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What Can Philosophy Learn from Improvisational Theater?

Erica Preston-Roedder
Occidental College

ABSTRACT: Can we learn about philosophical practice, and philosophical teaching, by examining an apparently very different discipline—improvisational theater? The short answer: yes! In particular, a consideration of improvisational theater reveals four values—play/playfulness, physicality, ensemble, and inclusivity—all of which have a role in philosophical practice and pedagogy. First, we can think of philosophy as a form of intellectual play, where theatrical techniques demonstrate that play can deepen the focus of our students. Second, philosophical teaching can be done in ways that productively utilize physicality in order to maintain focus or allow students to express their ideas through their bodies. Third, philosophical practice, and teaching, should aim to establish ensemble, which can be understood as a social configuration which establishes equality in terms of mutual dependence and responsiveness. Finally, inclusivity in the philosophical classroom can be heightened through the use of appropriately adapted improvisational techniques.

In addition to laying the conceptual groundwork to understand the connection between improvisational theater and philosophy, this essay includes a number of specific exercises for instructors who wish to introduce these techniques to the classroom.

KEYWORDS: philosophy in schools, precollege philosophy, play, theater, physicality

Introduction

IN 2018, I BEGAN AN AFTER-SCHOOL philosophy club at a local elementary school. That same year, I had three formative experiences. First, within my club, I was struck by what I came to (affectionately) term 'the problem of wiggly bottoms.' Despite my attempts to design interactive and engaging lessons, some of my

second-graders simply could not sit still long enough to engage in philosophical discussion. My second formative experience was a conversation with a colleague, Désirée Zamorano, who—channeling the educational theorist Paulo Freire—urged me to "avoid making my classroom another site of oppression" (Zamorano 2018). Although I had started the philosophy club hoping to provide an inclusive space for open-ended questioning, Zamorano asked hard questions about whether my club was rewarding the same students who did well in a traditional classroom setting. Finally, my own child attended a series of classes in children's theater, one which took a distinctive pedagogical approach emphasizing improvisation and movement. As I watched her theater class engage in a very different kind of pedagogy, I found myself wondering what philosophy, and philosophical pedagogy, might learn from theater.

In this paper, I argue that we can understand certain important features of philosophical practice, and of how to teach philosophy to young people, by learning from the implicit and explicit characteristics of certain theatrical practices. Specifically, I will identify four characteristics: play/playfulness, physicality, ensemble, and inclusivity, and I will suggest that each of these can, and should, play an important role in philosophy. Moreover, I will suggest that such characteristics can and should shape how we teach in philosophical classrooms. Thus, a consideration of theater can illuminate both conceptual features of what philosophy can/should be, and it offers us practical insight into how to teach philosophy, especially to young people.

My essay will proceed as follows. Section 2 will provide some background, including examples of theatrical exercises. Subsequently, sections 3–6 will focus on each of the four values mentioned above: play/playfulness, physicality, ensemble, and inclusivity. Section 7 will offer a brief conclusion.

For reasons of scope, this essay will focus on using theatrical techniques with elementary students (grades 1–6), although interesting questions arise about how older students—including undergraduates—might benefit from related practices. In addition, also for reasons of scope, I will restrict my attention specifically to improvisational theater as characterized by two practitioners: Viola Spolin and Michael Rohd. My aim is to demonstrate how we, as philosophers, can usefully learn from this theatrical tradition.

Before turning to the heart of this essay, I'd like to frame this project using an old joke, as retold by David Foster Wallace:

> There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?" (Wallace 2009, 3–4)

For the purposes of this essay, those of us who live and work in philosophy are the two young fish: we are surrounded by practices, values, and assumptions about the nature of philosophy, and these—like water—are so familiar to us that they become difficult to see. One way of getting around this problem (one which is not available to fish) is to emerge from our own environments and spend some time elsewhere. When we return, we may find that we see our native surroundings in new and different ways. This, then, is the goal of this essay. By reflecting on certain theatrical practices, we can ultimately return home and see illuminated features of our philosophical practice and pedagogy which may have been hiding in plain sight.

Section 2. Spolin, Rohd, and Improvisational Public Theater

As mentioned earlier, this essay focuses on an improvisational tradition in public theater. While comedic uses of improvisation are probably most familiar to U.S. audiences (Second City, Upright Citizen's Brigade), several thinkers have developed improvisational techniques for other settings. This essay will consider two texts in the non-comedic improvisational tradition: Viola Spolin's *Theater Games for the Classroom* and Michael Rohd's *Theater for Community, Conflict and Dialogue*. Providing a brief overview of these two texts, and examples of the kinds of exercises that form their practice will set the stage (pun intended!) for subsequent discussion.

