory action research. Freire claimed that through a liberating approach the researcher leaves the traditional “objective” role and becomes a dedicated researcher. The result is that the researcher gets very close to the area of research, and has as leader of various processes direct and immediate impact on the research area (Freire 2009). In their classic work on action research (1986) Carr and Kemmis divide this method into three main categories: technical, practical and liberating action research and link them to different research traditions. The technical category belongs to the empirical-analytical tradition, the practical is linked to the hermeneutic tradition and the liberating method is linked to the critical research tradition. The research methodology in this project is a combination of these three traditions. Action research is a strategy chosen from the basic wish to solve problems, enhance learning among the participants and produce knowledge about constructive processes of change. In this project we took a number of different roles, as for example process leaders, catalysts, facilitators, inspirators, supervisors, advisors, interlocutors and reporters. To keep the necessary distance needed to give an analytical description of the field of action research, we have used theory as reference and philosophical basis. Because we were two researchers we have alternated in the roles of joker and observer. In our opinion this doubling of roles has ensured quality control of our observations and analysis. Our social role in the field as teachers and jokers in SFT can be compared to the observing participant and the total/complete participant (Junker 1960). Participation is a fundamental condition for action research, both in regard to the research process and also to the processes of change.

Our empirical research findings are based on nine SFT processes, the first in spring 2005 and the final two in the spring of 2011. In this article we base our findings on material collected from four SFT processes, carried out in 2010 and 2011. In 2010 we carried out a total of 11 qualitative research interviews (Kvale 1997) with immigrant students at learning centres, their teachers and drama students from University and University College. The immigrant students had in connection with their training in Norwegian kept a logbook of their experiences with and emotional reactions to SFT. The work process (phase 4, 5, 6 and 7) in the SFT model was documented through videos and photos in 2010 and 2011. We limit the basis of this article to the findings from phase 6 and 7 in SFT from 2010 and 2011. Our observations and analysis as action researchers, the interviews, logbooks, films and photos, and conversations reflecting on the experience should be viewed in light of the key research question stated earlier.

Solidarity Forum Theatre with Findings, Analysis and Discussion

A SFT performance usually consists of four to five forum plays lasting around five minutes each. Even though most immigrant students have no experience of acting, we saw that they accepted to participate as actors in the forum plays with the drama students.

“When my teachers told us that everyone can try to act, I was shocked and scared. But it wasn’t that difficult, because we got help from the nice people. Then I acted with them and my friends from my class, and acting was great fun” (Immigrant).

The drama students are responsible for directing the plays, and the immigrants become their consultants. The forum plays are usually the staging of immigrants’ life stories with situations and events they have experienced as oppressive. By staging their stories, the immigrants get the opportunity to see themselves from an outside perspective, through fiction. The number of spectators can vary from two hundred to three hundred.

Warming up: being allowed to play

The warming up phase is meant to prepare the spectators for the Solidarity Forum Theatre, and entails that the spectators have to be active both verbally and physically. The warming up exercises are both simple and complex. For example a coordination exercise where we made different movements with the right and the left arm, led to laughter. *“As there is no compulsion to succeed, they feel free to give it a try”* (Boal 2002:50). Humour is central to our approach and is used consciously in the warming up phase to create a safe and relaxed environment. One of the immigrants noted in his logbook:

“I haven’t played since I was little. When I am feeling sad I almost always wish I was little again. So that I could play and know nothing about the awfulness [det vonde]...” (Immigrant).

By playing we get in touch with the child within us. By getting in touch with our expressive feelings, we can open up to both joy and sorrow. Joy requires that we are open to ourselves and others, and joy also opens up for what is painful (Norderhaug 1999).

Both photos and videos and our own observations reveal that almost all the spectators participated in the warm up. They were active and seemed engaged. We observed that the participants both smiled and laughed. Being active both physically and verbally, stimulates and challenges the spectators’ creativity. Through this kind of warming up,

Boal claimed that we could create an atmosphere of joy, as a sort of “*artistic communion*” (Boal 2002:23).

