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## Rehearsing a Revolution: Boal's Forum Theater as a "4-trans+" Approach to Bi/Multilingual Teacher Preparation and Development

Amanda R. Morales  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
U.S.A.

Theresa Catalano  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
U.S.A.

Crystal Bock Thiessen  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln  
U.S.A.

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, we, university instructors, explore the possibilities of Forum Theater and its potential significance for preparing future/practicing teachers to work with bi/multilingual populations. Inspired by a 4-trans+ approach, we use arts and community-based (ACB) pedagogies influenced by Arts Practice Research. Our analysis reveals the power of a 4-trans lens with the addition of *transmediation* to mitigate teacher learners' fear and anxiety in working across difference, breaking down stereotypes, developing interculturality (including critical consciousness), and facilitating a sense of belonging and agency among participants.

**KEYWORDS:** Forum Theater, arts practice research, pre-service/in-service teachers, interculturality, critical consciousness

**Theoretical Framework**  
**Interculturality, Arts and Community-based Approaches, and Arts Practice Research**  
**Method**  
**Findings and Discussion**  
**Conclusion**  
**Future Iterations and Limitations**  
**References**  
**Author Contact**

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Given the complexities that come with teaching in today's ethno-racially and linguistically diverse classrooms, educators often lack the experience and skills necessary to effectively communicate interculturality within the dynamic contexts of their schooling situation. More specifically, pre-service and in-service teachers (which we refer to jointly as teacher learners) often feel unprepared or ill-equipped to respond in effective, agentic, or socially-just ways in the moment when racialized interactions or intercultural conflicts occur (El-Mekki, 2021; Morales, 2011; Nelson & Johnson, 2024; Stillinger, 2023). It is well documented that teacher preparation programs (TPPs) have struggled to recruit more demographically diverse teacher learners and to prepare them to work with students who do not look or sound like them (Gershenson et al., 2021; Miller, 2018; Riley, 1998). Though TPPs have made

modest progress in many areas, curricular innovations that lead to increased critical consciousness and intercultural competence among teacher learners remain inadequate (Brown, 2012; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012). This is despite the increased potential for misunderstandings and intercultural conflicts among diverse student bodies as they navigate the rising hegemonic, neo-nativist, anti-immigrant narratives so commonplace in U.S. sociopolitical contexts today (Morales et al., 2024).

We know that intercultural conflict with racism at the root not only has profound negative impacts on the climate of our classrooms as a whole, but also has been found to be an important determinant of health inequities among racial/ethnic groups. In fact, McKinnon et al. (2023) reported that "students who report experiencing racism have a higher prevalence of indicators of mental health, suicide risk, and substance use" (p. 31). Thus, it is necessary to provide teacher learners with opportunities to grow in their capacities to address such situations; develop concrete tools for defusing conflicts; and facilitate student dialogues across ethno-racial and linguistic lines, with the ultimate goals of supporting students in increasing their racial literacy and intercultural competence (Ganesan & Morales, 2024; Gorski, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2017).

Research has also suggested that teachers need *practice* applying these tools in order to increase both their comfort level with and their effectiveness in supporting an inclusive and welcoming learning environment for all learners (Picower & Kohli, 2017). A parallel and essential strand to this skill development is the racial identity development of the teacher learner. More specifically, scholarship suggests that when teachers are engaged in unpacking their own biases, fears, and anxieties with race they begin to understand themselves as racial and cultural beings so that they are better able to help others do the same (Sue et al., 2009).

As such, this paper documents a pedagogical departure from the dominant, hegemonic, and (dis)embodied whiteness that is normalized by the 'colorblind' epistemological approaches to curriculum and instruction common in teacher education (Brown, 2014; Sleeter, 2001, 2016). It examines an arts and community-based (ACB) pedagogical project influenced by arts practice research (APR) (Phelan & Nunan, 2018). In this study, we explore two university teacher educators' and one intensive English instructor's efforts to engage their diverse groups of college students (i.e., undergraduate preservice teachers, graduate students that are practicing teachers, and adult international multilingual college students from the university Intensive English Program (IEP) in an embodied ACB intercultural experience workshop. The goal was to equip students with the language and skills needed to engage across complex cultural differences, to speak back to power (i.e., effectively challenge education policies and practices that are damaging for marginalized communities), and to respond within micro aggressive (Sue et al., 2009) scenarios in ways that are empowering and transformative.

As the mechanism for engagement, we incorporated Forum Theater (a component of Augusto Boal's *Theater of the Oppressed* into a three-hour

workshop involving all three student groups and collected data from the experience including written and video (transcribed) reflections from participants (see our Method section for more details). Our research is grounded in a “4-trans+ approach” which is inspired by the “4-trans” approach that is the focus of this special issue.

### Theoretical Framework

The intentional integration and expansion of the 4-trans framework in our use of Forum Theater with teacher learners offers a dynamic and accessible bridge between theory and practice. This study considers the framework of translanguaging, transculturalism, transdisciplinarity, and transnationalism as an effective foundation for understanding the multidimensionality and complexity of future/current teacher learners’ identities and lived experiences. And through the use of arts and community-based approaches such as Forum Theater, we hope to amplify the framework’s power with the addition of the concept of *transmediation* (each element of the model is explained in the section below). This holistic, interconnected approach encourages participants to not only reflect on their (and others’) social conditions but also actively engage in creating the conditions for their liberation, both locally and globally. Ultimately, it is through the use of a 4-trans+ framework that we strive to facilitate a more inclusive, fluid, and critical exploration of key socio-cultural issues and the important roles that critically conscious teacher learners can play once equipped with knowledge and skills to do so.

*Translanguaging* refers to the way in which bi/multilinguals move naturally across languages to make meaning, but also to a pedagogy in which the full linguistic and cultural repertoires of students are utilized for learning (García et al., 2017). Translanguaging contributes to our critical approach because encouraging students to utilize all their languages in their learning disrupts the dominant script in education where standard English is privileged as the premier language of schooling. Through translanguaging, multilinguals can transgress and resist one of many so-called “silent hegemonies” (García et al., 2017, p. 162) that are taken for granted and act as habitus (Bourdieu, 2018). In the case of monolingual students with limited experiences in settings where English is not spoken, translanguaging pedagogy helps develop critical consciousness that opens students’ eyes to these “silent hegemonies,” helping them to realize there are other ways to do ‘languaging’. For students who are accustomed to their home languages being marginalized or discouraged in their schooling experiences, the concept of translanguaging can be liberating as “opening up spaces for students to language flexibly also means opening up space for a discussion of power relations among social groups” (García et al., 2017, p. 162).