Viola Spolin's Theater Games for the Classroom. Following Dewey's progressive educational experiments in the early 1900s, schools began to experiment with teaching drama in a less-scripted form. For instance, students might re-enact a fable multiple times, switching parts, and experimenting with different dramatizations (Popovich 1961, 119). Viola Spolin, who worked from the 1920s through the 1980s, was an influential figure in the movement to develop improvisational forms and bring them to children. First, as a teacher, and later through op-eds, workshops, and books, Spolin shaped the form of improvisational theater as it is known today ("Viola Spolin Biography" n.d.). In her body of work, Spolin described, developed, and refined a large number of improvisational techniques for use with children,[1] some of which are described in Figure 1 (next page). Her games are generally simple in structure and designed to be accessible even to relatively young children.

Michael Rohd's Theater for Community, Conflict and Dialogue. Michael Rohd's approach was influenced by two major figures: Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal. While Spolin's work is aimed at children, Boal's influential 'Theater of the Oppressed' uses improvisational theatrical practices as a political instrument to empower entire communities (Boal 1979). Michael Rohd combines elements of both Spolin and Boal, ultimately deploying improvisational techniques to create and enrich dialogue around difficult issues, such as HIV prevention (Rohd 1998). While Rohd's workshops can include quite complex exercises, he also advocates

Figure 1: Sample Exercises from Spolin's *Theater Games for the Classroom*

- *Play Ball*. Players attempt to keep an imaginary ball above their head. The facilitator can deepen the game with commentary, e.g. "The ball is going faster now!" "Hit it higher!" (48).
- *Mirror Mirror*: Students work in pairs, mirroring each other's movements. In their pairs, students decide who will be the leader first; the other person is the 'mirror.' At some point, without stopping the actions, the facilitator shouts, "Switch!" and they switch roles. Once students are using their whole bodies, shout "On your own!" This means that no one is the designated leader or follower, but they continue to mirror (75).
- *It's Heavier When It's Full*. Two or three students work together to mime carrying an imaginary container which will they fill, carry, empty, and carry again.

for the use of simpler exercises for skill-building. Sample exercises from Rohd's work are included in Figure 2 (next page).

Section 3. Play and Playfulness

Spolin and Rohd's exercises have elements of play and playfulness. Keeping an imaginary ball in the air, navigating a crowded rectangle, or creating an imaginary machine—all of these activities seem to involve play. Indeed, both authors explicitly call on the notion of play in their writing, e.g., Spolin describes her exercises as "play" or "games" (1986, 3), and Rohd ruminates on the playful quality of his exercises writing, "It is during these activities that you will be reminded how infrequently we human beings play together" (28).

Because the notions of play and playfulness are central to this form of improvisational theater, it is worth developing these two concepts in more detail. Spolin characterizes play as creative problem-solving: one faces a set of rules, and one plays by using ingenuity and creativity to solve the problem at hand. Unlike in philosophy, these "problems" are often spatial or physical—how will you keep an imaginary ball in the air? How do you demonstrate that an (imaginary) container is heavy?

Building on Spolin's account, we might suggest that what centrally characterizes this kind of play is (a) creative problem-solving (b) within the existence of certain constraints/rules where (c) one's focus on the activity is sustained by the activity itself. This account of play is intended to illuminate certain important central, normatively interesting features of play, but it is not intended as necessary and sufficient conditions. Given the well-documented challenges in

Figure 2: Sample Exercises from Rohd's *Theater for Community, Conflict and Dialogue*

- *Zip Zap Zop*. One person holds an imaginary lightning bolt in her hand. She shouts, "Zip!" and throws it to someone. That person pretends to catch it, and then throws it, while shouting, "Zap!" The next person catches, and throws it, shouting, "Zop!" The game should be played rapidly and energetically (22–23).
- *Machine*. The first player begins with some sort of rhythmic motion (e.g., an arm 'hammering' down). The next player adds their own body to create a motion that is connected to the first (but not physically touching). For instance, the next player might pantomime one hand being 'flattened'. Play continues until all are participating, ultimately resulting in an elaborate 'machine' (26).
- *Leading Someone (Eyes Closed)*. Create a rectangle of space (e.g., by using chairs to denote four corners). Half of the group lines up on each side, and one line closes their eyes. Then, the facilitator silently points at one individual from each line. On this cue, the open-eyed player takes the closed-eyed participant by the hand and leads them into the rectangle. The goal is to ensure that the closed-eyed participant does not touch anyone else during the game. The rectangle slowly becomes filled with pairs of participants, and the game gets more difficult as the space gets more crowded (34).

providing necessary and sufficient conditions for the notion of 'game,' it would be foolhardy to attempt a definition of 'play' (Wittgenstein 1953).

