

Participatory Theatre as Democratic Rehearsal in Psychology Education

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based article examines how participatory theatre functions as a democratic rehearsal space within undergraduate psychology education in South India. While curricula increasingly acknowledge social determinants of mental health, structural inequalities such as caste, gender norms, and institutional hierarchy are often treated as contextual factors rather than constitutive of subjectivity. Consequently, students may acquire critical vocabulary about oppression without developing embodied awareness or relational capacities to navigate power in practice. Informed by participatory performance practices including Playback Theatre, Image Theatre, and Forum Theatre, the study introduces facilitative dramaturgy as a framework that sequences participatory forms to move students from narrative witnessing to embodied recognition and rehearsal of ethical response. Implemented within a second-year applied theatre course, the intervention engaged psychology

undergraduates from diverse social backgrounds through a structured progression of exercises. Playback Theatre enabled collective witnessing of experiences of loneliness, abuse, and institutional authority; Image Theatre translated these narratives into embodied representations of hierarchy; Forum Theatre created a symbolic rehearsal space to experiment with interventions in situations of social constraint. Findings suggest participatory theatre operates not merely as expressive pedagogy but as a structured environment where democracy is encountered as embodied negotiation. Students moved from perceiving distress as individual experience to recognising its structural conditioning while rehearsing relational responses. Classrooms can function as provisional democratic infrastructures, where recognition, ethical engagement, and collective responsibility are rehearsed rather than abstractly discussed.

INTRODUCTION: FROM CRITICAL AWARENESS TO EMBODIED PRACTICE

Research on the social determinants of health demonstrates that wellbeing is shaped not only by individual psychological processes but also by broader social, economic, and political conditions (Michael, 2005; Lund, et al, 2018). Experiences such as loneliness, abuse, exclusion, and vulnerability are not isolated but mediated by systems that distribute resources, opportunities, recognition, and safety unevenly across populations. For psychology education, this raises an important pedagogical challenge: how can students learn to recognise the relationship between individual psychological experience and the structural conditions within which it is produced?

While undergraduate psychology programmes may introduce students to concepts such as discrimination, inequality, and the social determinants of mental health, exposure to these ideas does not necessarily transform how students understand or engage with them. Students may learn to identify oppression, analyse institutional power, and describe structural inequalities, yet such knowledge often remains cognitive rather than embodied. The ability to explain inequality does not necessarily translate into the capacity to recognise, negotiate, or challenge it within everyday interactions. Within educational settings,

students frequently continue to enact learned patterns of compliance, deference, and self-censorship even while expressing democratic or critical values. Freire argues that critical consciousness emerges through praxis: the dynamic relationship between reflection and action through which individuals critically engage with and transform their social realities (2017, p. 9). From this perspective, awareness alone is insufficient. Without opportunities to experiment with alternative ways of relating, questioning authority, navigating disagreement, and responding to power in practice, critical awareness risks remaining primarily discursive rather than lived.

This challenge is particularly significant within the Indian context, where social life is shaped by intersecting structures of caste, class, gender, language, and institutional hierarchy. Although psychological distress cannot be reduced solely to social conditions, it is inseparable from the environments through which subjectivity is formed and negotiated. Yet these structural dimensions often remain marginal within dominant psychological frameworks centred on individual behaviour, diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention. As Sawariya argues (2021), caste in particular has received insufficient attention within mainstream psychology despite its enduring influence on social experience, access to opportunity, and everyday encounters with power. As a result, students may encounter structural inequality as an object of study without opportunities to examine how it is reproduced, resisted, or negotiated within lived relationships and institutional settings.

Participatory theatre offers a pedagogical response to this gap. Unlike approaches that rely primarily on discussion or textual analysis, participatory theatre enables students to investigate social relations through embodied action, reflection, and collective experimentation. By engaging participants as active contributors rather than observers, participatory performance can make visible the ways power operates through speech, silence, gesture, authority, and social expectation. Within educational settings, such practices create opportunities for students to explore alternative forms of participation, negotiate disagreement, and rehearse ethical and political responses to situations shaped by inequality and exclusion.

