



Charter Toolkit

Physical Theatre Workshop

"BODY COMMONING"

Curriculum Template

BY CHILDREN OF THE WILD ENSEMBLE THEATRE

There is no commons without commoning. How do we understand what it means to common? In 1973 Augusto Boal published a book that revolutionized the face of applied theatre and creative organizing: *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Written as a methodology for practicing activation and empowerment within oppressive situations, his techniques and exercises became “rehearsal for revolution.” They have since facilitated uprisings and collective actions across the world. Central to the work is his idea that a spectator can step into the scene to become a spect-actor and change the course of events, both on the stage and off.

To do so—to become an active player in one’s own life—requires the will and capacity to actively participate in one’s environment. We find that practically building one’s internal sense of power, as well as collective power, solidarity, and trust with others is a necessary step to this participation which forms the bedrock of commoning. From Minnesota to Oregon, Massachusetts, Nicaragua, and Switzerland, we have seen this practice play out where a felt sense of power and trust inspire action that is insurgent or revolutionary.

What are the external and internal blocks that keep us from creating commons spaces and structures? We find commoning to center around questions of power: who has it, who doesn’t, who feels they have it, and who wants it. When we begin to common we reclaim our own power which is central to our humanity. In so doing, we challenge any society or structure that prohibits the encouragement of this growth.

The following exercises come from *Theatre for Community, Conflict, & Dialogue*, a *Theatre of the Oppressed*-inspired manual by Michael Rohd. We have paraphrased them here with his permission. Members of our ensemble have been taught by Michael Rohd, Augusto Boal, and Julian Boal; to them we offer our greatest thanks for teaching us the spirit and practice of these steps towards rehearsing our revolution. For a deeper understanding of this theatrical tradition, we recommend reading Michael Rohd’s book, in addition to *Theatre of the Oppressed* and *200 Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal.





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The following is a list of exercises for a 2 hour workshop to be facilitated by 1-2 people for a group of 10-20 participants, ages 12+. We encourage a moment after each exercise for discussion and group process during the course of the workshop.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- A large, empty room for serious play
- A whiteboard, chalkboard, or large pieces of butcher paper and markers
- Clothes in which you can move and be comfortable



INTRO CIRCLE

Have everyone stand in a circle and go around and introduce themselves (names, where from, gender pronouns, etc). This is where we (facilitators and participants) state our goals for the space and determine what is needed to make the space safe. We ask this as a question to be answered by attendees, and if working with a group that meets regularly, we ask if there are safe-space practices already in place that we can be made aware of. We often say that we are sharing these exercises as tools to use for them to know each other in a different way, for them to know us, and to know themselves and their bodies.



CIRCLE DASH (5-15 MINUTES)

Have everyone stay in the circle except a facilitators who goes into the middle of the circle. People on the outside make a non-verbal agreement through eye contact to trade places and the person in the center attempts to steal one of their spots. If successful, that person whose spot was taken is the new person in the middle. This is a silent game.



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COVER THE SPACE (5–15 MINUTES)

Begin with making sure the space is clear and well-defined in four corners (with chairs or something else if not already clearly defined). A facilitator asks participants to begin walking around in the space. Encourage people to avoid walking in a circle. Ask them to keep their gaze up at the horizon and to check in with their breathing, their bodies, etc. How do they feel today? What do they notice about how they are moving? Allow enough time for people to establish quiet and focus. They should not speak or touch each other; the goals are to stay silent and be continuously moving. Then ask people to cover the space—meaning that as a group they should be covering as much space as possible at any given time. The goals remain the same. At a certain point yell “Freeze!” and have everyone stop where they are. Ask people to look around. They should be evenly distributed throughout the space. Then unfreeze them, have them walk around, and freeze them again. A variation is to do this in pairs. This should be led from the outside.