We use various assessment exercises to open the participants to questions of an ethical nature and to prepare them for the contents of the forum plays. The objective of these exercises is to make the spectators talk to each other about given themes. An example of such an assessment exercise is: Which qualities do you value and which qualities do you dislike in a friend? Words such as respect, honesty, trust, sharing and support are examples of positive values the spectators mention. Negative words often mentioned are ridicule, backbiting, betrayal, isolation and jealousy. We observed that they became very engaged in the themes during the assessment exercises, and they discussed loudly and intensely. In the summing up of the discussions in the plenary meeting the spectators also contributed. They became visible by voicing their opinions in public and the wall of silence which traditionally exists between actors and spectators in a theatre was broken. The contributions from the spectators were met with applause. Applause is used consciously to create a generous atmosphere. Based on the spectators’ commitment, body language and participation, we argue that we met our objective: to make the spectators communicate and interact within an informal and safe setting. We believe, as did Boal, that the games and exercises are learning for social life and that through these activities one can learn something important about being a citizen (Boal 2004:197).

Solidarity Forum Theatre performance

After the warm up, the performance starts. The spectators are shown the different plays the drama students and the immigrant students have staged. After having watched all the plays once, the spectators are informed by the jokers that the plays will be performed again one at a time. The spectators can shout “stop” when they experience oppression aimed at the protagonist by antagonists in the play. The spectators practice shouting “stop” loudly while simultaneously clapping their hands to stop the play.

Even though the spectators have never performed Forum Theatre before, we are surprised how quickly they grasp the rules, enter the stage and play the protagonist. We observe great involvement; temperatures run high and strong feelings are expressed. We experience that there is both the determination and the courage to participate in this form of discussion or confrontational dialogue. There are surprisingly many initiatives from the spectators, despite poor Norwegian language-skills and little theatrical experience. The themes and the solutions in SFT are many and varied. At this point we would like to present three examples of forum plays with some interactions, solutions and interpretations.

Take power from the oppressor through humour

The forum play “In the Store” is about a sales assistant who did not allow the customer, an immigrant, to try on an expensive jacket. The customer is directed to the

bargain counter in the store. An important rule in Forum Theatre is that you have to have a clearly defined oppressed protagonist, and only this protagonist can be replaced (Engelstad 2001). The joker asks the spectators who they think is being oppressed, so that there is a common understanding of who is the oppressed protagonist in the play. This person can be replaced with a spect-actor. The unanimous answer was that the customer was being oppressed. We also asked if they had any ideas about how the customer could have behaved differently. Many entered the stage, took on the role of the protagonist, and tested various strategies. When the spect-actor ignored or tried to argue with the shop assistant, she became even more determined and unsympathetic. When one of the spectators entered the stage and asked politely whether the jacket was of an especially poor quality since the sales assistant had to guard it so closely, the spectators were especially enthusiastic. She took power from the oppressor through humour and an unexpected proposal, without being an oppressor.

Even though the play was about oppression, ended tragically and was an anti-model of reality, the attempts to stop the oppression were characterised by high spirits and joy. We interpret this reaction as a relief that the resistance and struggle against oppression were over. Joy is released when we meet the genuine in ourselves and in other human beings. Joy perforates power systems and oppressive structures, and gives renewed energy to continue one's life (Norderhaug 1999).

Our informants confirmed this and expressed that through the SFT experience they had learnt something important about life, while at the same time having fun. One immigrant wrote: *"I have learnt lots of things. How one can move forward, how life is and what I can do and we have had great fun."* When SFT has the power to stop oppression, and the spect-actors transform from being passive to being active, we claim that SFT is empowering and we agree with Boal that Forum Theatre can be a "rehearsal for reality" (Boal 2002:xxiv).

