

Lecturing as Performance? Beyond the Traditional Theatre

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Abstract

There is a growing volume of literature where 'theatre' and 'drama' metaphors are employed to describe and explain roles people play and perform in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Within higher education, it is not unusual for teachers to speak of lectures being 'alright on the night', or the 'show must go on'. Teachers enter the lecture 'theatre', deliver 'lines on cue', use 'lighting and sound effects', and may 'improvise' the 'script' for the student 'audience'. In moving from preparation to rehearsal to performance, teachers become 'theatre' performers in every sense of the word. Using the metaphor of 'theatre' to represent the work of lecturers in higher education, this paper has two main aims. The first is to critically explore the characteristics of traditional (neo-classical) and liberal progressive theatres that constitute contemporary lectureship practice. Examination is made of the respective roles of the actors; degree of audience participation; kinds, ownership and 'negotiated' meanings of selected scripts; styles of presentation; the plot as reproduction or transformation; aims of the performance; and, processes leading to the performance.

The second aim is to outline the possibilities of a more socially critical approach to performance that could address some of the problematic features revealed in contemporary approaches to performance.

Throughout, participants are asked to position their own beliefs and practices. How do they view their performance? How valid are the representations given?

Introduction

There is a growing volume of literature where 'theatre' and 'drama' metaphors are employed to describe and explain roles people play and perform in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Within higher education, it is not unusual for teachers to speak of lectures being 'alright on the night', or the 'show must go on'. Teachers enter the lecture 'theatre', deliver 'lines on cue', use 'lighting and sound effects', and may 'improvise' the 'script' for the student 'audience'. In moving from preparation to rehearsal to performance, teachers become 'theatre' performers in every sense of the word.

Lecture 'theatres' are designed with specific kinds of performances in mind. Two popular performance spaces are used to create theatre. First is the traditional proscenium arch. Its raised stage serves to exaggerate the physical and pedagogical distance 'twixt performers and audience. This theatre is tailor made for the classical orator of Ancient Greece. It allows a single performer to deliver a play to large passive audiences. Second is the large flat performing space where flexible seating is used to create theatres-in-the round, arenas or avenues - rendering performer and audience on equal footing. Hence, physical distance between performers and audience is minimal.

Beyond the theatre spaces, there are many different ways that teachers could perform if it was simply a matter of choosing from a list of options. However, teachers hold beliefs which may facilitate or constrain particular kinds of performance (Errington, 1985). As a teacher, I will only select modes of performance that facilitate my beliefs about teaching and higher education. That is, provided that this style of performance can be used to put my beliefs into practice, I will use it. Similarly, when I observe practice in lecturing performance it will inform my theories about education. In this sense, beliefs about performance and education are dialectical. Dispositions about one will inform the other. Beliefs I hold about higher education are governed by views about society. For example, I believe that an important function of society should be to foster democratic structures. This belief influences other held views about education and performance. As an educator, I feel comfortable with those education beliefs that harmonise with my view of society. A consequence is that the many performance styles that educators could adopt are constrained by subscription to specific higher education and societal viewpoints (Errington 1985,1992; Nespov, 1987).

What kinds of theatre performance are open to teachers? Kemmis, Cole and Suggett (1983) posit three main sets of beliefs or theoretical orientations towards education and society that may usefully inform different kinds of teaching as dramatic performance. These are the neoclassical, liberal progressive and socially critical viewpoints respectively. The neoclassical and Liberal progressive orientations constitute contemporary higher education 'as is'. The socially critical approach gives an indication of performance as it 'might be'.

The aims of this paper are twofold: First to critically explore two contemporary approaches to theatre performance - the neoclassical and liberal progressive. Second, to outline an alternative approach to performance - the socially critical - that could redress some problematic features of contemporary performance.

The neoclassical performance

Kemmis (1990) observes that an orientation is "neoclassical" when education is based on the classical humanist tradition of "culture" containing certain worthwhile knowledge and skills which institutions of learning must transmit. Neoclassical perceptions of society and education give rise to specific attitudes and approaches to teaching - what it is, what it should be, and the tasks and purposes of those engaged in it. The aim of the neoclassical performer is to reproduce 'traditional values' - to reinterpret for others knowledge as it is, a 'fixed' entity. Here, 'worthwhile' knowledge consists of specific, well-established, cultural, social and (usually implicitly) political texts, (skills and disciplinary knowledge). The texts selected for rendition are often detached from their historical, political, social and cultural roots. Texts are brought into the theatre from the 'outside'.