The first two elements of this account draw heavily on Spolin's own characterization. The last element of this account, which describes the agent's motivation to continue playing, may require more elaboration. In play, a person's focus is sustained by the activity itself, not by some extrinsic inducement (such as a reward or punishment). One important feature of play, that is, is that it absorbs attention in such a way that one wants to continue. Often, this is because play is fun! But, as I will note in a moment, play can recruit our focus in other ways, e.g., by being absorbing, exciting, interesting, fascinating, etc.

Notably, because this account includes criteria related to the agent's motivation, the same activity can be work or play for different individuals or at different times. For instance, the activity of drawing a picture might be play for one child, who sits down to do so on a Saturday afternoon, but it may constitute work in a variety of other cases. For instance, drawing will constitute work for an architect who has lost her love of drawing but needs a paycheck, or for a school student who draws in order to avoid censure by her teacher.

This understanding of play as the sort of thing which can, and should, absorb a person's focus is visible within both Spolin and Rohd's texts. Spolin advocates the use of phrases like, "Keep your eye on the ball!" "Use your whole body to throw the ball!" These are intended to keep students focused; the students play, but they play in a focused manner. Rohd writes of *Zip-Zap-Zop*, in which an invisible 'energy bolt' is thrown around the room:

> This game is not to be played casually. Stress the importance of playing and being in it with lots of energy using both the body and voice. Stay focused. There should be no pauses. (22)

In theatrical games, participants engage in play, but—in the best cases—they do so with intense concentration and focus.

In addition to considering the notion of play, the notion of playfulness deserves special scrutiny. Playfulness is an attitude that characterizes some, but not all, play. An intense community soccer game, for instance, might still be play—but it may not be conducted *playfully*. The game is play because the participants are engaged in creative problem-solving, within constraints, and they are motivated to continue to do so by the activity itself, i.e., the intense exhilaration they feel while playing. However, the seriousness with which they take the game belies the claim that they engage playfully. Similarly, a champion chess player might be absorbed in play, but reject the claim that the game is being conducted playfully. As a first pass, playfulness involves playing with a specific attitude: we are playful when we take a light-hearted delight in what we do. For instance, we find it easy to laugh and to invite others to laugh with us.

How might the notion of play illuminate philosophy? Philosophy can and should involve a kind of intellectual play, albeit one which involves intense concentration and focus (like chess or soccer). The power of describing philosophy as *play* is that it calls attention to the motivation which drives a person to philosophize. That is, philosophy can, and often should be, a practice where the activity itself sustains and recruits one's attention. (When philosophy is boring or irrelevant, and external inducements are necessary to get one to engage in philosophy, it has ceased being play.) The notion of philosophy as intellectual play draws attention to how philosophy, at its best, is sustained by normal human impulses, e.g., towards wonder, questioning, and reflection (Lone and Burroughs 2016) intended for philosophers and philosophy students, K–12 classroom teachers, administrators and educators, policymakers, and pre-college practitioners of all kinds. The book offers a wealth of practical resources for use in elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms, as well as consideration of many of the broader educational, social, and political topics in the field, including the educational value of pre-college philosophy, the philosophies of education that inform this philosophical practice, and the relevance of pre-college philosophy for pressing issues in contemporary education (such as education reform, child

development, and prejudice and privilege in classrooms. Philosophy is *play*, that is, because humans possess the kind of impulses that make rumination on complex philosophical problems intrinsically rewarding. This notion, that humans are intrinsically driven to think philosophically is not a new one; Aristotle, for instance, famously considered the possibility that a life of contemplation brings the greatest happiness (Aristotle EN X.6–8, trans. Irwin). By conceptualizing philosophy as play, not just as critical reasoning or the investigation of specific perennial questions within human life, we can keep this aspect of philosophizing at the forefront.

Some might object that philosophy is too important to be conceptualized as play. If the issues at hand are abortion, ethics, human rights—isn't the notion of play misplaced? However, as developed here, the notion of play is not centrally that of a frivolous activity or of low stakes. The critical feature of play is the way it calls upon a person's intrinsic motivation. While some play is absorbing because it is fun, other play sustains our attention because it is interesting, challenging, gripping, etc. If this is right, philosophical play need not be conducted playfully; philosophy can be a form of play, in virtue of the way it absorbs or grips us, even when it is not conducted light-heartedly.

