

# **How to Incorporate the Illumination Project Into Your Classroom**

*Information for Instructors who bring their classes to Illumination Project performances*

By

Jeannie LaFrance, Illumination Project Coordinator

Portland Community College  
Oregon

The Illumination Project provides a dynamic thought-provoking approach to creating dialogue and action around controversial issues. Instructors bring classes to the Illumination Project to enhance their curriculum and augment classroom learning with experiential activity.

## **History and Overview of the Program**

The Illumination Project (IP) was founded in 2001 at PCC Sylvania. The IP is a student leadership and academic program that admits 20 students each year. Students in the program are called Student Educators. Student Educators receive 12 tuition free sociology credits for participating in the Illumination Project. The IP performs interactive student-written plays on issues such as racism, immigration, religion, gender, heterosexism and domestic and sexual violence. The program is a full academic year and starts fall term with performances occurring weeks 6-9 of winter and spring terms. Each performance term we have a different topic. We write three different plays about that topic. Plays are always based on the experiences of the individual students in the program that year.

## **Overview of Performances**

The IP performances are based on a style of theater known as Theatre of the Oppressed. Theatre of the Oppressed was founded in the late 1960's by Brazilian theater activist Augusto Boal. Theatre of the Oppressed is used all over the world to prompt dialogue and action around issues of oppression. The Illumination Project performances are low tech and emphasize subject matter and education rather than technical performance skills.

At the opening of IP performances the facilitator (also known as the "Joker" in Theatre of the Oppressed terms) will introduce the play and the interactive format. During performances, Student Educators perform a self-written short play (5 to 15 minutes long), that presents a problem of discrimination or oppression. The plays are focused on real issues that students have encountered that are related to institutional oppression and may affect their ability to succeed in school.

The Student Educators perform the play once without interruption and without solving the problems presented in the play. This first run through is called the "anti-model". Then the Student

Educators start the play again. On the second time through, the audience members can say, “Stop” when they see oppression happening. At that point, the audience member comes up on stage and takes the place of one of the characters who they believe could create a positive solution to the problem(s) presented. This is called an “intervention.” The original actors work with the audience member with whatever tactic they try. Sometimes an intervention the audience member attempts “succeeds,” and sometimes it does not. Either way it is an active learning experience for Student Educators and audience members.

When the audience member is finished with their intervention, the facilitator debriefs with the audience member, the Student Educators and the rest of the audience and then the play continues to the next “intervenable” scene.

Even audience members who do not actually come up on stage actively rehearse in their mind what they would do in the situations portrayed in the plays. In this way, The Illumination Project challenges the viewpoints of both the audience and the actors. In a realistic yet safe atmosphere actors and audience members have the opportunity to rehearse situations in order to build communication skills and understand their alternatives. The Illumination Project also enables audience members to take on different characters in order to build empathy – a key element to living respectfully in a pluralistic society.

### ***Intervention Guidelines***

We ask the audience to follow a couple traditional Theatre of the Oppressed intervention guidelines during Illumination Project performances (*these guidelines will be explained by the facilitator at the beginning of the performance*):

1. When intervening you may take the place of the person experiencing the problem (the protagonist) or the “potential ally” (the bystander) in the scene. We ask that you and not take the place of the person causing the problem (the antagonist). Taking the place of the antagonist typically just makes the problem “magically” go away.
2. Please only take the place of someone you might possibly be in the future. (i.e. if we are doing a play about the experience of racism toward a person of color we ask that people of color take that role). This guideline is because Theater of the Oppressed is a rehearsal for the future; for what each of us might personally do in the future. It is not useful for us to take the place of someone who we will never be.

*The facilitator will encourage participation but there is no requirement to volunteer. Even those students who never come up vicariously place themselves in the role of the intervener and are engaged in the performance.*

## **How to Attend the IP Performances**

The IP performs on all four of the main PCC campuses but the majority of our performances are at Sylvania. The IP also performs off campus at other colleges as well as high schools and conferences. At Sylvania we typically perform in the PAC Lobby.