Educational purposes are predominantly vocational, aimed at helping students take their rightful place in society. Students fit into this framework according to their own inherent abilities and cultural background. Higher education institutions continue the task begun in schools of sorting, selecting, classifying and ultimately placing students within appropriate categories that correspond with those of the future workplace. A whole battery of tests, examinations, interviews, and continuous forms of assessment are used for this ability-filtering process. The aims of the neoclassical performer are often expressed as an explicit set of relationships between the individual learner and certain technical and factual material in need of acquisition. How can I enable students to learn these skills? For the neoclassical educator, society is changed through the refinement and modification of existing skills, discipline and knowledge, in the pursuit of 'excellence'. For the neoclassical teacher-performer, 'real' drama is the classical theatre. Who better to deliver neoclassical views than the classical 'Greek Actor'? The neoclassical performer is director, actor, stage manager, casting agent, script writer, critic and skilled craftsperson, all within the one persona. In the classical theatre, the audience are apprenticed in areas of specialised information. Their task is to remember lines, note the cast of invisible players, emulate the values of the stage performer, learn, and reproduce the given script and singular meaning on demand. The audience are a fundamental party to this shared cultural ritual. They engage in a 'willing suspension of disbelief' as the Orator enters the proscenium-arched theatre...

The classical greek orator:

The Greek Orator walks on to the stage with bowed demeanour. Underneath one arm is the script of today's play. Though it may have been rehearsed, and performed many times before, convention dictates that the script be seen by the audience - some words to be read, others remembered. The voices of the audience are hushed. They anticipate the beginning of the performance. Papers flap and biros click sending a signal to the performer that the audience are ready. Eyes on the performer, the onlookers draw breath and await the plot to unfold. The performer takes a deep breath, lifts shoulders, straightens the back, stands with feet firmly together, clears the throat, and waits. There is silence. The performer dims the main lights using a switch hidden from the audience's gaze. The figure of the performer is now bathed in one single stream of light. As the clock points to the hour, the performance begins. The words of the performer bound around the walls of the theatre. They bounce off walls, fly over the heads of the audience, and echo down the carpeted aisles. During the performance, giant blocks of text are brought to the screen. The performer pronounces each word, line, and paragraph with measured ease. Forty-five minutes later the performance reaches its conclusion. There is no climax, no high point. The script has been measured pace-by-pace. The message has been delivered, its singular meaning made explicit, the oracle given. The performer tells the audience that the play will continue

here next week. Now the theatre fills with light once more. The audience take stock, look around, and rub tired eyes. With one swift gliding movement, our performer is gone. Some of the audience wonder if the performer was ever there in the first place. Those who watched the performance carefully may yet emulate the ways of the performer, if, as apprentices, they should later wish to take on this central role themselves.

The Greek Orator exercises the strongest voice within the performance space. This voice transmits the views, ideologies and values of society both 'as it is' and 'as it should be'. The neoclassical performer dominates ownership of knowledge. What counts as knowledge is the whole traditional, cultural inheritance of theatre producers over time. Invariably this consists of dramatic texts belonging to the 'high culture' of certain dominant interests. McLaren asks why some knowledge has high status (for instance, that of great scientists and philosophers), while the working knowledge of ordinary people is often devalued. Keddie (1971) points out that student knowledge may be used only to the extent that it has meaning within the teacher's notion of relevance. We may also ask why surface approaches to learning (eg acquisition of facts, 'objective' theories) are given higher value than experiential knowing (eg feelings, experience, practice) by traditional performers? What are the vested interests of traditional theatre performers in perpetuating specific kinds of 'worthwhile' scripts? If worthwhile knowledge is to be transmitted, then the Orator is the obvious expert to transmit it. As McLaren notes, teachers often employ an "authoritative discourse that frequently silences the voices of the students" (1989: 230-231). This is not uncommon where the teacher has his or her own agenda and, in order to fulfil obligations of the performer's role within time constraints, prioritises students' contributions to knowledge as 'low'.

Within the highly selective cultural domain of the traditional performer, the student audience are neither expected nor invited to question the selection of the text by the performer. the choice of the text seems neutral. It is presumed that the performer has a clear perception of his or her audience needs, and is the only person capable of selecting the play. The text is designed to communicate specific meanings to the audience. A performer's choice of text may be used to communicate and reinforce unchallenged values of uncontroversial playwrights - particularly with undergraduate audiences (Errington, 1992). The audience are rarely invited to examine the parameters of the performance itself - in an unquestioned assumption that this is the sole realm of the performer. Exceptions exist when student audiences are invited to comment on the teacher's performance - but invariably this process is initiated by the performer, not the audience. It may serve to simply reinforce unequal power relations.

Not all those who employ large class lecturing techniques are neoclassical in their approach to teaching and learning. It is how teachers use the traditional teaching theatre with a focus on achieving specific ends (performance with an over emphasis on 'objective' meanings) which make the neoclassical performer stand apart from his or her colleagues (Errington, 1992).