This practice-based study examines a second-year Applied Theatre course for undergraduate psychology students in South India that integrated participatory theatre practices as a means of engaging

with questions of power, democracy, and social responsibility. The study investigates the educational potential of participatory theatre as a democratic rehearsal space and introduces the concept of *facilitative dramaturgy* to describe the intentional sequencing of participatory encounters that support recognition, embodied awareness, and collective engagement with structural conditions.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How can participatory theatre in higher education function as a rehearsal space for democracy, enabling psychology students to recognise structural power and develop embodied forms of ethical, political, and collective engagement?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws together theories of democracy, critical pedagogy, and participatory performance to examine how participatory theatre can function as a democratic rehearsal space within psychology education. The framework is organised around three interconnected theoretical strands. First, Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy provides a way of understanding democratic participation as engagement with difference, disagreement, and unequal relations of power rather than the pursuit of consensus (2013, p. 8). Second, Freire's concept of critical consciousness and praxis offers a framework for understanding how awareness of structural conditions can move beyond reflection toward action (2017). Third, scholarship on participatory theatre provides a basis for examining how performance practices create spaces of witnessing, recognition, and intervention. Building on these perspectives, this article develops the concept of facilitative dramaturgy to explain how participatory theatre becomes a democratic rehearsal space. Facilitative dramaturgy refers to the co-constitutive relationship between dramaturgical composition and facilitative practice through which participation is progressively organised rather than assumed. Participatory theatre forms are understood as interconnected dramaturgical encounters whose sequencing shapes the conditions for recognition, embodied inquiry, ethical engagement, and democratic negotiation. The analytical focus therefore shifts from individual methods to the relational architecture through which participation becomes possible.

Central to this framework is a distinction between participatory

theatre as an aesthetic and pedagogical practice and therapeutic intervention. In this article, *therapeutic extraction* refers to the facilitation of personal narratives primarily for emotional disclosure or cathartic release rather than for collective inquiry and aesthetic exploration. By contrast, facilitative dramaturgy maintains *aesthetic distance* by working through role, image, metaphor, improvisation, and collective reflection, enabling lived experience to be explored as shared material for analysis rather than as an object of therapy. Personal narratives are therefore treated not as material requiring therapeutic resolution but as starting points for examining broader social and relational conditions.

Democracy as negotiation, contestation, and the practice of living with difference

This study approaches democracy not as the achievement of consensus but as an ongoing process of negotiation across difference, disagreement, and unequal relations of power. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy, democratic life is understood as being constituted through contestation rather than the elimination of conflict (2013). For Mouffe, pluralistic societies are characterised by competing values, interests, and perspectives that cannot be fully reconciled. The task of democracy is therefore not to produce a harmonious social order free from disagreement, but to create conditions in which differences can be expressed, contested, and negotiated without exclusion.

This understanding challenges approaches to participation that equate inclusion with agreement or assume that productive dialogue necessarily leads to consensus. Instead, an agonistic perspective recognises that participation takes place within existing relations of power. Individuals enter social spaces through different positions shaped by histories, identities, and unequal access to resources and recognition. Democratic engagement therefore requires the capacity to remain in relation across difference, including moments of tension, conflict, and uncertainty.

Mouffe's account is further informed by her earlier work with Ernesto Laclau on hegemony and political subjectivity (1985, p. 86). From this perspective, identities are not fixed or purely individual attributes but are constituted through social, cultural, and political relations. Subject positions are shaped through intersecting structures

such as class, gender, caste, and other forms of social organisation, and these positions are continually negotiated within relations of power. Individuals therefore encounter the world not as isolated subjects but through historically and socially situated positions that influence how they experience vulnerability, recognition, exclusion, and possibility.

This perspective has particular relevance for psychology education. Psychological training often provides students with theories and frameworks for understanding individual behaviour, cognition, and mental health. However, when future psychologists encounter clients, communities, or social groups, these individuals are not only subjects of psychological processes or bearers of particular symptoms; they are also positioned within complex social worlds shaped by histories of inequality, identity, and power. Understanding psychological experience therefore requires attention not only to individual factors but also to the social relations through which identities and experiences are formed.

For psychology students, engaging with democracy in this sense involves more than learning about inequality as an external social issue. It requires opportunities to examine how difference and power operate within relationships, institutions, and everyday encounters. The pedagogical question is therefore not simply how students can learn about social structures and inequalities, but how they can develop the capacity to engage ethically with difference, contestation, and unequal relations of power in practice.

