

We Are Change: Playback Theater Leads to Community Activism

By Lisa Gimbel, The Welcome Project, Somerville, MA

“The bus is coming! It’s coming, I see it. It’s going to stop – Noooooooo! Out of service!” The group of ESOL students shouted and were angry. We were doing Playback Theatre, a kind of theatre where people can tell their stories. We were acting out different situations that cause us stress. For example, family problems, bosses who yell and are demanding, and simple things like unreliable public transportation. There are a LOT of things that cause stress in the United States. It is always on top of us, and can feel very difficult to control. In my classes over the past two years we have been experimenting with how to manage the stress.



The most important question about stress is “What CAN I change? What CAN’T I change?” Obviously, there are many things we can’t change. It is important that we laugh, relax, stretch, and try to meditate so we can better handle the things we can’t change. That will help us to be relaxed. But what about the things we CAN change? We wanted to look at those things together.

Is the Bus Coming???

Our English classes are at the Mystic Housing Development in Somerville, Massachusetts. There are a lot of trains and buses in the city, but only one that comes to the housing development: Bus 95. When we did Playback Theatre, students said it was stressful that the bus didn’t even come on time. When conversation groups talked about difficulties staying in class, they said transportation was a problem. When we talked about health problems in our community, students said the bus was a major problem because they couldn’t get to a store to buy healthy food, or to go to parks for outdoor activities and exercise, or to the doctor very easily. Clearly, transportation is a very real problem. We decided it was something we CAN change. We went to talk to the Mayor of our city. Students talked about the problem:

“My name is Vien Pham. I come from Vietnam. I came in 1981, a long time ago. My country had war and I escaped. Now I am a senior. We need the Mayor to help seniors feel better. We need exercise, but we don’t have transportation to go to the YMCA.”

Another student told the Mayor we need a bus that goes to the hospitals and to the supermarket. Jaelle, from Haiti, talked about trying to get to the supermarket: “You need to take three buses to get there. We need affordable food!” The Mayor said he agreed, and that he would support us in getting more transportation.

One week later, we found out that the bus company, the MBTA, planned to take away the 95 bus completely. There was a budget crisis, and they were going to cut over 100 buses in Boston. We said, “No!”

We had a community meeting at the Mystic Housing Development, where 100 people shared our anger and made plans. ESOL students interviewed people at the meeting and made up chants. We decided to go to the big meeting of the MBTA in Somerville, and we planned to make signs with our messages. At our meeting we had interpretation in Spanish, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese. We called the MBTA to make sure they would have interpretation for us.

When we went to the big meeting of the MBTA, there were about 400 people. Many people spoke that night, and the MBTA heard our message over and over again. Do NOT cut the 95 bus. The Mystic Housing needs better transportation. We are poor, but we public transportation is our right too. Our buses are our lifeline. Our ESOL students and friends they brought were the only people who needed interpretation. It is difficult for immigrants to get involved in issues impacting their communities through meetings, but we worked together to make sure we could have a voice.

One month later, we learned the MBTA was not going to cut the 95 bus! Thousands of people in the Boston area had gone to meetings to tell the MBTA what will happen to our lives if they cut the busses. Our ESOL students were an important part of that. We have not completely won yet. The MBTA wants to raise the price of riding the bus and cut some of the services, but we will hopefully be able to maintain our current services.

There are a lot of things we have learned. Here are some.

- One way to manage stress is to identify what you can and cannot change. And then take action! Some changes can happen individually. Others need to happen with a lot of people working together.
- You have to keep trying, and trying different approaches. Even then, you might not win everything you want. The Mayor said he was going to help us improve the bus service, but two months later we were fighting to maintain it, never mind making it better.
- It's important to give ESOL students language choices at community meetings. Simultaneous interpretation into their native languages is one good choice. But some people want to practice their English! We experimented with 'interpreting' from the very fast English native speakers use, to slower simpler English that ESOL students can understand using the simultaneous interpretation equipment. Students liked it a lot.
- It is powerful for students to meet key decision makers, even if we aren't able to get all of what we want. Meeting the Mayor had a strong impact on students.

Additional material:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjqIX3GkN-k>

ESOL students interviewed people about the service cuts at the beginning of a community meeting about the cuts.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipcgWv2Vin4>

"Is the Bus coming?" Children and youth in a neighborhood youth program made a video about the MBTA bus cuts.