

A Relational Perspective: Using Drama Theory to Transform Instructor-Student Engagement

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Abstract

Some time ago, at the annual conference for the Society in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, we offered a workshop that focused on gaining insight into a less performative and more communicative style of teaching. We proposed applying dramatic arts theory (*lightness*, *le jeu*, and *complicité*) to support engagement with self, with subject, and with the larger audience. The paper outlines activities to support reflection in the three spheres of our proposed model, provides examples of engagement, and poses questions for further inquiry in this area.

Keywords

drama principles; engaged teaching and learning; *lightness*; *le jeu*; *complicité*

Teaching and Learning as Theatrical Performance

Theatre is referred to as a performative art and some may refer to teaching in the same way, though not always with positive connotations. For example, Enerson (2001) argues that “the notion of teacher as performer... persists unexamined into the classroom we lose sight of the real goal of the educational process—fostering student learning” (p. 9). Enerson’s framing of *teacher as performer* may be likened to Pratt’s (1998) transmission perspective to teaching—one that may take us away from the opportunity for empathetic and engaged learning.

We, on the other hand, see *teacher as performer* from a different perspective. We argue that an engaged audience is understood to be a product of the actors’ engagement with themselves, their material, their co-actors, and their audience (Fancy, 2007) on a level that transcends a declarative performance style. In this paper, we explore ways in which principles of dramatic theory (*lightness*, *complicité*, and *le jeu*) (Murray, 2010) may be applied to teaching such that the instructor’s performance results in deeper engagement with self, subject, and students. We give examples of

the activities we included in the workshop, outline some classroom examples of engagement, and provide guiding questions in the hopes they may provoke your reflection on the topic.

Deep versus Surface Approaches to Learning

The notion that what the instructor does affects how students approach their learning is not new. In one study, Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse (1996) proposed a *relational perspective* to examine the classroom interactions between instructor and students. They showed, for example, that students frame their approach to learning (deep or surface) according to the instructor's approach to teaching; students thus vary their learning approaches across courses depending on the learning climate created by the educator. The authors note that “the results complete a chain of relations from teacher thinking to the outcomes of student learning” (Trigwell et al., 1999, p. 57). Transmission teaching is more likely, the authors find, to result in surface learning approaches, while “conceptual change/student-focused” teaching is more likely to encourage students to take more deeply engaged approaches to learning.

The results from their study emphasize the importance of moving from simple transmission to a more deeply engaged approach. We suggest this means rethinking what engagement means in the classroom.

Spheres of Engagement

Actors must be trained to consider several levels of engagement. They must be fully engaged with themselves, with the script and its meaning, with other actors on stage, and with the audience—including those in the back balcony. Instructors are usually engaged with their subject material. Without thoughtful consideration, it can be easy to default to teaching the receptive few who smile and nod in encouragement, ignoring engagement with self as well as the larger audience. While it may feel good to teach to this smaller but committed audience, we encourage consideration of three spheres—self, subject and responsive few, and larger audience, suggesting that one must expand both inward (engagement with self) and outward (engagement with the full audience) (see Figure 1) to stretch our professional development as educators.

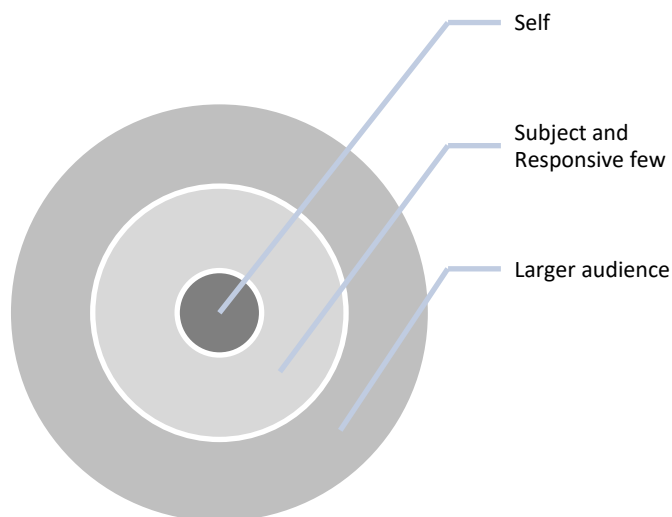


Figure 1. Spheres of engagement

Applying Principles of Drama to Teaching and Learning

Holding the above notion of spheres of engagement in mind, in our workshop, we applied three principles from performance theory (Murray, 2010) to explore increased engagement in teaching, which we argue can lead to transformed student engagement. We claimed that the instructor's authentic 'activity' or engagement is what will move passive students to become active learners. *Lightness*, *le jeu*, and *complicité* are interrelated concepts which detail the aspects of playfulness required for improvisation and the deeper listening it demands. They are fundamental to an actor's engaged and engaging performance.