To give hope to the oppressed

The forum play "The religious police" was about an experience an immigrant woman had had in her home country. She came from a country where covering her hair by wearing the hijab was mandatory. She was in medical school and on her way to the university she was stopped by "the religious police". Some of her hair had loosened from the hijab and had become visible. She was taken to the university management and was expelled permanently from university because of the visible hair. Her story was staged and her final line was *"Now my life dream is shattered"*.

The spectators were invited by the jokers to suggest amendments so that she could avoid being expelled from university in her home country. Many suggestions were acted out on stage, but it was difficult to find a solution which both university management and the religious police were willing to accept. The suggested solution that was finally accepted was that the university management expelled her for only three weeks and gave her a second chance because she was an excellent student. It was argued that the university needed good students, the country needed good doctors

and the university would eventually receive the honours of having trained an excellent doctor.

It can be claimed that this suggested solution was “magic” since the oppression had taken place several years earlier in her home country. Boal maintained that a solution in Forum Theatre was magical if it seemed unrealistic or utopian (Engelstad 2001). Magical solutions might also seem easy and superficial. It is the joker’s task to investigate and discuss the suggested solutions to clarify if they are credible and realistic. This is necessary for the enacted conflict to be taken seriously.

In this play we argue that the “magic” solution had value, as it demonstrated possible actions which could have taken place in her home country. To visualise an utopian ideal action can contribute to a sense of hope in the protagonist and thus counteract the feeling of impotence. To feel powerless is the core of every depression. The conviction that you are powerless and that everything is hopeless, strengthens the sense of helplessness (Norderhaug 1999).

To recognise that there is hope in the role of protagonist, we term aesthetic acknowledgement. An aesthetic recognition can lead to a deepened understanding of a phenomenon (Songe-Møller 1993:108). Intellect and emotions, body and voice become tools of reflection. In the reflection conversation afterwards, she told us as she cried: *“This was the first time I shared my pain with others. I hope it is the last time I cry for it”* (Immigrant).

One and a half month previously she had decided to stop attending the learning centre, as she had been seriously ill, and her family situation was very difficult. She demonstrated physically how she had been, bending her back and bowing her head with arms dangling. With tears streaming down her face, she lifted her head, straightened her back and raising her arms upwards and outwards, she said in a strong voice: *“But today I am not going to quit school”* (Immigrant). Spontaneous applause and expressions of joy filled the room. Many were emotionally touched by her statement. We argue that through SFT there was, as Boal called it, a *space of liberty* where she could free her memories, emotions, imaginations, she could think of her past in the present, and invent the future instead of waiting for it (Boal 2002:5).

Through the SFT experience she realised that she could influence her own life. The religious police in her home country had prevented her from getting an education, and now she was on the verge of stopping herself. This is what Boal called “cop in the head” (Engelstad 2004:47). From having been an object for others, she now wanted to be the subject in her own life. She expressed that she had obtained new hope for her own future. Hope implies that you focus on new possibilities, and is often the result of an active effort (Akerø 1993). She was active in her process of self-discovery. We experienced that her recognition spread power and hope to the others. To transfer this recognition from theatrical fiction to real life is challenging. SFT can lead to new hope, but this requires action.

To stop oppression without becoming an oppressor

The forum play “On the Bus” is about an ethnic Norwegian youth who oppressed a bus driver. The bus driver was an immigrant. The young person, who had forgotten his bus pass, refused to pay the full fare. A spect-actor who came on stage and took over the part as bus driver, ended up being threatening and very aggressive towards the ethnic Norwegian teenager. His answer to oppression was to become an oppressor. To stop oppression without becoming an oppressor, is the main rule of Forum Theatre. As jokers we stopped this interaction because it was oppressive. We asked the spectators if they accepted the behaviour of the bus driver, which they did not. We then asked the spectators for advice about the possible action of the bus driver in this situation. The spectators advised the spect-actor how to behave, and told him to explain in a firm but friendly way why he had to charge full price. It was very difficult for this spect-actor not to behave aggressively, so he had to play the scene several times. Finally he succeeded in breaking the spell of aggression, and was able to communicate in a respectful and “non-aggressive way”.