BLIND HANDSHAKES (5–15 MINUTES)

Have everyone choose a partner and spread out evenly throughout the room. Ask them to shake hands and before they let go, say “Freeze!” so they are still holding hands. Ask them to close their eyes and tell them the rules, assuring them first that you and the other facilitator will be on the outside to make sure no one gets hurt and that the safe-space container established at the beginning is still in place. Then explain that when you say “Go” they should let go of each other’s hands and walk backwards until you say “Freeze,” after which, you will tell them to find each other’s hands again, still with their eyes closed. Your job, being on the outside, is to make sure no one gets hurt, crashes into each other, etc. Encourage people to walk backwards slowly. Then ask them to switch partners and do it again. One variation can be asking people to agree on a sound and use that to help find each other.

DEFENDER (5–15 MINUTES)

This begins like Cover the Space. Once people have been walking for a few minutes, ask everyone to choose, silently for themselves, one person who is their friend. They should continue walking. After another moment, ask them to choose one person who is their enemy. After another moment, tell them to keep their friend between them and their enemy at all times. Then ask them to let that go and choose another friend and enemy. Do this a few more times. Then ask them to invent stakes for the situation: who is this friend and enemy, and how is the friend in a position to protect them, etc.



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STORYTELLING (10–20 MINUTES)

Ask people to pair up again. They will have 3-5 minutes to tell a personal story to each other. Let them know this will not be shared with the group. The story should have a beginning, middle, and end, and contain some stakes (an apology, a breach of trust, an expression of love, a fear, or a discovery). Explain the connection between story and theatre: story is an event as well as the relationships and circumstances that surround it; and stories have the power to shape what we believe in, what our values are, and what we fight for. If someone finishes their story before time is up, they should go back to fill in details. Make sure that both people have a chance to share a story.

COMPLETE THE IMAGE (5–15 MINUTES)

Ask 2 people to volunteer and have everyone else sit in a place where they can see the pair. Ask them to shake hands, then freeze. Ask the spectators what they see. There are no wrong answers. Then ask one person to sit down, the other person remaining frozen. Ask someone from the “audience” to enter and complete the image. Again, ask the spectators what they see. Encourage them to be realistic or abstract. Then ask the first person to sit down, and have another volunteer step in to complete the image. Ask the spectators what they see. Do this until everyone who wants to has had at least one opportunity to complete the image.

SCULPTING—PARTNER SCULPT (30–40 MINUTES)

This is where the whiteboard, chalkboard, or paper comes in. Simply ask participants: what are some of the issues they face in their homes, communities, or at school. Again, no wrong answers. The facilitators should write down everything that’s said. Ask people to choose a partner, someone new. Then explain sculpting. There are two ways to make a sculpture: 1) Show your partner the shape you want them to make and ask them to make it; or 2) Ask if it’s ok to touch your partner, and if consent is given, move your partner into the position you want them to take.

Ask participants to choose who will be the sculptor and who will be the clay (everyone will have a chance to do both). Then have someone choose a word from the list and ask all the sculptors to shape their clay, based on the word that was chosen. Ask them to stand at the side of the room when they are done. When everyone is done, have the sculptors take a walk through the “sculpture garden.” Repeat this exercise in groups of 3, then 4 or 5, making sure to change words every time and making sure that everyone is getting an equal opportunity to sculpt/be clay.



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CIRCLE SCULPT (20–30 MINUTES)

Have everyone sit in a circle. Ask 3-5 participants to stand in the middle, then ask someone to call out a word from the list. The people in the middle have until the count of 10 to make a sculpture based on the word. After each sculpture, ask the spectators what they see, or what they notice, without judgement.



CONCLUSION

The Great Lakes Commons Charter asks us to affirm that:

This Declaration and the First Principles emerge from the collaborative work of people and communities around the lakes. Together we reflect many walks of life, histories and cultures. At the same time, a single purpose unites us: to transition to a mode of Great Lakes governance by which the waters and all living beings can flourish.

These Body Commoning practices centre the body as a skillful source of knowledge. Collaborating and uniting across difference are just two of the everyday acts of commoning -- the way we create a commons. How do we witness, challenge, and celebrate various forms of power? How do we practice and rehearse moving from passivity to action? How does moving our body shape our thinking and emotions? Apply and adapt this Body Commoning resource and add your name to our Great Lakes Commons Charter. We welcome your feedback and your stories on how this guide is growing our common capacity and commons alignment.

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