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REA Annual Meeting, November 7-9 2014

Theological Edu-PLAY-tion:

***InterPlay* as a Pedagogical Tool for the “Un-making” of Violence and Aggression**

Abstract:

Play has educative potential in the fight against violence in theological education. This paper places the embodied pedagogical method of bell hooks, the psychological approach to violence and aggression of Peter Iadicola, Richard Mizen and Mark Morris and the *InterPlay* movement of Phil Porter and Cynthia Winton-Henry into conversation. This conversation shows that theology from and through the body as well as allowing the body to be a locus for theology addresses aggression and “un-makes” violence in the theological educational classroom. In this context, play becomes a prophetic practice that can remake classrooms and institutions.

I remember being at a two-week theological workshop hearing about philosophers and theologians I was reading about and excited about engaging. I remember one of the professors approaching me, and during our conversation he tapped me on the very top of my head and said, “well, at least you’re attractive.” This was followed by words of affirmation about how great it was to have my voice and perspective at the workshop. However, as the only African American and only one of three women at the workshop, I found this interaction problematic, degrading and a violent verbal attack on my character, intelligence and integrity. Immediately aggression began to grow inside of me and I knew that it needed to be released. While returning to my room I remember wanting to punch something, or should I say someone, but I had the sound mind to know that I needed to express this anger, but in a safer and healthier way. Once inside my room I began to dance. I cried and I danced until my body no longer held the anger that I had harbored.

Introduction

This is one of many instances in which I have experienced how higher education can engender aggression and violence. Unfortunately, I have learned through my peers that this is not uncommon. Aggression and violence in the classroom is often caused by the many instances of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism and ageism that go unchallenged. While many of these –isms are forms of violence in themselves they can also lead to actual physical violence. While higher education can and should engender camaraderie and collegiality, it often has become a place of cut-throat competition with a “publish or perish” mentality that breeds isolation, competition, resentment and aggression. This atmosphere breeds scholars of remarkable erudition of the mind, while

the body is ignored. Scholarly work engages the mind- with books, exams, and papers- without consideration for how the work can be embodied or even applied to one's own life. How can this dualism of the mind and the body not bring about stress, resentment, aggression and unresolved anger? When left unresolved these feelings often lead to the episodes of racism, sexism, and classism mentioned, that then lead to aggression and violence.

Racism, classism, ageism and sexism- embedded in both the curriculum and pedagogy of colleges and universities- breed violence.¹ According to the U.S. Department of Education, there were more than 22,000 violent crimes in and around college campuses in 2013 alone.² However, I would assert that an embodied learning is necessary to counteract this violence. Again, once the body is included in the learning process, as oppose to primarily cognitive learning, one is better able to not only understand their own body but to see and appreciate the bodies of others. The body at play provides hope for theological education.

This paper explores how theological education can take a prophetic stance in this matter by finding clues in the “un-making” of violence through play using the organizational practices and tools of *InterPlay*. *InterPlay*, which I will describe in depth and give practical examples later, is an organization that seeks to bring play back into the lives of adults. The strategy of the organization *InterPlay* is one way of approaching the “un-making” of violence by offering a different type of classroom structure. Not only can play breakdown the overly dualistic mind/body structures of the traditional higher educational classroom but it can also enhance it through the wisdom of one's own body, in a way that is beneficial for the students, faculty, and institution as a whole. I begin by defining and looking at the psychology of violence and aggression. I dialogue with Peter Iadicola using his work to highlight how the current traditional higher educational classroom is structured to promote aggression and violence through solely cognitive learning, competition, and various -isms among students and faculty. I then place the engaged and embodied pedagogical method of bell hooks in conversation with Phil Porter and Cynthia Winton-Henry, the co-founders of *InterPlay*, to show the importance and educative potential of play. I argue that theological education can be a prophetic voice in this area by utilizing the educative potential of play to combat the possibility of aggression and violence. I offer up my suggestions for the remaking of the theological educational classroom as a “contact zone” by starting with *InterPlay* workshops at the institutional level and allowing this approach to permeate among the faculty, students and within the classroom pedagogy. This approach has the prophetic potential to remake theological classrooms and institutions into more open, expressive, hospitable and community-based classrooms that will promote holistic learning.

¹ Peter Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles. *In Violence: Do We Know It*

² According to the U.S. Department of Education there are various acts of violence that have been committed and recorded. In the United States in 2013 alone, among 4-year public and private institutions, 2-year public and private institutions, private for-profit institutions as well as less-than 2-year institutions there were 10,769 non-campus crimes and 11,064 on-campus crimes committed. “The Campus Safety and Security Data Analysis Cutting Tool.” <http://ope.ed.gov/security/Getdownloadfile.aspx.2013>. U.S. Department of Education. Accessed May 6, 2014. <http://ed.gov>.