Lightness is the ability to be unencumbered by the material being presented, to avoid 'living through' the full scope of tragedy they may be performing. Lightness refers to the quality of an actor who, "for all of the real effort required and expended ... is in the most affirmative and radical sense 'child-like' (Williams & Lavery, as cited in Murray, 2013).

Le Jeu, the game or the desire to play, refers to the willingness and exuberance of an engaged performer. "Here the pleasure is not about the simple pleasure of performing a character, but the pleasure in the engagement, in the invitation to play and in the inhabited space of the moment" (Balfour et al., 2017).

Complicité refers to keeping in touch with all the moving parts in the spectacle of live theatre—the other performers, the audience's engagement, and all the elements of the production. "Complicité ... is a term used to describe when performers seem to inhabit a world with one another, a form of un-spoken unity where performers are completely receptive to one another and what the situation they are in requires" (Lecoq, as cited in Murray, 2000).

We drew on the notions of *lightness*, or movement and intent rather than content; *le jeu*, or playfulness, intellectual and otherwise; and *complicité*, or the unseen but critical connections between and amongst the instructor and class participants. In this section, we define each of these terms and briefly outline the workshop activities. Each highlights principles that could be pondered in individual reflection.

Lightness: Intentions and Actions

Lightness is about comfort and engagement with self and a letting go that will allow us to 'go with the flow.' That does not mean that everything is unplanned, but rather that we consider educational goals (our intentions) and how what we do (our actions) moves students towards them. This alignment is not rigid; rather it has a sympathetic resonance and lightness as it moves us towards synergy amongst our beliefs, intentions, and actions (Pratt & Associates, 1998) for our teaching. In doing so, it creates space for us to follow impulses that still move us towards our intended goals. Choosing appropriate corresponding tactics for teaching requires us to be in tune with questions about our practice:

- What do I want from my students today? (intentions)
- How do I tailor what I do towards this success? (actions)

For example, Nicola has for many years spent time thinking about physical presence in the classroom and its impact on the students. There is immense positive power in walking up to the back row in a large lecture hall and sitting with the students and saying, “I just wanted to see how it looks from back here,” and then staying there for five minutes while carrying on with the lecture. Suddenly, that back row is the front row—and its inhabitant—behave quite differently. Similarly, if she wants students to take more leadership of the discussion, it means inviting them into that role, but also sitting to one side and quieting her physical presence in the room. At the same time, Kit suggests that as an actor, she often does not move off the stage and into the audience, but must still gather the audience to her through her intentions and actions. This leads us to the notion of thinking about *how* we are present with others in our teaching, how we get their attention, and how we gather them to us in other ways.

In another example, in Nicola’s online courses, the notion of communities of practice or learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wenger, 1998) is very important to her. With that in mind as an overarching principle, regardless of the topic, creating a sense of community is a focus. She, therefore, runs the first week of the course as a scavenger hunt through the course platform. After students complete it, they come back to their assigned small group to discuss it. The group that gets all its members through first gets a virtual pizza party (which is just a picture of a pizza—though is a sought after prize!). The main point, however, is that it is a social start to the course that helps them cement relationships before they start digging at the content of the course.

Each of these examples is about having the connection to one’s teaching perspective that will allow strategic decisions to be made. These decisions result not in a rigid approach, but rather create the space for *lightness*.

Reflection: Think of a time when you had a goal and what you did to move students towards it. How did your actions support your intentions? How does your self-knowledge as an educator allow you to make these decisions?

Consider your goal and then hold that intention to make each moment (whether you are on stage or teaching) support working towards that goal. To do this well, the actors must be in tune with themselves: their perspectives, their own background level of energy, and their intention for the outcome of the interaction. Achieving this self-awareness brings the authenticity Palmer (1998) advocates into the teaching and learning process.

Le Jeu: Energizing the Script

Directors and actors, when blocking out a scene, think about who stands or sits where and what the dynamic is on stage. Trained actors understand how to contribute to this dynamic with their directed focus. Similarly, the instructor can value a student’s contributions by attending to them fully: listening to them, looking at them while they speak, and responding to them. Done in an intentional way, this can engage the rest of the class in the interaction, even though on the surface it is occurring between two people only.

While lightness may be hindered by tensions in the body and mind, being willing to follow the impulses of *le jeu* helps us move beyond these tensions. *Le jeu* is about having a sense of

intellectual playfulness and a willingness to bat ideas around with our students; it is also about conveying that willingness and inviting others to join us in playing with the subject.