To be clear, while philosophical play need not be light-hearted, the value of playfulness—even for serious topics—should not be overlooked. Many wonderful philosophers do seem to exhibit an air of playfulness, punctuating their professional presentations with moments of playfulness and engaging in light-hearted back-and-forth. This may not be coincidental. When the topics are difficult ones, such as ethics and mortality, a playful attitude may make it possible to squarely face that which we might otherwise shy away from contemplating.[2] In addition, playfulness can shake us loose from defensiveness and thereby allow a more open-minded discussion of controversial topics; instead of sticking to "safe" opinions, we become willing to creatively explore and question.

Besides illuminating key features of philosophical practice, the notions of play and playfulness can be used to shape one's approach to teaching philosophy to children. First, it is useful to reflect on Rohd's comment, above, about providing adults with much-needed opportunities to play. In a similar vein, we might think of philosophical teaching as providing young people a much-needed opportunity to engage in intellectual play, i.e., to allow their minds to engage in creative problem-solving, within constraints, drawing on their own, intrinsic motivation to do so. Thinking of philosophy as play, therefore, reminds us, as instructors, of the importance of connecting with student's intrinsic motivations. Second, at a practical level, theatrical games may 'warm-up' the intellectual muscles we need in a philosophical classroom. By beginning a philosophy session with a theatrical exercise that requires creative problem-solving, such as building a joint machine, students may approach their philosophical work ready to apply the same creativity.

Finally, reflection on theatrical contexts suggests there is an appropriate role for playfulness within a philosophical classroom. Within a theatrical context, a sense of playfulness communicates that the activity is one which, while requiring focus, can be approached light-heartedly. Light-hearted play, in turn, encourages the risk-taking necessary for creativity. Moments of playfulness within philosophical instruction may be of similar importance. That is, by introducing elements of playfulness, the instructor creates low-stakes moments that encourage philosophical risk-taking by the students. If this is right, playfulness has a role in philosophical pedagogy.[3]

Section 4. Physicality

It's hard to read the work of Spolin or Rohd without being struck by its physicality. One repeated phrase used by facilitators is, "Show, don't tell." For instance, a student should *show* they are holding a lollipop (e.g., by licking the air) instead of *telling* ("Hey guys, look at the lollipop I'm holding!")

Part of this emphasis on physicality simply derives from the nature of theatrical productions. Beyond this, however, Spolin and Rohd seem to see bodily engagement as integrally linked to the full engagement of any participant in their games. Spolin explicitly theorizes about this link, suggesting that for "total, organic involvement of the person," one must be engaged at all levels—physical, intellectual, and others (7). Regardless of the specifics, the general idea seems to be that physical play can deepen a person's engagement in the sense that, since a whole person includes her body, authentic involvement requires physical involvement.

How might philosophy benefit from a consideration of physicality? In philosophy, it is tempting to conceive of our work as solely an intellectual activity. Reflection on the use of physicality within theater, however, suggests that physicality can be productively utilized within philosophy. In particular, I will suggest three ways that philosophical pedagogy might utilize physicality: managing the potential burden of physicality, using physicality to engage focus, and engaging one's body directly with philosophical questions.

First, the use of physicality in theater reminds us of the importance of managing the potential burden of physicality. Put simply, our minds are embedded in bodies, and it is difficult to concentrate when our bodies are uncomfortable. When instructing elementary children, this may be as simple as recognizing the need for a snack or a stretch break. According to this conception, the body is construed negatively, as a potential impediment to thought.

Second, and more strikingly, theatrical pedagogy suggests that physicality can be used as a way to engage focus. That is, instead of conceptualizing physicality merely as a potential impediment to cognitive performance—an impediment that can be relieved by snack breaks and stretching—thinkers such as Spolin and Rohd conceptualize physicality as a way to *deepen* engagement. For instance,

Figure 3. Philosophical Tableau

Give students a key concept for today's lesson (friendship, happiness, fairness, art, etc.) After a minute or two of silent reflection, ask for volunteers to come to the front and silently demonstrate the idea using their bodies. Other students can then position themselves within the tableau, still silently.