Laying the Foundation: Dynamics of Aggression and Violence

While there are a plethora of definitions for violence and aggression, this paper will use the definition, spheres and principles of violence as laid out by Peter Iadicola and those laid out by Richard Mizen and Mark Morris about aggression. Iadicola defines violence as “any action, inaction or structural arrangement that results in physical or nonphysical harm to one or more persons.”³ Violence affects an individual physically, emotional, psychologically as well as their community and communal relationships.⁴ The experience of violence is both universal and yet some are more vulnerable to its impact than others. Along with this definition Iadicola offers up six points of clarification that must be taken into consideration when using this definition, however I will give special attention to one. Iadicola asserts, “when violence occurs in neighborhoods it serves to weaken the bonds between residents as they seek the false sense of protection from isolating themselves between locked doors. These relationships are damaged by the violence and in turn have an impact on the physical and psychological well-being.”⁵ When violence occurs relationships are damaged and this has an impact on individuals physical and psychological wellbeing at various levels. When that professor was so disrespectful towards me, I did not want to return to that university or workshop. It is important to note here that individuals are often affected at a physical level and therefore need a physical way to both deal with and heal from violence.

Spheres of Violence & The 10 Principles

Iadicola notes that violence occurs in three spheres of our lives: the interpersonal, institutional, and the structural. It is the second two that hierarchical power structures and organizational positioning are manifest. Institutional violence is violence perpetrated by institutions and their agents; structural violence “occurs in the context of establishing, maintaining, extending or reducing the hierarchical relations within the society.”⁶ Mizen and Morris define aggression as “instinctual...an affective component or potential with a particular function.”⁷ If individuals are acting out of instinct based on feelings of racism, sexism, ageism or classism that come from these hierarchical power structures, they are more likely to resort to violence.

Iadicola offers ten principles that can further our understanding, but for this paper I will only focus on two. The first focuses on the social structures that are already embedded in the way we live our lives – structures which can prompt anger or frustration and in which violence could already be embedded.⁸ Iadicola remarks, “violence may be an emotional expression of frustration in response to social conditions stemming from the (social) structures.”⁹ If we can aid in eliminating the frustration and anger at the institutional and structural levels it will decrease the need to have an emotional and or

³ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 7.

⁴ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 10.

⁵ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 10.

⁶ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 11-15.

⁷ Richard Mizen and Mark Morris. *On Aggression & Violence: An Analytic Perspective*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.) 52.

⁸ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 16.

⁹ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 18.

physical response to the frustration or anger that is felt. When the body is recognized there is a greater chance that the bodies of others are seen and valued. The second principle highlights violence as a form of learned power. Iadicola contends that “we learn that violence can be expressive in that it is defined as an ‘appropriate’ response to anger or frustration.”¹⁰ If we learn that violence is an appropriate way to express the aggression and frustration that we experience from various structural powers of authority then we must start ways and practices to un-learn it. Engaging the body offers a type of disruption and expression that can aid in un-learning violence as an appropriate form of expression of anger and frustration.

Educative Potential of Play: The hooks approach

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks speaks of an engaged pedagogy that bridges the dualism of the mind and body. I even go a step further and say that her engaged pedagogy is also embodied as it requires recognition of both the bodies of the teacher and the students. hooks reflects on professors who “used the classroom to enact rituals of control that were about domination and the unjust exercise of power” and “were often deeply antagonistic toward, even scornful of, any approach to learning emerging from a philosophical standpoint emphasizing the union of mind, body, and spirit, rather than the separation of these elements.”¹¹ I find this to still be true in much of theological education. hooks asserts that to educate for freedom and transformation one must not only incorporate the mind, body and spirit, but one must also take risks in order to “make their teaching practices a site of resistance.”¹² There needs to be a break from the traditional role of the university that recognizes the “cultural diversity, rethinking ways of knowing, deconstructing old epistemologies”¹³ in order for transformative learning to happen.

One way in which educators can rethink ways of knowing, deconstruct these old epistemologies and transform the classroom through what and how we teach is through engaging the body in the learning process. hooks often affirms that engaged and embodied pedagogy must respect, care for the well-being of, take “interest in one another, in hearing one another’s voices, and in recognizing one another’s presence.”¹⁴ The classroom must not solely be about the teacher but about the voices, expressions, stories and experiences of the student as well. hooks also reveals a revolutionary concept of bringing excitement to higher education. “Excitement could not be generated without...students being seen in their particularity as individuals and interacted with according to their needs.”¹⁵ I affirm that excitement and play can only add to the classroom experience. It can disrupt this mind/body split that often leads to the various biases and –isms that promote violence and aggression in the classroom. One way to

¹⁰ Iadicola, “Violence: Definition, Spheres, and Principles,” 18.

¹¹ bell hooks. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994.) 18.

¹² hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 21.

¹³ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 29.

¹⁴ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 8.

¹⁵ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, 7-8.

incorporate more of this engaged and embodied pedagogy into the theological classroom is through the playful practices of *InterPlay*.

So what is *InterPlay* anyway?