*Transculturalism* on the other hand, refers to a “non-essentialized, inclusive approach to culture” that views it as dynamic and hybrid with “blurred, fluctuating and overlapping cultural borders,” characterized by “interconnectedness,

permeation, and ongoing transformative dialogue” (Loh, 2022, p. 398). Transculturalism is an essential element of a critical framework because, with this lens, students are encouraged to see cultural/racial identities and choices as highly personal and multi-layered. Moreover, they gain the tools to disrupt or reconsider stereotypes of the ‘Other.’

*Transdisciplinarity* is about “creatively re-imagining the disciplines and the possibilities for combining them” (Bernstein, 2015, p. 7) while challenging “the entire framework of disciplinary thinking.” It works across disciplines to apply research to real-world problems that “need not only to be understood in new ways but also demand practical solutions” (p. 13). Transdisciplinarity contributes to our framework because bringing different disciplines to the mix (such as students from many different departments, including marginalized spaces where international learners of English often dwell), provides a window into the topic of focus from many different perspectives. This not only allows students to consider alternative ways of viewing the world and to draw parallels across student experiences within different disciplines but also name how they are unique in some contexts.

*Transnationalism* can be defined as “the phenomenon wherein people, through a mix of necessity and choice, live their lives across two or more countries” (Skerrett, 2020, p. 501). Use of this term also acknowledges the complex, highly mobile, and heterogeneous nature of today’s student populations (Hamann et al., 2010). Recognizing the transnational nature of our students means making their complicated intersectional identities and biographies visible and understanding how they shape schooling experiences so that we can serve them better. That is, knowing these identities and biographies can help teachers avoid putting students into boxes that make them question their identities and feel uncomfortable. It means seeing their students as dynamic, hybrid, and constantly changing, as well as recognizing that transnational students often have to navigate expectations “to be increasingly skilled in the languages, cultures, and curriculum and instructional approaches of two or more nations” (Skerrett, 2015, p. 500).

We adopt the 4-trans framework described above that serves as a foundation for this important special issue; but because of our arts and community-based approach, we amplify its power by drawing on the concept of *transmediation*. Klecker and Phinney (2019) described transmediation as switching back and forth from written or spoken forms of communication to engaging in some form of action-oriented art. In the case of the ACB intercultural workshop, students spoke about microaggressions in small groups, then wrote, performed, and collaboratively reimagined them, mapping stories on their bodies as theater. The addition of transmediation is important to recognizing the many contributions that creative and embodied approaches to (bilingual) learning can have (Leland et al., 2016; Siegel, 1995; Wolfe, 2010). We believe that transmediation is essential to our critical framework for our arts-based approach because, as part of the art-making process, students move from using formal language (which is normally elevated over other means and is the privileged form of meaning-making) to elevating the theatrical use of the body and its meaning-making capacities. This movement away from the privileged norms of

communication in which teacher learners are more comfortable, and away from sterile academic spaces devoid of emotion, toward vulnerability, renders the experiences transformational. Furthermore, the use of theater aids in flattening social hierarchies. Individuals who are typically vulnerable and in less powerful positions can find themselves on more equal ground due to the level of discomfort commonly felt by all participants in arts-based activities like Forum Theater.

### Theater of the Oppressed and Critical Consciousness

According to Augusto Boal (1979), the theater is not just drama-based art, but a space of resistance—a place where art forms are not merely objects of pleasure but spaces to educate, organize, and “incite to action” (p. xiii). Inspired by Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000), Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979) envisioned theater as both a sensorial way of transmitting knowledge and as “rehearsal of revolution” (p. 155). Forum Theater, which is one of the types of Theatre of the Oppressed, is “a critical drama-based pedagogy to examine issues of racism, classism, linguistic discrimination and xenophobia” (Caldas, 2018, p. 3). In essence, by having participants excavate and recreate difficult real-life situations in which they have had trouble resolving, facilitators can take theater and transform it into social action. The aim of using Forum Theater with students in higher education is to explore real scenarios in ways that empower them to practice solutions to life’s problems (personally and professionally) and change the outcomes for the better. We were inspired by Caldas’s (2018) work with bilingual teacher learners to begin our own work in Forum Theater. In her study, Caldas discussed how being a bilingual teacher also means being an advocate in the classroom, since this area of education is highly politicized. Caldas showed how having the teacher learners act out and respond to real scenarios that had happened to them could be used as a vehicle for developing critical consciousness and agency.

Critical consciousness (*conscientização*) can be defined as “learning to identify social, political, and economic conflicts and to take action against the oppressive forces of reality” (Freire, 2005, p. 35). Thus, it involves making students aware of injustices within society and how to resist them. Forum Theater can help develop *conscientização* by having students brainstorm situations they have witnessed or been a part of and then recreate these situations for the group, stopping when the scene arrives at a *moment of crisis or conflict* in which the participants/actors are not satisfied with their response. At that point, the audience (aka the other students) propose alternatives, and these more agentic responses are then acted out until all are satisfied with a resolution. In this way, not only are all participants made aware of and given opportunities to bear witness to and problematize injustices that are happening to those different from themselves, but also, they are given tools (perspectives, knowledge, words, actions) to respond and resist these injustices.

In our version of Forum Theater, we engaged students in activities focused first on trust and community building, then on responding to microaggressions (preparing participants through readings and discussion ahead of time for what these are/how they function). We next asked students in mixed groups to brainstorm microaggressions they had witnessed or experienced to act out and propose better responses.