Facilitate a discussion with the whole class: What do they see? How are these embodiments of the central idea the same, and how are they different?

part of the function of a game like Zip-Zap-Zop is to use physical engagement to foster intensity and focus. Participants are encouraged to use their whole bodies as the energy bolt is quickly thrown around the room; the goal is to create and sustain focus, rather than providing a 'break' to rest the body/mind. Indeed, an experienced facilitator can use a game like Zip-Zap-Zop to bring the focus back to an instructor (e.g., by shouting out more and more complicated directions) or to develop attentiveness between participants (e.g., by directing them to focus on catching each others' throws). Thus, physicality can be a way of positively engaging focus.[4]

Third, and finally, consider the possibility of engaging one's body *directly* with philosophical problems, a notion which draws on Spolin's suggestion of a 'physical level' of involvement in theatrical play. What would it be for a whole person, including one's body, to engage with a philosophical question, such as the nature of love, anger, or art? One possibility would be to engage in an exercise as described in Figure 3.

Suppose, for instance, that the topic of the lesson was happiness. In the Tableau, a student might stand with a big smile, hug an imaginary friend, mime a game of basketball, or offer an expression of surprised delight. Each of these bodily expressions of happiness provides fruit for subsequent philosophical discussion: How do these instances of happiness differ? Are there different kinds of happiness? Can one feel happiness and frustration at the same time? Etc.

This kind of exercise serves two purposes. First, it uses physicality to draw students' attention to the philosophical concept in question; a student who tries to figure out a physical stance to represent happiness is more likely to be thinking about and attending to, questions of happiness. Second, an exercise like Tableau allows students to have ideas which are not language-based. A student who makes an expression of surprised delight knows something about what happiness is, and can communicate it to the class, even if she can't yet find words to articulate what she knows. A game like Tableau allows this student to put forward her idea, which can then be discussed further by her peers and facilitator.

This last step, in which a student's physical offering is examined linguistically, is a philosophically important one. That is, within the practice of philosophy, it is not enough to simply express something bodily; a key feature of our contemporary philosophical practice is converting thoughts into words, which can then be linguistically shared with others. This linguistic approach stands in contrast with theater and other arts, which allow that ideas might be expressed through images, music, movement, etc.

Section 5. Ensemble

The notion of ensemble is critical in theater. Rohd's text, for instance, has an entire chapter on developing trust between participants, where the ultimate purpose of this work is to create ensemble (29). Rohd explains that an ensemble is capable of more than just performing together; they trust and depend upon each other. In Spolin's work, while she does not explicitly use the term 'ensemble,' she does describe a "community of players," in which "everyone is given and freely takes responsibility for his or her part in the whole. All individuals work at top level together for the full event" (17). In describing their ideal community in these ways, both authors arguably reach beyond familiar educational notions of mutual respect (e.g., Cohen, Cardillo, and Pickeral 2011) or safe spaces (e.g., Holley and Steiner 2005).

For the purpose of this essay, an ensemble can be centrally characterized by mutual dependence and responsiveness. For a theatrical ensemble, *mutual dependence* means that a performance or exercise cannot be successfully completed without the participation of all; we each depend on each other to do their part. In a performance of King Lear, for instance, the actor playing King Lear must rely upon the other actors and vice versa; the failure of any actor will negatively impact the final product. A similar mutual dependence characterizes certain theatrical games. For instance, in Leading Someone with Eyes Closed, the failure of any one participant will impact the other players as well; even if one person or pair is playing conscientiously, their success in navigating the crowded rectangle depends upon the attentiveness of others.

The second characteristic of ensemble is *responsiveness*. A responsive participant, in a theatrical ensemble, recognizes the offerings of those around him, and those offerings substantially shape his contribution. An exercise such as Build the Machine is designed to develop this kind of responsiveness. In Build the Machine, each player must observe what has been 'built' by prior participants and structure her contribution based on this.

Notably, Spolin and Rohd are working within traditions where the term 'ensemble' is inclusive of all the players. While some theatrical traditions delineate principals from the ensemble, Spolin and Rohd do not. Thus for Spolin and Rohd, ensemble denotes a kind of ideal of equality. At the same time, as a practical matter, these authors are undoubtedly cognizant of the fact that, in theatrical

exercises, some participants will end up with larger roles, e.g., a participant may use their body more expansively, another may speak more, etc. Consequently, a nuanced understanding of ensemble will conceive of it as a social configuration that demands equality (in some respects), while accommodating certain kinds of inequalities (in other respects). That is, within a theatrical exercise, some participants will participate 'more,' but each person is equal in the sense that they are depended upon and responded to (although, again, perhaps not in identical ways, or even identical amounts). When we choose to describe a group as an ensemble, we are emphasizing the fact that all participants are bound by responsiveness and mutual dependence, while allowing that each person's contributions may vary in type, size, scope, etc.