From Critical Awareness to Praxis

If agonistic democracy raises questions about how individuals engage with difference, conflict, and unequal relations of power, Freire's concept of critical consciousness provides a pedagogical framework for understanding how such capacities might be cultivated. Freire (2017, p. 45) critiques what he terms the "banking model" of education, in which knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student as a fixed body of information. In contrast, he proposes a dialogical and problem-posing approach to learning in which learners actively investigate the social realities they inhabit. Knowledge is not simply received but produced through critical engagement with lived experience.

This critique is particularly relevant within psychology education. Psychology curricula often emphasise theoretical knowledge, cognitive

frameworks, and the analysis of individual behaviour. While these approaches provide important conceptual tools, they can risk positioning social realities as objects of study rather than lived experiences. Students may learn about oppression, trauma, caste, gender, or inequality as topics within a curriculum without necessarily engaging with how these structures shape their own lives and the lives of the people with whom they will eventually work.

For Freire, such engagement becomes possible through the development of critical consciousness (*conscientização*): the capacity to recognise how personal experiences are shaped by broader social, political, and economic conditions. Critical consciousness emerges through praxis, understood as the ongoing relationship between reflection and action. Rather than accepting social arrangements as natural or inevitable, learners begin to identify relations of power, question dominant assumptions, and explore possibilities for change.

Within the context of psychology education, critical consciousness operates on at least two interconnected levels. First, students may begin to recognise how their own experiences are shaped by structures such as caste, class, gender, family expectations, and institutional hierarchies. Second, they may develop a deeper understanding of the individuals and communities with whom they will eventually work as psychologists, counsellors, or mental health practitioners. Psychological distress can then be understood not solely through individual or clinical frameworks but also in relation to the social conditions through which vulnerability and wellbeing are produced.

Participatory theatre becomes significant in this context because it creates opportunities for praxis. Through cycles of enactment, dialogue, and collective reflection, students do not simply discuss social realities but engage with them through action. Participatory theatre can therefore be understood as a pedagogical space in which critical consciousness is explored, tested, and rehearsed. The movement between action and reflection creates opportunities for students to examine how power, identity, and inequality operate both within their own lives and within the broader social worlds they seek to understand.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND STUDY DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative, practice-based research design examining a week-long Applied Theatre course with second-year undergraduate psychology students in South India. The classroom functioned as both a pedagogical and research site, allowing analysis of participatory processes as they unfolded through practice. The study draws on facilitator observations, workshop documentation, student reflections, and the analysis of participatory theatre activities to examine how democratic engagement emerged through the course.

Participation in all performative and reflective activities involving personal experience was explicitly voluntary. Students were informed that they could opt out of any exercise, remain silent during discussions, or participate in a reduced or observational capacity without academic penalty. Consent was treated as ongoing and revisable rather than a one-time agreement.

Given the emergence of disclosures relating to gendered violence, self-harm, and sexual abuse, additional safeguarding measures were implemented. These included clear framing of the work as non-therapeutic, the use of aesthetic distance through role, image, and improvisation to mediate personal material, and structured debriefing at the end of each session. Confidentiality was reinforced through anonymisation of all data used in this article, removal of identifiable contextual markers, and collective agreement on non-disclosure of peer narratives outside the classroom.

The facilitator also maintained a dual role boundary protocol: while guiding pedagogical processes, they did not assume a counselling role, and any expressions of acute distress were redirected to institutional support services where appropriate.

Method: Facilitative Dramaturgy as Pedagogical Design

The pedagogical intervention followed a structured sequence informed by *facilitative dramaturgy*, a concept I developed in this study to describe the intentional organisation of participatory theatre forms to progressively develop relational trust, embodied inquiry, and ethical engagement. Rather than treating theatre techniques as discrete activities, the course employed them as interconnected pedagogical phases through which participants moved from relational awareness to embodied analysis and finally to the rehearsal of intervention.

The intervention comprised four sequential phases: relational grounding, Image Theatre, Playback Theatre, and Forum Theatre.