### **Interculturality, Arts and Community-based Approaches, and Arts Practice Research**

Arts and community-based (ACB) approaches to education are ways of teaching that integrate the arts and community engagement into learning experiences (Bowen & Kisida, 2017). There are many studies that provide a basis for the use of arts and community-based approaches (such as Forum Theater) as a means of developing interculturality in (future) teachers of bi/multilingual populations (e.g., O'Farrell, 2015; Powers & Duffy 2016; Sharkey et al., 2016). By *interculturality* we mean more than just development of intercultural skills and communicative competence; rather, the term encompasses "reciprocal interaction across cultures, mutual sharing, cultural creation and common growth" (Dai & Chen, 2015, p. 102), emphasizing intercultural harmony and treating others with dignity and respect.

Findings from ACB research reveal that embodied experiences can leave lasting impressions on students, helping them to "recognize, confront, and challenge beliefs about themselves and the multiple identities of their future students" (Powers & Duffy, 2016, p. 71). In addition, experiences such as the mapping exercise described in Sharkey et al. (2016), which included students taking photos of their journey to school each day (in this case, from the perspective of how chemistry was involved) can become an "initial entryway for teachers to begin to learn about the places their students inhabit so they can find ways to make curriculum more relevant and meaningful" (p. 317). Finally, ACB research shows that language learning can also be developed in these experiences since working with local communities can facilitate authentic discourse, given that engagement in the artistic process requires communication and collaboration (Berriz et al., 2019).

ACB often draws from the work of John Dewey (1934), one of the first to foreground aesthetic experiences and the arts in making learning and life more meaningful. Through Dewey's philosophy of aesthetic education, teachers are inspired to use art as a mechanism for "capturing, representing, and communicating what they know" (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2019, p. 68). In this way, the arts serve as a catalyst to re/awaken the learners' senses and give educators license to break from rigid approaches to teaching and 'learning' within schools. These embodied practices acknowledge the humanity of both teacher and learner, allowing for creativity and critical self-reflection in ways that many other approaches can't. Furthermore, ACB approaches emphasize community

partnerships and their power to engage students and community partners in meaningful dialogues, which foster a humanizing sense of belonging and empowerment (Engdahl, 2012).

As we mentioned in our Introduction, our research is influenced by arts practice research (APR) (Phelan & Nunan, 2018). According to Mulvihill and Swaminathan (2019), proponents of using the term 'arts practice research' argue that calling it this "signifies a continuous opening of potential relationships between arts practices and research" (p. 5). Phelan and Nunan (2018) also noted that the term "arts practice research" gives the 'practice' part a central role; within the range of approaches to this type of research, "artistic practice may be a key component of the research method, a part of the final thesis, or constitute the whole work" (p. 1). In addition, adopting this research frame indicates our position and advocacy for art in and of itself to be "recognized as research and as a site of meaning-making and knowledge construction" (Phelan & Nunan, 2018, p. 3).

## Method

In the following sections, we describe the participants, the context of the ACB intercultural experience, and our methods of data collection and analysis.

### Participants

The 40 participants in our study included students from three different university classes who worked together in one three-hour ACB intercultural workshop at a mid-sized Midwestern American public university on February 22, 2022. This workshop was curated and organized specifically for these three groups of students as a required element within the curriculum of their respective courses. The workshop/ACB intercultural experience was facilitated at a time when in-person classes had just begun again after a global pandemic. The first group consisted of 21 predominantly white undergraduate preservice teacher learners (studying either elementary or secondary education) in a "Multicultural Education" course, which incorporated preparation for working with bi/multilingual students. There were no domestic students of color in this group. However, there were two multilingual international students: one from Korea (who spoke Korean and English) and one from Guatemala (who spoke Spanish, K'iche', and English). This group was taught by Amanda, who regularly teaches multicultural education and identifies as a Latina who also grew up in the rural Midwest. Before engaging students in the activities, she had participated in workshops on Forum Theater at multiple events and learned about the technique from experts and from reading the work of Augusto Boal (1979) and Blanca Caldas (2018), but this was the first time she had formally integrated Forum Theater as a pedagogical tool in her teaching together with Theresa and Crystal.

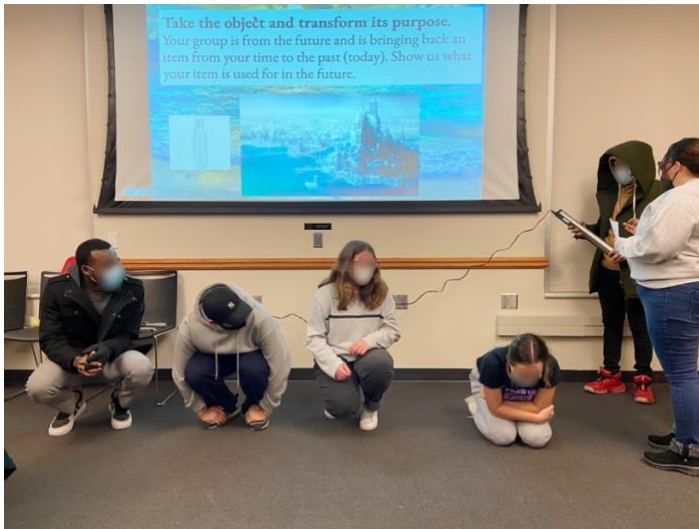
The second group consisted of practicing teacher learners in a graduate teacher education course entitled “Intercultural Communication.” Students in the course were language teachers in K-12 settings or higher education pursuing their master's degree or doctorate. A total of 11 students were in the class, hailing from many different countries (e.g., Morocco, Burkina Faso, Argentina/Spain, China, and the U.S.). American students included a Native American woman, a Latina, as well as five white students who were language teachers fluent in or experienced with working with speakers of languages other than English. Languages spoken to various degrees by this group included Ho Chunk, Mooré, French, Arabic, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, and a variety of World Englishes. Theresa was the instructor of the course, which she has taught since 2011. Like Amanda, she had previously attended workshops and read Boal's (1979) and Caldas's (2018) work but had never formally incorporated it into her teaching. She identifies as a multilingual Italian American who has lived and taught in various countries.