What is the value of ensemble for philosophy? While some philosophy can be conducted individually, philosophy is often conducted in community with others. Within a philosophical community, we can use the notion of ensemble as a guiding ideal, i.e., good philosophical discussion will be characterized by mutual dependence and responsiveness.[5]

Suppose, for instance, that you and I engage in philosophical discussion, and we take ensemble to be a guiding ideal. In terms of responsiveness, this means that my own ideas should be shaped by your contributions. If I develop my own ideas while talking to you, but do not actually do so in response to your offerings, then I have used you as a prop in a kind of monologue, not as a discussant. Of course, this does not mean that I must adopt your ideas. Sometimes responsiveness is achieved by considering another's objections or questions. However, responsiveness need not be through intellectual back-and-forth. I might be deeply responsive to you in the sense that your attitude toward my work, such as your encouragement or your kindness, plays a key role in my continued scholarship.

In terms of mutual dependence, ensemble demands that our success in an endeavor is jointly determined. For instance, in Leading Someone with Eyes Closed, I must rely on my fellow participants to do their part in order to successfully complete the exercise. Similarly, in order to have a successful philosophical conversation, I depend on my fellow participants to play their roles. Since success in philosophical conversation takes many forms—some conversations are successful because they discover knock-down objections, others because they yield creative new ideas, yet others because they are simply enjoyable, etc.—mutual dependence only makes sense when the participants have a shared, or overlapping, vision for what constitutes a good philosophical discussion. Talk of ensemble and mutual dependence in philosophy, then, highlights the importance of communicating our vision of the purpose of a philosophical conversation.

Finally, when we use the notion of ensemble within philosophy, we are highlighting a kind of equality between participants. Because of our responsiveness and mutual dependence, we stand as equals, as peers, within a discussion.

At the same time, as mentioned above, this does not require that all participants must have precisely the same amount of time to speak or have the same philosophical expertise. Within the social configuration of ensemble, one participant may 'lead' the philosophical dialogue more than others, provided she still stands in relationships of genuine responsiveness and mutual dependence.[6]

Having made sense of the notion of ensemble, let us turn to its practical pedagogical importance. In particular, how can we use the idea of ensemble to teach philosophy to young people? If we take seriously the notion that ensemble matters in philosophical discussion, then exercises designed to enhance responsiveness and mutual dependence, such as those found in the work of Spolin and Rohd, have value within a philosophical classroom, since they foster the kind of interactions between students that are a prerequisite for philosophical discussion. In particular, we should consider exercises that use physicality to develop responsiveness and dependency, such as Leading Someone (Eyes Closed). When our bodies are dependent upon others, we may perhaps move more quickly towards relying on our peers in other respects, e.g., relying on them to respond to our thoughts, emotions, and ideas. Another exercise that might allow students to use physicality to develop responsiveness and mutual dependence is Philosophical Mirror (see Figure 4).

Section 6. Inclusivity

Both Spolin and Rohd repeatedly invoke the notion of inclusivity. Spolin writes, "Play is democratic! Anyone can play!" (3), and Rohd's work is explicitly inspired by the inclusive tradition of Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (xi) and the progressive educational theorist, Paulo Freire (xvii). As described in the introduction to Rohd's text,

Figure 4. Philosophical Mirrors

Students work in pairs, mirroring each other's movements. In their pairs, students decide who will be the leader first; the other person is the 'mirror.' At some point, without stopping the actions, the facilitator shouts, "Switch!" and they switch roles. Once students have started using their whole bodies, shout "On your own!" This means that no one is the designated leader or follower, but they continue to mirror.

Then, give each pair a set of three philosophical questions. On the first question, one student leads and the other "reflects back" what they heard. On the second question, the other student leads and the other "reflects back" what they heard. On the last question, they try to discuss the question in a way where no one feels like they are "leading" it. Debrief: How did they feel about the different forms of conversation?

> One of the basic assumptions of Michael [Rohd]'s approach is that virtually anyone can participate in this kind of theatre. . . . What is required is a desire to engage in dialogue about the oppressions in our lives and to use theatre as a tool to effect that engagement. However, this is not to say the techniques are somehow not demanding. (Rohd 1998, forward by Doug Paterson, xi)

Inclusivity, in this sense, means that a practice is conducted so as to be open to a wide group of people. In theatrical contexts, this means that participants of all backgrounds—those who are poor, those who are shy, those who are clumsy—have a chance to participate. As Spolin stresses, one does not need special training to be able to play a theatrical game. Moreover, as evidenced by both Spolin and Rohd's texts, a good theatrical workshop will begin with warm-up games before moving to more complex practices; this is done in the name of inclusivity as well, providing opportunities for shy students to engage with the practice.