In this role on stage he was the representative of the spectators. The spectators identified with him. Both he and the spectators reacted with delight that he was able to overcome his oppressive behaviour. In doing so he demonstrated how both the oppressed and the oppressor regained the human dignity they had lost through oppression and submission (Freire 2009).

In these three plays the spectators tested out new roles as spect-actors. It was a rehearsal for reality. SFT functioned as a dress rehearsal for real life, and the participants were trained to meet difficult and confrontational situations. We use the Norwegian language in SFT, because it is the common language of all the participants. The Norwegian language can present a challenge to some immigrants. They can have problems understanding and expressing themselves verbally in the play because they are still in the process of learning Norwegian. We have discovered during the years with this work that it is particularly important to stress physical theatre and the non-verbal language in SFT. In addition, when the themes in the plays felt relevant to the spectators, we observed that the immigrants were willing to overcome language barriers to contribute to finding solutions to the oppressive situation. Several of the informants communicated that it felt liberating to express themselves on the stage through body language without being dependent on verbal skills.

“People who did not understand a word of Norwegian came up on stage. They came and they tried, because they understood the body language and they saw situations that they recognised” (Drama student).

One of the immigrants thought that it was especially important to be allowed to use the body as a means of expression:

“Everything becomes simpler, first of all. People understand much more what we are

talking about when we use our body. Maybe a person doesn't understand what you talk, but if you use your body and show with body language, then he understands it" (Immigrant).

Boal claimed that working with images and using physical language can be more democratic, because "...it does not privilege more verbally articulate people" (Boal 2002:xxiii). This is an important factor in SFT. *Through physical language the spectators made themselves understood despite weaker language skills. To be citizens in a multicultural society requires communicative skills. In SFT voice, body, emotions, gestures and intellect are all used in the communicative process.*

Three central elements in SFT

From our empirical studies we have selected three elements which we consider central to SFT: The Stop, The Life Story and The Attitude Change. We will now present these three elements with analysis and discussion.

The Stop

To shout "stop" is the Forum Theatre's means for ending oppression. The idea is that the oppression in the plays is meant to be provocative and unpleasant for the spectators, so much so that they feel the urge to radically change the situation through stopping the play, entering the stage and taking centre stage in the play. On one occasion, after the first viewing of the plays, the anti-models, we had to run after one of the spectators. She was so provoked by the content of the forum play that she wanted to walk out. We had to remind her that we would re-perform the play and that she could shout "stop" and become a spect-actor and change the play so that it ended differently. She subsequently joined the discussion later in the process of Forum Theatre.

A Norwegian language teacher at a learning centre felt very moved when the spectators shouted "stop". She claimed that this was the first time that many of these immigrants had had the opportunity to say "stop" and set a limit to the unacceptable.

"... ..because some of them have never managed to say stop to anyone – not even to parents – not even to siblings, because they take it for granted that "that's the way it is". They say that: "They oppress me" and the only possibility is just to accept it.... It becomes a fantastic aha- experience that: No...it does not HAVE to be like that" (Teacher).

She claimed that many immigrants accept oppressive elements in life because it is an integral part of their upbringing, culture and religious interpretation. In their encounter with SFT they were given the opportunity to raise their voices, show their position and say stop when they disagreed. A person who says stop is a rebel who says no to

the unwanted. Simultaneously this person says yes to something new and better happening.

“In other words, his ‘no’ affirms the existence of a borderline ... In a certain way, he confronts an order of things which oppresses him with the insistence on a kind of right not to be oppressed beyond the limit that he can tolerate” (Camus 1961: 13).