The third group in the ACB workshop consisted of seven international multilingual college students who were a part of the Intensive English Program (IEP), which serves pre-matriculated students at the Midwestern university. The students' home countries were Sudan, Honduras, and Brazil. All seven of the students were enrolled in a class entitled “English for Campus and Community Engagement,” a content class designed to help connect pre-matriculated multilingual learners of English to peers and services throughout their host institution and city while focusing on meaningful use and practice of English. The Forum Theater activities were integrated into the IEP course and required out-of-class collaborations. Crystal was the instructor for this course, one that she developed and has been teaching since 2017. She has worked with multilingual learners of English at all levels in the United States, Ukraine, and Japan, but this was her first experience incorporating Forum Theater. To our knowledge, none of the students in any of the groups had previously had experience with Forum Theater either in a teacher education setting or elsewhere, although a small number had some background in theater and other arts-based practices.

### **Envisioning the Space and the Experience**

As co-teachers committed to deepening and enriching the intercultural learning of our students, we set out to create, facilitate, and learn from an ACB experience that would engage three distinct groups (coming from very different backgrounds and perspectives) in practicing interculturality and developing their critical consciousness and language/ communication skills, with microaggressions as the coalescing topic, all through a 4-trans+ lens. All three instructors participated in the entire workshop and were part of the planning, teaching, and reflecting process, and we took turns at various parts of the workshop facilitating the different activities. At the beginning of the workshop, participants were welcomed and given framing for its purpose/intent. The teachers centered participants' attention on the wide range of diversity in the room and invited them

to reflect on shared agreements for making the space brave and inclusive (Singleton, 2015) and ensuring that all students (in particular, the IEP students) were comfortable and understood the purpose and process of the collective task at hand. Co-teachers then took turns facilitating, taking leading or supporting roles, starting first with a brief get-to-know-you activity and then a series of Boal's (1992/2002) games and group exercises that progressively grow more complex and intimate with the intention of building trust and familiarity among the members. Figure 1 depicts participants engaging in a Boalian warm-up activity called "This Bottle is Not a Bottle."



**Figure 1**  
*Warm-Up Activity*

Next, co-teachers turned to the main event, Forum Theater, explaining and scaffolding the series of activities students would be asked to do and briefly modeling each stage to make it more tangible. Theresa transitioned participants to group work, setting parameters for the activity (such as all members had to play a role in their group's skit). Students dove in, sharing memories and discussing within their mixed groups instances where they witnessed or experienced a microaggression, their thoughts and feelings at the time, and how they responded in the moment. The students then selected one of their discussed scenarios to perform, established roles, did staging, and then rehearsed in groups.

Amanda then called on each group, one at a time, to take the "stage" and perform their scenario/skit ending at the point of crisis/conflict. Audience members then briefly discussed in groups potential responses/solutions and provided specific suggestions for the actors to reenact. Actors would reperform the scene, sometimes multiple times, based on audience suggestions until the collective felt it landed on a response that effectively challenged the oppressor(s) and empowered the actor(s) in ways that could lead to more racially-just outcomes.

Crystal and Theresa provided support to Amanda in facilitating audience dialogs as teacher learners unpacked each group's scenario, crafted justice-oriented responses, and responded to each group's reperformances. Once all groups finished, Theresa brought everyone together to reflect on and synthesize the learning experience through whole-group discussion. Participants were asked to share their thoughts related to the topics we tackled within this collective activity (microaggressions) or the activity itself (doing Forum Theater within a heterogeneous group). Theresa wrapped up the experience, facilitating a short reflective dialogue where the participants were invited to consider the utility of ACB approaches such as Forum Theater in their own future teaching.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In line with arts practice research (APR) and our 4-trans+ approach, we positioned the entire experience as data, including the process and products resulting from the experience. As such, we leaned into the freedom that APR afforded us as we framed our research design, data collection, and analysis. We engaged in ongoing creative, critical, collaborative inquiry using dialog, journaling, visualization, and peer-debriefing through the process. We used our informal notes, observations, and photographs as secondary data to help us make sense of our primary data, which consisted of participant voices and perspectives gathered through IRB-approved, post-experience reflection assignments given immediately after the February 22, 2022 workshop and collected on March 1, 2022. These reflections were built into the course design, and each student from across the three groups was asked to produce a product (either a reflection paper or reflection video, 40 total) in response to open-ended prompts (see Appendix A).

Students were given the latitude to translanguage as needed to effectively communicate their ideas and perspectives on the experience in any language of their choice. The products created by participants were compiled, read/viewed, and thematically coded by their respective instructor as a subset of data. Initial codes were discussed during peer-debriefings as we dialoged about *noticings* and *wonderings* from the data. Then, each subset was read/viewed and coded by at least one of the other two co-teachers to fine-tune codes and begin mapping emergent themes across the data sets. This process culminated in a peer-review and debriefing session held on May 10, 2022, where codes and overarching themes were identified and discussed to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness as we crafted this creative work.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In the paragraphs below, we offer the results of our detailed examination of the data, drawing connections within and across the various forms in relation to the 4-trans+ framework.

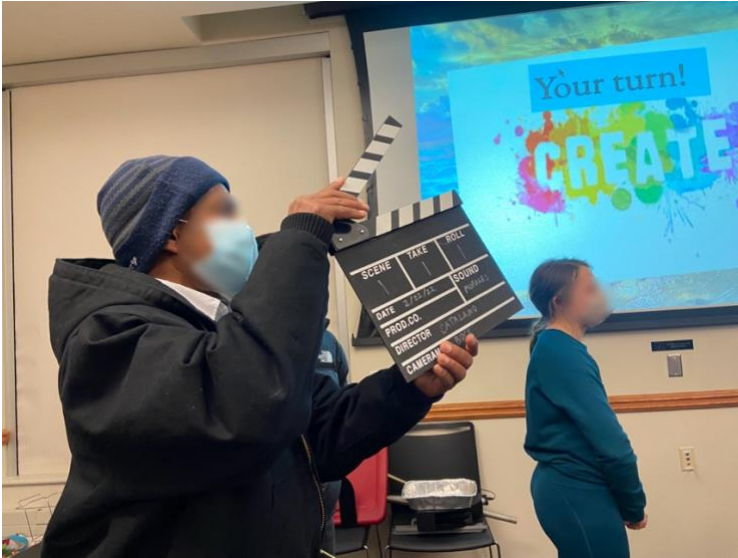
## Transmediation: Talking, Moving, Acting, then Writing

As discussed, the process of transmediation is the way that we mode-switch (Klecker & Phinney, 2019) from written or spoken forms to the mode of the art and back again. In the case of Forum Theater, students needed first to talk through the scenarios based on their real-life experiences. The talking then became acting, which included exaggerated gestures, body language, facial expressions, etc., and after the workshops, students had to write about their embodied experiences in their reflections, which we quote from in this paper using pseudonyms and noting from which group of students they came. Several participants referred to how the experience of transmediation (creating, producing, and reflecting on the theater activities) contributed in diverse ways to understanding. For example, Walid, a graduate student, noted in his reflection that “the complexities that we can use lengthy paragraphs to explain can be achieved through very short skits.” Walid thought that if they were just writing about the experiences, the processing of the experiences in a meaningful way would take longer, and students would focus on different things. By creating theater together, the stories were simplified and boiled down to their essence.