Energizing the script is an activity often used in theatre as a way of stimulating active listening and directed focus. It offers actors the chance to think about what messages they are both receiving and conveying. One person reads a line in a script; the other, before responding with their own line, paraphrases what the other actor has said. It is similar to a therapeutic active listening technique in which the therapist may respond to a client's comment with, "What I think I heard you say was." The aim is to not just hear the line, but to process what the other person has said, then infuse the paraphrase with energy that is appropriate to the dialogue and in doing so make the scripted lines come more fully alive. It also provides an opportunity to demonstrate one has understood not just the spoken words, but also the unspoken ideas, context, and mood of the speaker.

Reflection: Find a willing partner and any book or play with dialogue. If you're feeling adventurous, feel free to create your own dialogue as you go along.

While instructors may paraphrase students' questions in class, thinking about infusing the paraphrasing and response with an appropriate level and style of energy can bring more vitality and authenticity to the interaction. This makes it seem we are asking questions as if we really want the answer and you may find it makes you a more attentive listener.

Complicité: Attention Ball Toss

Complicité takes our intentions and actions and our intellectual playfulness and translates them into moments of connection with others. The resulting dynamic, that moment of the spark of connection, has the potential to transform the classroom and its teaching-learning interactions.

For the attention ball toss activity, we asked participants to stand in a large circle and toss a large beach ball to each other. They were to only toss the ball to those who made eye contact. Each person who received the ball was invited to give a brief example of a time they witnessed student engagement—as an instructor, as an observer, or as a student. The intention was to speak about the example in a way that captures others' attention and to visually scan for that attention, amending one's portrayal of the example as needed to 'recapture' the audience.

The example Nicola gave was trying to get students in a course on lifelong development and meaning-making to think beyond stage/phase theories and to consider theories around life transitions in a concrete way. Nicola invited Kit to come in and dance for the class as a moving life model. Nicola had organized chairs in a circle and provided students with drawing pads and pencils and gave a brief lesson on life drawing movement so they were prepared to represent her dance with flowing lines of energy. As Nicola outlined different transition theories, Nicola focused on what factors allowed one to move easily through transitions and which impeded transitioning; Kit provided freeform movement to represent these transitions. They ended up with pads of paper with smooth flowing lines and sharper jagged lines. They then got into groups, and with one caveat to only share what was comfortable, they talked about how these lines could represent life

transitions they had experienced. The level of engagement was extraordinary: they were animated, participative, and wrote with deep understanding of the transition theories in subsequent papers.

Back to the ball toss activity: we pointed out to participants that the softness of the inflatable beach ball and its size meant that their hands were kept gently apart while they held the ball as they spoke. This relaxed and softened the rest of their stance. We have found that something that cannot be clutched tightly goes a long way towards keeping the rest of the speaker's position relaxed. It may well be worth thinking about holding a beach ball for any presentation and we suggest the audience will find it easier to engage with you if your stance is relaxed.

Reflection: Think about how physical presence in the classroom can engage (or disengage) students. Consider not only stance, but also position in the room, voice, emotions, etcetera.

The message you communicate is not only your words, but also your tone and volume of voice, your physical stance, and your expressed emotions. All will affect the message you send, how it is received, and whether you engage the audience.

Exploring Further

While this paper unashamedly provides descriptions of practice, we believe that the notion of applying principles from dramatic arts theory offers opportunities for all disciplines to explore further options for encouraging student engagement. We believe that the ways in which the teacher undertakes their performance and the extent to which they are in touch with themselves and have a *lightness* can infuse intellectual energy and playfulness into their subject to portray *le jeu*. They can then connect with the entire audience in *complicité* which can move them beyond teaching to the interested few and positively affect engagement with themselves and their entire audience.

Our intention and actions for the workshop were that in inviting participants to try the activities (and you to reflect on them) we hoped to foster the development of engaged notions of *teacher as performer*. We also wanted to promote thinking about further inquiry educators could undertake in their own teaching about notions of engagement. Questions you might consider include:

- How might you tailor these activities and processes for your teaching in your own discipline?
- What kinds of research questions might you explore regarding the impact that results from these activities and processes (for yourself and your students)?

We also encourage you to think about applications of the specific activities and other theatre activities in your teaching. We agree with the idea that arts-based create “entrances to emotional, spiritual, and ephemeral places” while “engaged in the local, personal, everyday places and events” (Finley as cited in West et al., 2014). We hope that through pondering these questions and others you come up with you will experience greater insight about your limitless capacity to grow engagement—with your students, the material, and with yourself.

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