- Before the start of winter and spring terms we contact faculty whose classes coincide with IP performance times. We also send out an email to PCC mail-users with our entire schedule and place flyers in the boxes of Sylvania faculty. Instructors sign up to bring their classes by calling or emailing the Illumination Project Coordinator.
- We typically have one to three classes as well as individual audience members attend each performance. Occasionally performances will be “sold out”; this is rare but does happen. Because of space requirements and the style of theater we limit our audience size to three or four classes maximum. Individuals can still attend even when we are booked in terms of classes.
- It is most helpful for faculty to book their classes toward the beginning of the term however sometimes faculty book closer to the performance date – if we have space it is relatively easy to add another class on short notice
- If an instructor has signed up to attend a performance but realizes they cannot make it we ask that they please let us know. We order chairs and print education booklets and programs based on audience attendance.
- All audience members will receive a program and educational or “Ally” book at each performance. The educational book is usually several pages long and gives further information about the performance topic. The book contains related statistics, definitions of terms, local and national resources, personal stories as well as more detailed information and dynamics of the given topic.
- All performances are free and open to the public as well as PCC classes.

## **Pre and Post Performance Coursework**

In order to deepen the learning of The Illumination Project performances we encourage instructors to provide pre and post performance coursework. Our website (<http://www.pcc.edu/resources/illumination>) offers a variety of articles and curriculum pieces that match various performance topics. Below is a list of general activities and topics that could be used for any Illumination Project performance subject.

***Credit for performance attendance:***

- If an instructor cannot take a class to an IP performance they can give extra credit for students who attend a performance on their own (and/or write a short response paper or journal).
- The IP writes three different plays on each term's topic. Instructors can give extra credit to students who attend more than one performance and/or write a comparison paper.
- During a performance instructors can give extra credit for students who volunteer to do an intervention.

***Class work:***

- Students break into small groups and develop a short Theater of the Oppressed forum theatre piece on a topic relevant to the class and/or their own lives. Each group performs and facilitates the skits for the rest of the class.
- Students complete a current news media search on topics relevant to the performance and develop a paper or presentation.
- Students work in small groups to write definitions for terms (assigned by the instructor and related to the topic). *How do these terms relate to the scenarios depicted in the play?*
- Students work individually or in small groups to research and report back on a specific social change movement or strategy. During the presentation students present in the "style" of their particular grassroots movement (if applicable).
- Students write a paper on Theater of the Oppressed.
- Students write a paper about institutional racism or sexism or heterosexism or religious oppression etc (whatever the topic of the play) and that topic's impact on PCC or Portland or Oregon.
- Students write about an incident in their own lives that was similar to the action in the play. *How do you wish you or other people had responded differently in that situation?*
- Students pick one of the characters in the play and write about that character. Students should select a character whose opinion or life experience is vastly different than their own. They write an internal monologue or the biography of that character in relation to the play. *Did this exercise give you more insight into the character? Did you feel more compassion toward that character? Did you like the character more or less? Did you find ways that you related to the character that you did not notice before?*

### ***Discussion / writing prompts:***

- Discuss your particular discipline and how it constructs and has historically constructed the issues presented in the play. *How is that paradigm similar or different from the viewpoint of the performance?*
- The topics in the Illumination Project performance are often controversial. People either avoid talking about such difficult topics altogether or end up in a shouting match when they do discuss them. *How could we structure these conversations so those individuals feel respected and listened to?*
- Lack of information about people different from us and heavily enforced mainstream “rules of normalcy” are issues present in most people’s lives in the U.S. *How were these issues represented in the Illumination Project performance? How do these issues contribute to oppression and discrimination?*
- In the Illumination Project performance there were incidents of discrimination and prejudiced as they occur between individuals. *How are these individual acts of bias incidents related to institutional oppression?*
- Privilege is an unearned advantage; a right that is granted to some, but not all people-even if it is perceived or stated that all people have access to it. *What are some examples of institutional privilege we saw in the performance?*
- The IP performance represented various characters and their relationship to each other to the topic of the play. *What are the perspectives of the various characters in the play? Whose perspective do you most strongly identify with? How did the experiences of the characters in the play affect their relationships with others?*
- *How does the lack of understanding or appreciation for other religions/genders/ethnicities etc lead to discrimination or oppression in the IP play?*
- *Where did you see intolerance being displayed during the play? What is it that the characters who displayed intolerance do not understand?*
- The format of the IP performance is designed to prompt dialogue and action around issues of oppression. *Did you learn new techniques for how to deal with difficult situations related to oppression? What were they?*