

In life, it is occasionally necessary to fill out a form, survey, or other official document that asks you to identify yourself in terms of race. The forms have boxes. These days, I might check “mixed race,” or “mixed heritage.” But there was a time that my best option was the box labeled, “other.” Yes, children, there was a literal category called, “other.”

Only later would I encounter the concept of the Other with a capital O. But unless you're a disciple of Husserl or on a college campus, Otherness is more often a vague, uneasy feeling than an articulated philosophy. And although my Other—the one on the surveys and government forms—was a crude and lazy catchall category, perhaps it was apt. After all, my sense of self has always been characterized by a feeling of Otherness. I felt estranged not only from the mainstream, but also from the groups I could legitimately claim as my own.

Not to complain. I treasure my sense of uniqueness, my Otherness. I know it has given me a singular perspective, one that I wouldn't trade for fitting in. But if I am being honest with myself, I must also acknowledge that feeling like an outsider has sometimes undermined my confidence and constricted my sense of possibility. Notably, it's one reason it took me so long to fully acknowledge my passion for theater and performance.

True, there are many compelling reasons to avoid a life in the arts. It's impractical. It will break your parents' hearts. It's not what a child of a working-class immigrant does. It's not what the only child of five to attend college does. And although no one ever said it out loud, it's not what brown people do. (Not this brown person, anyway. I realize this isn't everyone's experience or perception.)

This revelation is not something I dwell on or talk about much. Yet, it feels relevant to the challenge of creating an inclusive classroom.

We should all be able to realize our potential free from institutional barriers. But just as critically, we should be able to imagine our potential unhindered by more subtle, internalized forces. Our educational institutions are particularly responsible for eradicating such impediments. More than anywhere else, the classroom is where we question our assumptions and envision the full scope of possibility.

I strive to create a classroom where implicit values are exposed and evaluated; where varied identities are not simply acknowledged but also seen as indispensable assets; and where cooperative learning cultivates genuine interaction among diverse students. Fortunately, the study and practice of theater is perfectly suited to these goals.

Art should make the invisible visible, unveiling social constructs that disguise themselves as natural facts. Similarly, I believe we should rigorously question the implicit values we bring to the classroom. By doing so, educators can eliminate blind spots that would otherwise leave valuable contributors unseen. We must ask: on what assumptions are curricula and approaches based? What experiences and points of view have they unwittingly omitted?

My answers to those questions emerge from the discipline I teach. Devised ensemble performances depend on disparate points of view intersecting, resonating, and colliding to create works that no individual member could have conceived of alone. When the classroom includes and honors varied voices, it reaps comparable rewards. However we identify ourselves—in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, class, physical ability, and so on—each of our contributions enriches the group.

Of course, ensemble theater's defining modus operandi is cooperation. An ensemble creation is the product of extended periods of close collaboration. Each member challenges and provokes the others, generating and curating the work collectively. And diverse students thrive in a cooperative learning environment. A non-hierarchical, collaborative system of creation yields exciting and vital performance works, not to mention better learning outcomes for diverse groups.

Using ensemble theater not only as the subject but also the model for education, I set into motion a virtuous cycle. Students feel more deserving, confident, and empowered to contribute. At the same time, they are more disposed to invite, listen to, and value the contributions of others. It's not enough to feel empowered to give; students must also feel open to receive.

We all grapple with Otherness, and should. We each manage a unique set of inherited attributes, given circumstances, and chosen affiliations. In society, we all benefit from unearned advantage and struggle with undeserved disadvantage. While these factors may be resistant to change, they must not pass unexamined—either outside of the classroom or in it. And we cannot allow our differences to form false borders, least of all within ourselves. We are familiar with the question: what happens to a dream deferred? We might also consider the dreams we simply couldn't imagine.

When I think about the inclusive classroom, I'm reminded of the influential educator Jacques Lecoq's pedagogical journey from the Neutral Mask to the smallest mask: the clown nose. One represents the "mask of humanity," the other, "the humanity of the mask." As educators and citizens, we create an atmosphere of inclusion by honoring both the universal—that which connects us—and the unique—that which makes each of us truly ourselves. Like an arc of electricity, we bridge the gap and allow each pole to energize the other.