Relational Grounding

The course began with relational grounding to establish trust and create conditions for participation within a cohort of students who had limited prior familiarity with one another. This phase employed theatre games, sociometric exercises, de-mechanisation practices, and collective Tamil-language singing. Sociometry (Jacob, 1946) enabled participants to explore patterns of affinity, difference, and group formation, while de-mechanisation exercises, adapted from Augusto Boal's work encouraged awareness of habitual bodily responses and social behaviours (2002, p. 30). Together, these activities established a shared rhythm of participation and prepared the group for subsequent exploration of more personally and socially complex themes.

Image Theatre

Image Theatre, developed by Augusto Boal is a non-verbal participatory method in which participants create and modify bodily images to explore social relationships and structures of power (2002, p. 174). Working individually and in groups, students constructed images representing concepts such as "power" and "power over" before collectively analysing posture, gaze, proximity, and spatial arrangement. The emphasis was not on verbal explanation but on examining how relationships of authority, vulnerability, and exclusion could be communicated and interrogated through embodied composition.

Playback Theatre

Playback Theatre, developed by Jonathan Fox is an improvisational performance practice in which participants share lived experiences that are immediately enacted by fellow participants through movement, dialogue, and symbolic representation (2003). Within this study, students volunteered narratives relating to loneliness, friendship, academic pressure, authority, gendered restriction, and experiences of interpersonal harm. Participation remained voluntary throughout. Narratives were explored through role, metaphor, and improvisation

rather than revisited as personal testimony, maintaining aesthetic distance while avoiding therapeutic extraction. Facilitated reflection following each enactment focused on shared social patterns and relational dynamics rather than emotional processing or therapeutic interpretation.

Forum Theatre

The final phase employed Forum Theatre, another participatory method developed by Boal, in which an unresolved situation of oppression is repeatedly performed and interrupted so that audience members become "spect-actors" who can experiment with alternative actions (2008, p. xxi). The workshop centred on a staged "bus" scenario depicting an ambiguous situation of gendered intimidation. A woman boarded a nearly empty bus, followed by a man whose physical proximity and persistent gaze created visible discomfort without explicit verbal aggression.

Participants entered the scene at moments of tension to test different forms of intervention, including verbal confrontation, spatial repositioning, initiating conversation, redirecting attention, and seeking assistance. Each intervention was followed by facilitated reflection before the scene was replayed, allowing participants to consider the possibilities and limitations of different responses within an ethically complex situation. Rather than seeking a single correct solution, the repeated enactments encouraged participants to explore how agency, responsibility, and ethical judgement are negotiated under conditions of uncertainty.

Across the four phases, facilitative dramaturgy functioned as the organising pedagogical framework through which participation was progressively structured. The sequence moved from establishing relational trust, to making social relations visible through embodied representation, to collectively exploring lived experience, and finally to rehearsing responses to situations shaped by unequal relations of power.

FINDINGS

The participatory theatre process produced distinct shifts in participation across the sequential phases of the workshop.

In the relational grounding phase, sociometric exercises and group

activities revealed differentiated patterns of participation. Some students consistently occupied central spatial positions and initiated interaction, while others remained peripheral, delayed entry into activities, or participated primarily through observation. These patterns varied across exercises but remained visible as recurring interactional tendencies.

In the Playback Theatre phase, students introduced narratives related to personal and social experiences. Contributions unfolded sequentially, with each narrative generating further responses. Several students disclosed experiences of interpersonal harm, including accounts of sexual abuse. Participation during this phase was marked by sustained silence, focused attention, and visible emotional responses in parts of the group. Following these disclosures, the scheduled break was delayed as students remained in the space, engaging in informal conversation and peer support, including instances of supportive physical proximity.

In Image Theatre, students engaged in repeated bodily composition exercises exploring “power” and “power over.” Across groups, consistent embodied patterns emerged, including expanded versus contracted postures, variations in spatial centrality, directional gaze, and bodily tension. In paired escalation exercises, participants repeatedly modified bodily positions to intensify perceived dominance or reduced agency.

In the Forum Theatre “bus” scenario, students intervened at different stages of the enacted situation. Interventions included direct verbal confrontation, spatial repositioning between characters, redirection of attention, and externalised help-seeking strategies such as calling out to the bus driver or simulating phone-based assistance. Timing of intervention varied, with some students acting immediately and others observing multiple iterations before participating.

Post-performance discussion generated multiple perspectives on responding to ambiguous situations of harassment. Students articulated both hesitation in real-world applicability and recognition of alternative intervention strategies. Some referenced prior personal experiences that informed their responses.