Kaylie, another graduate student, commented in her final reflection about how the different modes act as a mosaic, layering upon each other and adding nuance and complicating our understandings of a situation by adding an emotional component. In this way, the theater became a metaphor for the understanding of culture, which was one of the larger goals of the course, that is, to understand the dynamic and complex nature of what we call “culture” and how we communicate and interact with people different from ourselves. In this final example, Braden, another graduate student, reported in their final reflection that:

These kinds of activities provide for the use of nonverbal communication as a means of communication, practicing multimodal acts of meaning-making, and how different people involved in collaborative activities have a different level of expertise in the language they use. (Braden, final written reflection)

In this quote, Braden noticed the way that people in each group had different comfort and competence levels with English and with acting, and that the theater activity enabled them to transmediate across different modes, allowing for flexibility and for each person to act or speak in ways they felt most comfortable. This meant that, for some participants, they might just click the movie slate to start the action (see example in Figure 2 below).



**Figure 2**  
*Ready, Set, Action*

For other participants, they might be an 'extra' on the scene, acting, but not having to speak, such as the participants pretending to be on a bus in the photo below (Figure 3). Only the bus driver and one of the passengers had speaking roles, but the others had to use body language to show their reaction to the bus driver's treatment of the passenger in this scenario.



**Figure 3**  
*Bus Scene*

Moving from more traditional and static modes of engagement to a critical, embodied one involving acting out scenarios with gestures, facial expressions, and props was not easy or comfortable for most of the participants. In this way, majority white, native English-speaking teacher learners who typically feel at ease and centered within university curriculum and instruction were, by design, decentered. This decentering dissolved much of the typical power these students hold relative to students of color and multilingual students. In this way, *endarkened* (Delgado Bernal, 1998) pedagogies like Forum Theater highlight the ineffectiveness of traditional paradigms to dissolve hierarchy and offer a valuable justice-oriented tool of resistance.

### Translanguaging in Meaning Making

From *transmediation*, we move to the related concept of *translanguaging* (drawing on the languages of learners to understand content). There were often multiple languages spoken in each group, and below, Amadou, a graduate student, points out how he found it useful to translanguage with his group members since he spoke English well, but also spoke Arabic and French, like some of his community partner IEP students.

Translanguaging was a very useful approach that we used in the group work, and I could see how to go about it and what challenges come along with it such as trying to strike a balance between inclusion, using as much English as possible not to exclude other monolingual students, and staying away from mere translation. (Amadou, final written reflection)

Above, Amadou recognizes that there is nuance to translanguaging in group situations. This means that he had to find ways to use his other languages to help his group members understand what was happening, considering that some were at beginning or intermediate English proficiency levels, while at the same time not excluding other group members who only spoke English. He did this by sometimes speaking in Arabic and then translating for the English monolingual group members. Other times, it was just an expression like “good job” that he used in French to encourage other group members and make them feel comfortable.

Amadou's actions remind us of García et al.'s (2017) notion of *cariño* and the way that translanguaging can show authentic caring between students or between teachers and students, which works to fight back against language hegemonies that may cause students who are not native speakers to feel inferior. It also speaks to the ways in which theater can “capture aspects of human experience and social life in unparalleled ways” (Leavy, 2020, p. 183). Because participants had the freedom to decide what they wanted to portray and how to portray it, and to negotiate these decisions together on their own terms, it opened up spaces in which translanguaging could occur naturally. In addition, because he was a practicing teacher, Amadou had school situations to draw on, such as the consideration that translanguaging needs to happen without excluding other

students. This was useful advice for the preservice teachers who might not yet have had the experience to recognize some of the challenges of implementing translanguaging in their own classes.

The following quote from graduate student Madison's final reflection shows how undergraduate teacher learners also benefited from the translanguaging in their groups:

I got to surround myself with MANY different cultures, all while getting to share mine. Also, what I thought was very beneficial was getting to hear their languages. I do not surround myself enough around different [people] who are trying to learn English and continuing to do this will help me a lot with my future students. (Madison, final written reflection)

Besides making a connection to how the workshop could help her in her own teaching and showing that the experience was something she was not used to, Madison also documented in her reflection how being exposed to the languages of the other students through translanguaging made her remember a time when her father had made a negative comment about someone speaking a different language in a store. She expressed that seeing students translanguage helped her "open her mind" to the fact that not everyone's first language is English and, for this reason, they do not speak English all the time. She noted she now had tools to advocate for people the next time her father or someone else made an ignorant comment about this topic.

### **Transculturalism: Transcending Notions of the 'Other'**

The concept of *transculturalism* emphasizes a non-essentialized, inclusive approach to culture that encourages us to embrace blurred lines and cultural borders, and to recognize our own cultural practices while not accepting the idea of fixed or oppositional and closed cultural, ethnic, and national allegiances or identities (Loh, 2022). We were reminded of this concept by multiple comments in our data, particularly from the multicultural education group of undergraduate teacher learners who spoke of the ways in which Forum Theater encouraged them to cross boundaries and re-think their stereotypes of the 'Other.' For most of this group, this intercultural activity was their first opportunity to engage in in-depth conversations with people from international, multilingual, and non-white backgrounds, particularly around experiences with race/racism. Therefore, they entered this experience with a significant amount of what Bonilla Silva (2011) described as racialized emotions (RE). He stated that REs are group-based and relational; "much like class and gender, race cannot come to life without being infused with emotions, thus, racialized actors feel the emotional weight of their categorical location" (Bonilla Silva, 2011, p. 4). And for white individuals, racial constructions are often binary (dominant vs Other) and predicated on historical and social relationships (Bonilla Silva, 2011).