“To play is to do things that we enjoy...that lift our spirits...makes communities generous and open...fosters freedom and peace.”¹⁶ *InterPlay* is an organization that wants to unlock the wisdom of the body, mind, heart, and spirit through various tools and practices with a community of supporters. This organization wants to bring a unity back to the lives of many in order to eliminate stress and promote happiness, joy and the celebration of life.

Co-founders, Phil Porter and Cynthia Winton-Henry contend that life has become so fractured and splintered that there is a deep need to put things back together, which is what *InterPlay* does. I would concur that higher education has become fractured and there needs to be a reunion of the mind and the body. *InterPlay* focuses on using the spirit, mind, body and the heart together through connection and community. In bringing all of these elements together, play aids in diminishing the splintering that has happened over time by focusing on fun and affirming oneself and the other as one seeks to find the good in everything. The best part is that there is no skill or ‘creative gene’ necessary to do *InterPlay*; they teach you. It provides individuals with tools for everyday stressful situations so that they are better able to assess and handle stress. This aids individuals in looking for the good in oneself and one’s neighbor, aiding in the creation of communal relationships and support that become helpful in difficult situations. Play can disrupt the kinds of hierarchical and authoritative power structures that create aggression and violence that plague higher education.

***InterPlay* in Action**

How would *InterPlay* realistically work in the theological classroom? How can professors create this environment while still creating a space for learning and not just play? As a professor you can start and end each class with students and yourself by practicing “easy focus.” Easy focus is a practice used to “relax and open up our physical awareness to take in a full range of information.”¹⁷ In this exercise you rub your face, massage between your eyes and take a deep breath. Once you are relaxed open your eyes slowly and softly with easy focus. As you gaze around the room take in the whole scene and enjoy all that you are and all that you are seeing.¹⁸ This quick yet effective exercise would be particularly helpful in a very diverse class where students get time to relax, breath and gaze on the dignity and worth of each person before saying anything or offering any remarks.

Another exercise that can be done in the classroom --,perhaps, when there is a particularly heated debate or at the end of a very controversial class, or in my case when I felt debased and belittled by the professor at the workshop -- move the body. Put on music or have silence, but allow people to move their body according to how they are feeling. Some might move with fluidity and direction, some might decide to hold

¹⁶ Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter. *What the Body Wants*. (Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2004.) 11.

¹⁷ Winton-Henry and Porter, *What the Body Wants*, 18.

¹⁸ Winton-Henry and Porter, *What the Body Wants*, 48.

positions and then release them, some might just want to be still, while others might want to express their energy in quick bursts and harder movements. They are physically expressing the feelings they may have gathered during the class debate and releasing them into a safe space not to fester and turn into aggression or violence. After these exercises, it is important to have a time of reflection either written or a dialogue about what feelings came to the surface and why. Play offers the space to explore feelings that might not be able to be expressed in words or that aid in bringing words to the surface, allow time and space for this as it not only releases tension and aggression but it calls for a truth and honesty that the body cannot hide from.

The Charge for Theological Education

Theological education has the unique opportunity to be prophetic in highlighting the educative potential of play as it encompasses the whole person. As theologians, ministers, and laypersons we care not only about education, but about educating the whole person in the love and grace of the divine. We take seriously the weight of sin, grace and forgiveness, therefore when these violent attacks are not only committed, but committed in our classrooms, these issues compound making it difficult to see the love and grace of our creator. When we allow our classrooms to be sites for these kinds of acts we are perpetuating this system of violence. We must no longer allow these acts to go unchallenged, but to offer something in its place. As theological educators we are all called to a mission of creating safe spaces to learn, grow and explore that which our students feel called to. If these spaces are no longer safe and in fact cause more harmful affects then we are not affectively carrying out the mission we have been entrusted with. Embodied learning offers an opportunity of reconciliation of the mind and body. Play touches on one's theological anthropology as it encourages and uplifts the power of the individual voice as well as the importance of communal engagement and support. Theological education has not only a wonderful opportunity, but a responsibility to be trailblazers in this area of teaching for and to the whole person through embodied learning.

Knowing the current problem of violence and aggression in higher education in general and theological education in particular, I offer up the organization *InterPlay* as one of many opportunities of learning how to begin to incorporate play into the classroom. As this will be different from what most faculty are use to *InterPlay* offers untensives (retreats), weekly to biweekly play groups, and workshops that can aid everyone at the level they are at. It would simply involve moving at a level in which you feel comfortable by incorporating little things along the way. The point is to start the process not be overwhelmed by it. My recommendation is for each institution to start with departmental retreats at the beginning of each semester. This includes administration as well. I would then have workshops, untensives (retreats), and classes made available for all faculty, administration, and students throughout the year. While this is an intense start, I believe in order for change to happen things must be disrupted. In this context, play becomes a prophetic practice that can remake classrooms and institutions. It is in doing theology from and through the body and allowing the body to be a locus for theology that one can begin to deal with aggression and start the "un-making" of violence in the theological educational classroom.

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