Across phases, participation patterns included speaking, bodily enactment, observation, delayed entry, and withdrawal, all contributing to the structure of interaction within the workshop.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that participatory theatre functioned as a structured pedagogical environment in which social relations were not merely represented but actively reorganised through embodied and narrative practice. Across the workshop sequence, participation emerged as situated and uneven, shaped by spatial positioning, interactional dynamics, and prior social conditioning. Students did not enter the process from a neutral position; rather, their responses were continuously inflected by relational histories and the emergent atmosphere of the group.

The movement from relational grounding to Image Theatre and then Forum Theatre shows that participation can be structured as a sequenced dramaturgical process. Each phase enabled different modes of engagement to come into view: relational attunement in the initial exercises, embodied analysis of social relations in Image Theatre, and situated ethical decision-making in Forum Theatre. Participation, in this sense, was not a fixed attribute of the learners but something produced through changing pedagogical and relational conditions.

Particularly in Forum Theatre discussions of ambiguous situations of harassment, sustained disagreement emerged around what constituted an appropriate response. This can be understood through Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic democracy, in which democratic practice is defined not by consensus but by the ongoing presence of legitimate disagreement within a shared space (2013). Importantly, these tensions were not resolved through facilitation. Instead, they remained active within the pedagogical process and shaped how students positioned themselves in relation to one another.

Facilitative dramaturgy, as developed in this study, offers a way of understanding this sequencing as a methodological structure through which participation is progressively transformed. Rather than treating theatre techniques as discrete tools, it organises them as interdependent phases that move from relational attunement, to embodied inquiry, to ethical rehearsal. Through this sequencing, theatre functions less as representational practice and more as a structured environment in which social relations can be tested and reconfigured under conditions of uncertainty.

This approach reworks Augusto Boal's notion of rehearsal. While Boal frames rehearsal as preparation for collective political

transformation, in this educational context rehearsal is re-situated within professional training in psychology. The emphasis shifts toward cultivating ethical judgement, critical reflexivity, and responsiveness to power as it appears in interaction, rather than orienting participants toward predetermined political outcomes.

The study therefore suggests that participatory theatre in higher education can function as a pedagogical environment for examining how agency, authority, and social positioning are enacted through interaction. Its value lies not in resolving disagreement or producing consensus, but in sustaining conditions where such dynamics can be observed, experienced, and critically worked through in practice.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that participatory theatre can function as a rehearsal space for democracy within undergraduate psychology education when structured through facilitative dramaturgy. Rather than treating participation as a pre-existing capacity, the workshops showed how it is actively produced through sequenced relational, embodied, and situational encounters that enable students to engage with power, difference, and ethical uncertainty in practice.

The contribution of this work lies in shifting attention from participatory theatre as a collection of techniques to the organisational logic through which those techniques are brought into relation. Facilitative dramaturgy describes this logic as a structured sequencing of pedagogical conditions that move from relational attunement, to embodied inquiry, to collective witnessing, and finally to rehearsal of intervention. In doing so, it offers a way of understanding how democratic engagement is not delivered through individual exercises but emerges through the relational architecture of the learning environment itself.

This has implications for how participatory and arts-based pedagogies are understood within higher education. Participatory and arts-based pedagogies should be positioned beyond expressive, reflective, or awareness-raising tools, as structured environments in which students rehearse how to perceive, interpret, and respond to social relations as they unfold in real time. Within such environments, learning is not limited to conceptual understanding but extends to the embodied negotiation of uncertainty, disagreement, and ethical

decision-making.

Importantly, this study does not propose participatory theatre as a solution to structural inequality, nor does it claim stable transformation in student subjectivity. Instead, it suggests that its value lies in creating conditions where power and social positioning become perceptible and negotiable within interaction. These conditions are necessarily provisional, shaped by context and facilitation, but they open pedagogical space for forms of learning that connect critical awareness with embodied practice.

Seen in this way, classrooms can be understood as temporary democratic infrastructures—spaces in which students do not only learn about social structures but rehearse how to inhabit them differently. The significance of participatory theatre in this context lies not in what it represents, but in what it makes possible: the situated rehearsal of relational, ethical, and political engagement under conditions of uncertainty.

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