The emotion of white fear, for example, is often rooted in an overall fear of the *Other* as well as fears of being seen as racist or ignorant, a fear of offending someone, and in many cases, a fear of violence against themselves as a white person (Matias, 2016). For more than one-third of our student group, the emotion of fear surfaced in their reflections. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, they identified the non-white, non-native English-speaking participants in the activity as the source of that fear. One undergraduate student, Micah, stated her feelings this way during her final video reflection,

Honestly, this whole event made me extremely anxious.... I was meeting people who grew up very different from me and that scared me. I'm not sure why, but I was terrified I might say something wrong or somehow offend them.

This student, like others, referred to her rural, all-white upbringing frequently and how she lacked the cultural experiences and expertise needed to comfortably engage in multi-racial contexts.

Another undergraduate student, Ruth, described her fear in relation to her religious identity, framing it this way: "The people made me the most anxious because I was worried about automatically being judged as a white Catholic woman." This student shared several times that she felt her religion was viewed negatively by her more "liberal peers" and teachers. Her statement automatically positioned the racialized *Other* as both judgmental and "non-Catholic," though she had yet to learn anything about the IEP students' religious beliefs. A third undergraduate student, Nora, provided commentary on how the activity made her feel based on assumptions of difference: "the part of the activity that made me the most anxious was the *people*.... I hate to admit it, but I was especially nervous to meet and talk to the [IEP] students because our experiences are so different." She clarified that it was being separated from her white friends at the beginning of the evening that was the most unnerving for her because she then was the "only white person" in her group.

It is important to note that it was in this discomfort, this forced separation from the familiar, that students — with support and encouragement from one another and their instructors — had to push past this fear and in many cases chose to embrace the vulnerability of their immediate position. For many students, there was progress and a sense of release and gratitude on the other side of the fear and anxiety they felt. An undergraduate, Lainey, for example, explained,

I did not want to go this event at all, my anxiety was through the roof, and I was so scared. Thank you for pushing me to get outside of my comfort zone and making me experience something I know I wouldn't do without that push. This experience is one I will not forget. (Lainey, final written reflection)

These quotes align with the notion that one's racialized subjectivity *can* shift and that "racialized acts," encounters, and experiences can "create the space for rupturing racialized habits" (Bonilla Silva, 2011, p. 4), such as tendencies towards racial avoidance and insulation. Another undergraduate, Beth, described how the

experience helped her better understand what it feels like to *not* be the majority and to be pushed out of one's comfort zone, but that her group was able to "be scared but also comfortable together."

A second connection to transculturalism was through an increased understanding of the pervasiveness of racialized experiences among minoritized students and communities. Students indicated that doing Forum Theater with students different from themselves allowed for a deeper, more personalized understanding of the concept of microaggressions. In describing the activity, John, an undergraduate student, mentioned the power of engaging with group members' stories in this way:

Lots of the ideas brought up in [my group] were by the people that were not white. This gave me an idea of just how many racial microaggressions that other group members deal with day-to-day.... It puts into perspective how [they] are affected based on the stereotypes placed on them.... These issues are absolutely massive. It definitely had a big impact on me hearing all my group members' stories, especially the ones that were not in our class or a different race than me. Just puts into perspective how they feel about situations they've been in that I will probably never be in. I was touched by their stories, and I'll never forget this experience. (John, final written reflection)

John's story also highlights the benefits of bringing three very different groups together and how undergraduates appreciated the perspectives of the IEP students and of the teachers who had real scenarios from their own teaching to draw from.

Similarly, Micah, an undergraduate student, noted how the embodied aspect of the experience was striking for her. She said:

It was really hard to watch because it is one thing learning about it, but something completely different seeing it in front of your eyes. It was truly eye-opening... but it happens every day to those who are different than me. Our world, country, cities, and communities are so diverse, and this play really brought microaggressions to light. It made them real, and I think we need more of that in education. (Micah, final reflection)

In large part, students seemed to come away with more nuanced and empathetic perspectives towards international and multilingual students' racialized experiences and complex cultural identities. Even more, many of their narratives indicated a sharper criticality, as described by Sharkey et al. (2016), or at least awareness of the problematic nature of some narratives they grew up around regarding minoritized communities. As for undergraduate student Tiffany, this awareness hit close to home. She indicated that, although witnessing other's accounts of micro aggressive experiences firsthand was heartbreaking, it "allowed me to see just how harmful these comments can be." She said, "these [microaggressions] are comments that I have heard said, even by close friends

and family members, and I did not recognize [them] as microaggressions until recently.”

Another undergraduate student, Annie, indicated that the activity “helped me look at my own biases and reflect how to better myself as a person.” Some of the undergraduate students also showed they understood the goal of the activities and how they related to transculturalism, such as in this excerpt from Brian’s reflection: “When teachers understand and interact with different cultures, they can prevent prejudice and judgments from harming a student’s educational path.” Natasha also said that, “Attending events like this one can help me to become more knowledgeable of the challenges and equip me with the resources I need to intervene and help.” This level of critical reflection was common among participant narratives and often included references towards action.

### **Transdisciplinarity: Understanding Complicated Topics Better**

*Transdisciplinarity* refers to working across boundaries of disciplines and finding new ways to understand content (Bernstein, 2015). In the Forum Theater workshop, participants experienced transdisciplinarity because they were engaged with learners from different subject areas (e.g., multicultural education, intercultural communication, and English language/community engagement). In addition, they each had opportunities to draw connections to their own subject area while engaging in the theater activities, allowing them to understand the content in different ways. For example, the IEP students in the English for Campus and Community Engagement course seemed to have an overall understanding of the topic, but there was still some initial confusion on what constituted a microaggression. This was especially apparent when the students – all of whom are a part of their country’s dominant cultural and language group – were asked to think of ways in which they themselves may have committed acts of microaggressions towards others. Having the opportunity to come together with their small groups and participate in discussions and performances that investigated microaggressions further were key components in these students’ full understanding of what can be a complicated, situational, and not-always-easily-understood concept.