Through SFT the spectators obtained a platform and a possibility to set limits and test alternatives. They were given the opportunity to shout stop to express a need for change or a rebellion. The stop indicated that “I want something new to happen”. *“In Theatre of the Oppressed, reality is shown not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for – to become what we have the potential to be” (Boal 2002:6).* The mind-blowing transition from passive spectator to active participant took on a collective and unifying dimension as the spect-actor took on the leading role on stage and tested out changes in order to break down oppression. Those who shouted “stop” and entered the stage, were given the full support of the spectators through applause and verbal support. To stop something takes social and creative courage. We observed unity and solidarity when the spectators shouted stop. The stop and the interaction in SFT can be characterised as a collective act of rebellion, which contributes to a strengthened unity and solidarity among the participants. We also experienced that a few immigrants stopped the play, entered the stage, but had no suggestions for a solution. Maybe they were overwhelmed by stage fright in front of an audience of several hundred people? Or maybe they just had an urgent need to stop the oppressive situation in the forum play? Be that as it may, they took the first step towards change by saying stop. The stop and the following interaction empower the spectator and the spect-actor by revealing their own values and attitudes. The spect-actor practices citizenship. By revealing and challenging the role of the victim in various situations, we maintain that SFT stimulated the will to rebel and change in the involved parties. The question is: Are these experiences transferable to the multicultural society, to the various familiar and personal arenas of the participants? This study cannot answer this question. But we can ascertain that the participants have become more aware of the mechanisms of oppression. The liberating potential of SFT is transferable to real life, but this requires conscious and active participation.

The life story

By staging the life stories of the immigrants, we are confirming both for them and the spectators that we believe in their stories. Varvin (2008) emphasises the importance to an immigrant of having their story acknowledged. It can be of positive value both mentally and physically. He claims that it can be health enhancing. One woman who participated in the complete process, wrote in her logbook: “This was a completely new experience. I have never felt this kind of happiness before...” (Immigrant). A young boy said at the end of a SFT performance: “This has been my best day in Norway” (Immigrant). They had recognised the themes of everyday racism in the plays. There were similarities between the episodes enacted and their own experiences and stories. Their identification was analogue. “These are our lives, thank you for performing them as it really is”, said a Muslim woman in the Minerva project. She

experienced a complete identification with the play. This also happened to another woman who had her life story staged. She chose to become a spect-actor and replaced the protagonist, thus acting herself and her life from years back.

“To see one’s own life staged was so powerful that I had to leave the room several times. To be allowed to go up on stage and say what in reality I was never able to say to my husband, was liberating!” (Immigrant).

One immigrant wrote in their logbook:

“We performed dramas that were about something that happens often that is reality. It is good to know something that I didn’t know about how people treated each other, but I haven’t only learnt that. I have also learnt how I will handle it if I experience such things. And that changed me a lot” (Immigrant).

A solidary identification took place. The identification with the content of the plays and their themes was solidary, analogue or complete (Boal, 2004). The presence was intense, and we observed a strong concentration both on stage and amongst the spectators. The spectators were completely silent during the plays. Some were sitting on the edge of their seats, many were deeply moved and had to wipe away their tears. This incited a strong sense of community spirit and solidarity. Solidarity in a group can work as protection against traumatic experiences (Herman 1995).

To play-act together, to participate in a theatre group where you can trust each other, listen to each other and create something together, led to a heightened awareness of mutual responsibility and respect. We observed that loyalty and interaction prevailed between immigrants and drama students all through the process. After the project was finished, quite a few have kept in touch through online social media, and both drama students and immigrants have initiated social meetings. Our hope is that the solidarity which we observed in course of the process between the actors and the spectators when the life stories were acted out, can be transferred to the multicultural society. That life stories are universal and recognised and confirmed by the spectators, tells us that we have analogue experiences with oppression. To have a heightened awareness of this can reduce xenophobia and encourage solidarity, in our opinion. We maintain that a respectful encounter between stage and spectators and among the actors took place.