What can philosophy learn from this kind of inclusivity? Academic philosophy has been widely criticized for its failure to be inclusive, and the general value of inclusivity in philosophy has been widely discussed (see, for instance, American Philosophical Association "Resources on Diversity and Inclusiveness").[7] Thus, instead of using the lens of theater to revisit well-worn arguments for the importance of inclusivity in philosophical practice, it is most valuable to think about how theatrical techniques can be used, at a practical level, to develop inclusive pedagogical techniques for a philosophical classroom.

As I mentioned at the outset of this essay, one of my guiding concerns as an instructor came from Freire: how can one avoid creating philosophical classrooms which serve as another site of oppression for students? In particular, traditional text- and discussion-based philosophical pedagogy risks privileging the same skills that allow elementary students to be successful in other school contexts. For instance, it is not uncommon for a philosophical lesson to proceed by having students read a brief story, and following this up with discussion (Trickey and Topping 2004). However, lessons structured in this way may rely on some of the same capabilities which allow students to be successful in standard school contexts, e.g., the ability to sit still, to express themselves verbally, to have confidence in their ideas, etc. Thus, such pedagogical techniques run the risk of creating philosophy classrooms that reward and penalize the same skills/students as standard school-day classrooms.

The theatrical practices mentioned above can help philosophical classrooms deepen their inclusivity. First, inclusivity can also be enhanced through a consideration of play and playfulness. In particular, as suggested earlier, playful contexts can create moments in which students are more comfortable taking risks. These moments provide openings for students who are not yet confident in their skills. For instance, a student who speaks English as a second language, or who has never encountered philosophy before, may not yet be confident enough to raise their hand to answer a question about a picture book. However, an instructor can

create spaces that encourage risk-taking by using games and engaging in them playfully. That is, we might explicitly conceptualize our pedagogical approach to include moments of playfulness in order to encourage risk-taking, and bring about broader inclusivity.

Second, consider the notion of physicality. By using physicality productively, philosophical classrooms can become more inclusive of students who lack "proper" school skills, such as the ability to sit quietly. In particular, by conceptualizing physicality as more than just something which can interfere with learning, and instead thinking of physicality as an opportunity to return attention to the instructor or to peers through games like Zip-Zap-Zop, the philosophical classroom can reach students who might otherwise lose interest or focus. Relatedly, games like Tableau, which allow students to demonstrate their ideas physically, create opportunities to accommodate and reward different learning styles and skills. Ultimately, such practices can help ensure that all students, not just students with traditional school skills, have the opportunity to explore philosophical ideas.

At the same time, since many of these games are physical, it is important to explicitly consider how to include individuals who are disabled. One might worry, for instance, that a game like Zip-Zap-Zop may be less accessible for a student with a physical impairment. One scholar (Ray 2017), who has considered this issue suggests the following. First, facilitators can model several different ways to complete the activity (Catch the bolt with your hands! Grab it with your elbows!). Second, facilitators should take time to describe the exercise fully, so that those with disabilities can determine whether it is feasible for them, and use inclusive language, e.g., "If you can, walk to the front of the room."

While such suggestions can make theatrical games more accessible to those with physical disabilities, they do not eliminate the underlying worry: by introducing physicality, a classroom's activities may be less accessible to certain bodies. In acknowledging this worry, of course, one must be wary of overstating it; it would be demeaning to assume that a student in a wheelchair, for instance, cannot physically engage in a game of Play Ball. At the same time, there are occasions when physical activities are more difficult—or even impossible—for a disabled student. In such cases, a facilitator has several options. First, while the classroom may not be appropriate for physically intense theatrical games, both Spolin and Rohd offer a variety of less physically-oriented theatrical games. These games may introduce elements of play and playfulness, thereby increasing inclusivity without potentially excluding those with physical disabilities. Second, in some cases, it may be feasible to team a disabled student with another player (or put all students in teams), or to recruit a disabled student (or several students) to assist with coaching. However, such solutions are not perfect, and since one of the goals of utilizing theatrical games is to address inclusivity, a sensitive instructor will need to be aware of these challenges during facilitation.

Section 7. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to demonstrate that certain characteristics of improvisational theater can contribute to our understanding of philosophy and constructively shape how we teach philosophy to young people.