In reflecting on these performances, especially the nature of demonstrating both the microaggression and possible responses/solutions from the audience, Issa, a graduate student from Burkina Faso, stated in his final video reflection, “I have learned how to respond in case I am the victim of a microaggression. I also learned that this is a phenomenon that affects many people. I used to think the opposite.” Engaging in performances that highlight a complicated concept across disciplinary boundaries can enhance understanding as core components are isolated while participants demonstrate their understanding of it through movements, gestures, and facial expressions that accompany their spoken words (Uribe, 2019). Issa’s quote shows a more internalized understanding of the concept of microaggression as the performer applied it to his own experiences and

gained a broader understanding of its existence. It also connects directly to the reflections of the teacher learners of color in the Intercultural Communication group who not only heard stories from those who encountered microaggressions similar to their experiences, but who also came to feel a sense of solidarity and support showing that they were not alone in these experiences and in their shared understanding of the phenomenon.

In terms of transdisciplinarity among the groups of students (i.e., teacher learners and the IEP students from a variety of disciplines such as science, engineering, math, language arts, social studies, etc.), this led to discussions of microaggressions and what they might look like in the many different contexts experienced by the students. For example, one undergraduate student talked about how microaggressions within the field of engineering mapped along gendered and ethno-racial lines, specifically drawing attention to how women are often underrepresented in these courses. Therefore, microaggressions tended to impact female students of color more acutely. Across the groups, participants were able to share what microaggressions and aspects of race and racism within various spaces, fields, and content areas looked and felt like. This helped participants see that microaggression is a universal phenomenon, but that it manifests in different ways in different contexts.

Participating in Forum Theater activities was not only a way to understand more deeply and connect to complicated topics such as microaggressions. As described by Hwang (2019), incorporating arts as a way of learning and cultivating habits through bodily production can also produce a reframing that provides for deeper understanding of both lived and unlived experiences. In this case, the interdisciplinarity combined with the ACB approach opened the IEP students up to varied perspectives on what are often shared experiences that are difficult to name and discuss, especially in a foreign language such as English, and to use that knowledge to reimagine more proactive responses and reactions to complex situations.

### **Transnationalism: Building Relationships and Collaborative Support**

Attending to the *transnational* nature of student identities is key to preparing teachers to work with globally mobile bi/multilingual students. One of the goals of the Forum Theater workshop was to bring different groups of students together so that they would feel more confident working with others different from themselves, but more specifically, we wanted the teacher learners to develop cultural understandings about the complex identities and biographies of their future students in hopes to better serve them. For the IEP students, we wanted them to increase their comfort level working with domestic students outside the IEP program and to help them build relationships that could bolster their learning and enrich their lives while studying in the U.S.

For IEP students, coming together with domestic peers was both exciting and a source of anxiety. The introduction activities, which helped them learn about each of their complex hybrid identities, and warm-up exercises, that were designed to progressively build trust and a sense of camaraderie with their groups (Boal, 1992/2002), were crucial mechanisms in helping participants to feel like important and integral members of their teams (see example in Figure 4 below). About these, Hassan from Sudan said that “the warm-up process was fun and wonderful, it requires harmony and collective thinking,” while Amir from Sudan stated, “The warm-up was very simple, and it broke the distance between us. (...) art is the language that unites all people.” Replacing feelings of anxiety with feelings such as “fun” and “wonderful” is important for students to establish positive relationships with one another. The idea that these activities “broke the distance” both metaphorically and physically is important in countering the distance that IEP students often feel on campus, both in terms of communication and in terms of physical space and interaction. Recognizing that the warm-ups integrated “harmony and collective thinking” and that these arts-based movements had the power to “unite,” moved the students out of feeling like outsiders and into more feelings of support and group membership.



**Figure 4**  
*Relationship Building Activities*

Reflecting on both the warm-up activities and the subsequent collective group performances and discussions on microaggressions, Amir continued:

These activities are very useful for me because they give me space to connect with other students at the University. It is an opportunity for me to form relationships with those who speak English fluently. I was not to be strange or embarrassing, on the contrary, I felt that these people belonged to my group. I was so relaxed and easy to

get my opinion on. All members of my group accepted opinions and listened to each other. (Amir's final video reflection)

Again, the themes of belonging to a group; not feeling embarrassed but, instead, supported; having space for connection and breaking feelings of distance; and forming relationships, are elements that are not only necessary in the formation of interculturality (Dai & Chen, 2015), but also directly counter feelings of disconnection and isolation that IEP students often experience during their time studying at American host institutions. In addition, the interaction with American students at the university helped them dispel stereotypes about Americans and practice using English in informal contexts.

For the teacher learners from the other groups, thinking through the lens of transnationalism and the other trans\* attributes we mentioned earlier about their partner groups helped them transcend stereotypes and ingrained ways of thinking about the *Other* and, for the IEP students, ways of thinking about Americans, which are central goals of intercultural communication. For example, because of the timing of the workshop in February 2022, there were quite a few scenarios created by Asian participants that brought to light hate speech or other types of discrimination they had witnessed or experienced during the pandemic, with the aim of learning how to better advocate for themselves or others in the future.

Witnessing these scenarios helped other participants transcend their own lack of awareness that these kinds of things were happening, given the relative cultural isolation that many of the rural undergraduate students had experienced leading up to this point. Even to white undergraduate student actors who had no connection to the identity-related roles and scenarios they were re-creating, the experience allowed them an opportunity to imagine a more liberating conclusion as well as to witness the way in which people can be judged as being from a culture – and not multiple cultures – just because of the way they look. As Amadou, a graduate student teacher learner, stated:

The empowerment that these activities provided is immense. They [white students] could see that it was okay to stand against racism, xenophobia, and hate speech.... They [students of color] also saw how other students on campus realize their struggles and the challenges they go through, and they hear and feel them. (Amadou, final video reflection)

Amadou's comment shows evidence of the development of *conscientização*; like him, many participants gained the strength and the knowledge to advocate for themselves and others by participating in the Forum Theater. Regarding students of color and transnational students in the class, some felt that Forum Theater helped them feel "heard," which helped them transcend loneliness and isolation, moving toward a feeling of solidarity with others. This type of public pedagogy and intercultural dialogue embodies exactly what scholars such as Uhlig et al. (2016) described as intercultural inquiry and community-based arts projects.