Attitude change

To change from being an object into becoming a subject, take the leading role and stop oppression in a respectful and dignified way, is an immense process of change. Immigrants are often placed in the role of the victim because they are regarded as “assistance seekers” by various agencies (Varvin 2008). One immigrant student said that he had learnt something about how to break out of this role of victim. He had through the SFT work learnt more about Norwegian culture and how to stop oppression in a good and polite way, so that “...we become nicer to each other”. Another immigrant student said: “Now I understand – after theatre – what I can do

about oppression. Before that I could not understand... ” (Immigrant). Together with three of his fellow students he expressed the opinion that they ought to do this several times “to practice and to understand better”. We agree with these immigrants, and we claim that these quotations are representative. Several participants voiced that they needed training and experience in stopping oppression in a respectful way. SFT can function as such a “training-place” and “...it should and can also be a means of transforming society” (Boal 2002: 16).

SFT events led to a change of attitude for several of the participants. This is what they claim in interviews after the SFT experience, and we want to refer to some of the statements.

One of the drama students claimed that breaking oppression consisted largely in a willingness to make personal changes. The student shared that she personally had changed her attitudes towards immigrants after having participated in this project. She was an actor in a forum play where a Muslim girl experienced being oppressed in a clothing store. The sales assistant was suspicious, disliked her touching the clothes and thought that she ought to shop for cheaper clothes. The drama student had for many years worked in a clothing store and said that through her participation in Forum Theatre she had realised that she had acted oppressively towards immigrants. “I have a completely different patience, a completely different attitude to immigrants when I meet them in a shop context than I had before” (Drama student).

Another student said that she did not know any immigrants before the project, and now, since participating in the project, she had started smiling at unknown immigrants on the bus.

“I experienced that now when I sat on the bus yesterday, I smiled differently to people who were not Norwegian. It probably sounds a little crazy, but I have a new perspective on seeing others from other nations, and that is thanks to you. Thank you for having made me a little smarter” (Drama student to immigrants).

Several of the drama students expressed that before the project, they had had little or no contact with immigrants, and that the direct and personal meeting with the immigrants had given them unique insight and knowledge.

“You get a completely different respect and understanding through a personal meeting compared to what you can read and learn purely theoretically. It was a dialogue where both parties were humble and open towards the other, and therefore there was room for so much experience sharing” (Drama student).

One student said that the week we were working with SFT together with immigrants, had changed him and his attitudes.

“My acceptance of immigrants has risen sky high, and all the prejudices picked up through the media and by not having contact with that group, they have completely

evaporated and been replaced by a very strong sympathy... I experience now”
(Drama student).

Many of the drama students who are going on to work in schools, expressed that they felt better suited as teachers in a multicultural society after this project: *“You have helped me to become a much better teacher and a much better human being”* (Drama student).

One of the teachers at a learning centre said that she thinks that Forum Theatre could be a suitable tool for good integration processes. *“This demonstrates oppression in everyday life very well – it highlights the problems. I think this instigates a thought process in the participants”*. She believed that the participants in SFT would put into practice their experiences from the interaction when similar situations arose in real life.

A reasonable interpretation would be that both drama students and immigrants have changed attitudes and have gained insight into their own role in relation to themselves, “the others” and society. Immigrants in this project have different cultural backgrounds and might also be in conflict with one other. A number of immigrants expressed that even though they can be characterised as a homogenous group because they are immigrants, there could be racism and oppression between the various groups. *“Before I did not like Afghans, for example. I thought “why do they come here”, but now I have learnt to look at them differently”* (Immigrant). SFT had an impact on oppression which can take place between groups and within a group, both in the group of drama students and the immigrant group. As jokers in SFT this is a challenge you have to be highly aware of.

Both drama students and immigrants expressed that a “before and after” SFT attitude change towards ethnic Norwegians and other immigrants had taken place. *“I have seen that there are many good people here in Norway. I hadn’t seen that before because we are not together”* (Immigrant). Some immigrants said they had prejudices against Norwegians because they did not know them or had contact with any of them. *“Before this I would never have believed that I would meet so many nice people here in Norway. Thank you so much. You have opened up to us”* (Immigrant). SFT gives experiences which can lead to new and responsible actions between ethnic Norwegians and immigrants in the public arena. We claim that this can contribute to the strengthening of integration in a multicultural society.