In particular, I suggested that improvisational theater values play/playfulness, physicality, ensemble and inclusivity, and that these characteristics have a role to play in philosophy and philosophical teaching. We can think of philosophy as a form of intellectual play, where play is compatible with focus and is, sometimes, playful. Philosophical teaching can be done in ways that positively employs physicality in order to maintain focus or allow students to express their ideas through their bodies. Furthermore, philosophical practice, and teaching, should aim to establish ensemble, wherein we are equal in our mutual dependence and responsiveness, even if some are more vocal than others. Finally, I suggested that physicality and playfulness can be used to create a more inclusive classroom. For those who are interested in utilizing theatrical games in the philosophical classroom, Figure 5 offers a summary of basic advice for facilitators.

Figure 5. Advice for Facilitating Improvisational Games

- Do not stop the action or prevent the energy of the action from dissipating. Choose a few, simple, clear phrases, "Keep your eye on the ball!" "Where is it now?"

  Some good multi-purpose phrases from Spolin are, "Show, don't tell!" (68), "Share your voice" (68), "Help your fellow player who isn't playing" (17).

- Explain the whole game before starting. Everyone should feel comfortable; avoid surprises.
- No one has to participate. If someone chooses not to participate, gently check in with them periodically to see if they have changed their mind.
- Laughter is natural. However, laughter can distract from the focus you are trying to build, so it should be addressed. Gently redirect focus back to the activity, using your coaching phrases. As a facilitator, your goal is to structure the play so that it naturally holds the attention of the players, not to discipline participants into playing (Rohd, 29).
- There is a substantial learning curve in facilitation. Begin with a simple, short exercise. Your facilitation skills will improve with practice.
- With younger children, physical dependence exercises (such as trust falls) may not be appropriate, as children may not take them seriously. Instead, build ensemble using other activities, such as Mirror Mirror or Build the Machine.
- Both Spolin's and Rohd's texts are excellent and approachable, with a large number of well-organized exercises.

While one of my goals was to illuminate the nature of philosophical practice, a second goal was to provide guidance for teaching philosophy to young people. With respect to this latter goal, it should be noted that the practices identified here are not new. Good educational practice can, and does, conceptualize roles for creative problem-solving, physicality, community ('ensemble'), and inclusivity. This, I think, is as it should be: the goal of this essay's pedagogical discussion was not to suggest that utilizing these values in education was wholly new, but rather to argue for the deep and important connection between certain pedagogical practices (practices which may already be recognized as good pedagogy for other reasons) and the specific subject matter of philosophy. Play, physicality, ensemble, and inclusivity, I suggested, can and should be appropriately included within a *philosophical* classroom; they are not mere diversions or a change of subject matter.

I began this essay with a joke by David Foster Wallace about fish in water: when we are surrounded by philosophy, it is difficult to see our discipline for what it is. However, by stepping out of the 'water' of philosophy, we can gain perspective. Here, taking a new (theatrical) perspective allows us to see features of our practice, which might otherwise be hard to detect; or, at least, we see these features of practices in a new way. If my essay has succeeded, the notions of play/playfulness, physicality, ensemble and inclusivity—and their connection to philosophical practice—should elicit a sense of recognition: "Ah," says the fish, "*This* is water."

Endnotes

1. While the exercises I describe in this section occur in Spolin or Rohd's texts, some of these exercises have long histories and their original provenance is unknown.

2. Notice also that an attitude of playfulness is compatible with taking one's work seriously, in the sense that a person wants to do it well (or, alternatively, of moving back-and-forth between light-heartedness and gravity). Such individuals may be motivated to engage in the 'play' of philosophy *both* because the problems are gripping and engaging, and because the activity delights them.

3. Here, my point is that playfulness has value in philosophical pedagogy, not that theatrical games are the best or only way to create moments of playfulness. Many instructors instinctively create moments of playfulness through jokes with students, whimsical drawings on the whiteboard, etc.

4. One nice example of an author who seems to use the body in this way is (Kenyon, Terorde-Doyle, and Carnahan 2019). Their work focuses on teaching philosophy to pre-K children, and they discuss the importance of "thinking with our bodies" (25–27). While their form of bodily engagement comes mostly as art projects, not

improvisational games, the spirit is similar: bodily engagement can be a way to deepen and focus attention.

5. An 'ensemble' may call to mind a Community of Inquiry, as articulated in the Philosophy for Children tradition. However, the notion of a community of inquiry has been much more richly theorized (e.g., Gregory and Laverty 2017). Ensemble, as characterized here, is meant only to identify a few key elements of philosophical discourse.

6. To be clear, this kind of equality is not the only kind of equality desirable in philosophical discussion.

7. The notion of inclusivity is being restricted here to that of inclusivity of persons, although philosophy also faces challenges in inclusivity of texts and viewpoints (e.g., non-Western, non-canonical texts).

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