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## Conclusion

Using Forum Theater, we have illustrated how ACB approaches to teaching can be a departure from the ordinary and a pathway to empowering teachers and students to be “active meaning makers and creative agents” (Hwang, 2019, p. 507). For example, we saw through a transcultural lens how theater gave white students in an undergraduate course on multicultural education a release from fear and anxiety associated with forced separation from the familiar and a critical and humanizing optic with which to view the racialized experiences of their peers. Additionally, graduate students in an intercultural communication class complicated their understandings of student experiences on an emotional level through transmediation by switching from talking, to writing, to embodied portrayals of microaggressions. In addition, translanguaging was facilitated by the ACB approach which allowed participants to be more inclusive and demonstrate authentic care.

We demonstrated how, through the lens of transnationalism, participants were able to apply intercultural skills they had learned by breaking down stereotypes related to fixed or stable cultural identities and beginning to develop critical consciousness. Furthermore, the transdisciplinary nature of the activities helped international multilingual learners in a university intensive English program understand and communicate about the complex topic of microaggressions better through the vehicle of Forum Theater. In addition, the activities helped them imagine themselves as confident communicators of English, break from a sense of isolation from American culture, and feel a sense of belonging.

Through comments from participants, we also articulated the benefits of bringing diverse groups together to collectively participate in ACB activities. In doing so, students were able to see things from different angles, to learn from each other, and to understand what racism/microaggressions might look like across a variety of contexts and countries. They were also able to practice the very skills (i.e., listening, cultural empathy, using their body, translanguaging) that were goals of our teacher education program and make connections between what they learned in the workshop and how this would help them as teachers. In the case of the IEP students, they were able to further develop their intercultural skills and English proficiency by being involved at every level of the creative process.

These findings connect to other research and scholarship coming from our collective that is pushing the field of teacher education to not only espouse the use of culturally sustaining pedagogies (CSP) and ACB approaches in methods classes, but also to *enact* ACB and CSP—authentically modeling them in our own praxis with teacher learners (Catalano et al., 2024; Catalano et al., 2021; Catalano, & Morales, 2022; Leonard et al., 2024; Morales & Raible, 2020). In sum, we believe that pedagogy, such as using Forum Theater or other ACB approaches, can be powerful ways to help participants, including future teachers and students in general, learn how to live together peacefully. We hope that more researchers

continue to explore the possibilities and to help others envision what it might look like in settings very different from our own.

Furthermore, we believe that we have illuminated how a 4-trans+ approach can help teacher educators complicate the teaching and reflective learning of their students. This was accomplished in our case by providing opportunities for teacher learners to hear transnational students talk about their complex intersectional identities and the ways they intersect with schooling. Moreover, rooting the workshop in translanguaging theory gave support for students to move naturally across languages to make meaning, but also helped teacher learners understand the value of this multilingual pedagogy for their own teaching. In addition, the transdisciplinary nature of the workshop goals and the diverse groups working together helped participants consider alternative ways of viewing the world and racism/microaggressions, in particular. Through Forum Theater, students were also made to consider transculturalism by reflecting on the cultural/racial identities and choices of participants and breaking down stereotypes of the Other. Finally, the addition of transmediation as part of our critical framework flattened hierarchies since all students were made vulnerable in the process of moving from formal academic registers to creating and performing scenarios with their bodies.

ACB projects that partner with diverse groups within the local community align well with the 4-trans+ framework and aid participants in embodying concepts in a way that facilitates thinking about their own teaching and how they can incorporate these same concepts. Although we recognize that much time and thoughtful planning is required to implement activities such as the ones described here and that there are challenges involved in this work, we assert that the benefits are transformational and, thus, hope our readers will take the time to help their students experience the 'fragrance' that well thought out and impactful teacher education programs can exude.

### **Future Iterations and Limitations**

Our findings have shown the many benefits gleaned from our arts practice research. Although we feel that the workshops were largely successful, we would also like to take a moment to discuss what we might have done differently, as well as the limitations of our 4-trans+ orientation. We have learned through this experience that the more diverse the group, the richer the interactions seem to be. Hence, even if we apply the 4-trans+ framework, it will be much less effective if participants are from a homogenous group and if the burden of bringing diverse perspectives is carried by the community partners only. This is because depth of understanding is often tough to develop among commonly homogeneous groups of teacher learners. Furthermore, it is often difficult to foster a grounded perspective of teacher learners as social agents that goes beyond white savior narratives (Aronson et al., 2020; Seekford, 2017), especially given that many novice teacher learners have had limited exposure to the beauty and complexity of survivance among marginalized communities.

That said, we know that this practice is not something that is easy for people in all contexts to put together without placing undue burden on marginalized communities to provide diverse perspectives. Hence, we have found the partnership between students learning English and students studying to be teachers fruitful because it is easy to see the benefits for both groups. Teacher learners get practice working with multi-ethnic/multilingual learners and intensive English students get authentic opportunities to practice listening and speaking English with target language speakers. The process is a two-way, mutually beneficial experience. In line with these points, we suggest that whatever context scholars and educators may be in, they pool together their community connections while being attentive to power dynamics and thinking about who stands to benefit in the activity.

As we planned for future workshops, we discussed our desire to provide more time for students to get to know each other at the beginning, as well as time for students to reconnect with their group members later in the year. We also wanted to provide more time to develop ideas and add artistic elements such as costumes, props, lighting, linguistic details, and body language into each scenario. Adding more time would bring more opportunities for discussion and reflection that we believe would further enrich the data. That said, we know that time seems to always be a limitation in creative work, especially in educational spaces, and so this is easier said than done.

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### Author Contact

Amanda R. Morales, [amanda.morales@unl.edu](mailto:amanda.morales@unl.edu)

Theresa Catalano, [tcatalano2@unl.edu](mailto:tcatalano2@unl.edu)

Crystal Bock Thiessen, [cbock3@unl.edu](mailto:cbock3@unl.edu)