Based on our experiences with SFT, we maintain that it is important to risk highlighting problematic challenges which can arise in interpersonal encounters in a multicultural society. This can be done through confrontational dialogues, and SFT functioned as such a dialogue arena. Both groups could identify with self-experienced conflicts and oppressive situations in society. SFT activated and involved both drama students and immigrants with varied language skills. Empowerment took place.

Conclusion

The Theatre of the Oppressed was introduced by Augusto Boal several years ago. However, this application to the situation of immigrants in the Nordic countries is very relevant for breaking down barriers and prejudices between immigrants and native citizens. Solidarity Forum Theatre opens up to a kind of communication where the participants learn to recognise each other through the aesthetics, methods and forms of expression of the theatre. The methodology of SFT stimulated dialogue and discussion and led to respectful encounters between the drama students and the immigrants.

The mutual stereotyping of the other was abandoned and replaced by dialogue and establishment of close relations between immigrants and drama students. Integration was not one-sided, both Norwegians and immigrants realised the need for integration in the multicultural society. The categorisation of immigrants and drama students finally ceased. Only one category was left, human beings.

The findings from this research are encouraging as the method opens up for discussions and reflections within an amusing and engaging setting. Difficult dilemmas were tested in a secure environment. Lacking verbal language was compensated by non-verbal expression. Alternative reactions to oppression were discussed and tested out and gave rise to a change in attitudes. This triggered both joy and hope that problems can be solved and situations and persons can change.

SFT functioned as a tool for stopping oppression. Through this experience the participants practiced transforming from passive spectators into active citizens, from recipients to contributors. In this process of change lies an acceptance of citizenship in the society. Boal thought that a person ultimately became a fellow citizen when he/she actively participated in the changing of society. SFT can strengthen pluralism as a resource in a multicultural society. Integration is basically about how we meet one other as fellow human beings.

SFT functioned as a meeting place and functioned as a dress rehearsal for real life. SFT gave hope of positive future actions in a multicultural society. We think this could be the starting point of empowerment for both immigrants and drama students. Our own habits of categorisation ceased as we worked through the phases in SFT. It was no longer about drama students and immigrants, about “us” and “them”, or about minority and majority, but about fellow human beings interacting. On the basis of our research material, we claim that the participants’ competence as fellow citizens in a multicultural society was strengthened. Through SFT an exchange of cultural opinion formation and practice took place, and a diversity of discourses was carried out in solidarity. We believe that in the future there will be a need for more of these kinds of meeting places, which can become valuable contributions to a meaningful integration

process.

“In truth, a session of Theatre of the Oppressed has no end, because everything which happens in it must extend into life. Theatre shall never end!” (Boal 2002: 276)

Further Research

The project has opened doors to various partners and also given us insight into what complex and complicated processes may be required to empower fellow citizens in a multicultural society. In the project a first encounter between two “so-called” categories of persons took place. Several participants asked for a follow up when the project was over. They experienced a need for more training in order to master oppressive situations. A longitudinal research project and/or a quantitative study could further explore the validity and relevance of our findings. A comparative study of attitudes of the participants before and after a SFT process would also be very interesting. What changes take place in regard to acculturation? Which attitudes linked to integration have shifted in both immigrants and students? A longitudinal research project might give some answers to these questions. We see the need for educating art and cultural workers in the areas of theatre (SFT) as intercultural communication. Having received this training, they could then teach SFT at learning centres, asylum centres and schools. This would contribute to increased integration in the multicultural society and counteract mutual stereotyping, segregation and marginalisation.

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Film Documentation from SFT 2011 by film team from UiS.

Photo Documentation from SFT 2011 by Elin Eike Worren, Photographer.

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Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 30, November 2012.
URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>