The liberal progressive performance

The liberal progressive advocate takes a holistic view of education in respect of purposes, processes and student outcomes. Here, education is not about advancing specific subject matter, or traditional knowledge. Rather it takes for its purpose the development of the 'whole' student. The student is both the focal centre and rationale for all education undertakings. The teacher aims to provide for self-evident (unproblematic) 'needs' of students. The overall purpose is to guide students towards 'self-actualization'. A major part of the teacher's task is to prepare students not simply for the workplace on leaving university, but rather for the rest of their lives. Educational performances are usually underpinned by highly selective, developmental and phenomenological theories regarding how students ('should') develop or 'progress' and the part educators should play in their advancement. In the theatre of the liberal progressive, the student is seen as an active explorer in search of self-enlightenment. Great store is placed on education as a 'process' rather than 'product' - the journey, not the destination. Within this theatre, the student is both actor and director. The student's task is not to spectate, but to create. The text and script is likely to be the student's own, consisting mainly of working knowledge brought to the theatre.

The liberal progressive performer prefers flat spaces with flexible seating. Size of audience is no object - provided it can be organised into groups. The flat space symbolises a non-hierarchical relationship between performer and audience. It also facilitates a way of working which allows the Strolling player to circulate among group learning cells. In this theatre, the teacher is a Strolling Player whose task it is to 'stroll' from group to group observing students on set learning tasks.

The strolling player:

The Strolling player enters the acting area. There is no obvious script or grand entrance. The performer moves to the centre of the space, and offers the students some opening cue lines. They will invent and improvise the script as usual. The student audience move to appointed groups. Here they discuss a set reading, not with the aim of challenging it, but the intention is to reproduce its content later. They will also draw on their own experiences to add to the information in the handout. Once the groups are operating, the Strolling Player observes each group, stops occasionally to make comments, and tries not to give his own opinion. He asks each group: 'What is the author of the handout trying to convey?' The Player gives the groups five minutes to produce a plan for presentation. Students are assured that their own personal meanings are as valid as anyone else's, including those of the author. Some minutes later, the Strolling player gives notice that the activity will end in two minutes. More strolling follows. Soon time is up. Students sit on the floor and anticipate the opportunity to share their discussions with others. A spokesperson from each group reports back to the class. They describe the content of the handout and similar life experiences as the author, but are not invited to reflect on this work. The Player reminds his audience about the importance of sharing ideas. The students then leave. The Strolling player is left within the empty theatre space. He decides that now is the time to construct aims for this activity...

The two most common orientations to performance in higher education have failed to show students the social and political machinations of the performer which serve to determine and reify specific forms of knowledge. The socially critical viewpoint which follows provides greater promise for closing the gap between performer and audience, and factual and subjective knowledge.

The socially critical performance

Socially critical advocates believe that society is constructed in inequitable and unjust ways. In order to transform these prevailing circumstances, it is necessary to assist students in the development of critical enquiry. Within a collaborative (non-dominative) framework, the main purpose of the socially critical performer is to help transform the attitudes of students by demystifying relationships between self, others and society. The world might be transformed through collective action and increased awareness of how it works (the practical) and why it works as it does (the political). The teacher acknowledges the power bestowed on him or her by the institution and serves to use teaching to raise the collective consciousness of individuals. It is recognised that the teacher probably has more expertise than students (depending on content, knowledge, age and life experience), but the teacher does not swamp the lecture with his or her own dominant visions. The teacher is leader and consultant in the teaching process.

The script is issues-based. Examples of 'issues' might be: the differences between privileged and non-privileged members of society; raising the visibility of minority groups (according to race, gender and creed) and the siting of these concerns within the dominant ideologies of contemporary society (Errington, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995). Performer and participant-audience investigate issues together. A part of this time will involve identifying stakeholders with vested interests in issues and outcomes. For example, an examination of 'health' issues extends beyond the individualism of dietary advice, towards an examination of the political influence of sugar growers and refiners who may persuade food companies to increase sugar levels in their products (Colquhoun & Errington 1989, 1990a, 1990b).

Knowledge is to be questioned. What vested interests are served by a specific selection of knowledge? Teacher and student are co-investigators within the discipline area. They consciously analyse and subsequently demystify pedagogy as a social construction. Why is one type of knowledge (eg 'facts') seen as more 'worthwhile', than another (experiential activity)? The socially critical performer helps students identify their own and a shared 'hidden curriculum' of beliefs, attitudes, perceptions and prejudices to co-question its continuing validity. It is believed that only when students' own subjectivities become part of learning can real transformation of understanding take place. The teacher acts as resource, encouraging student research, appropriate action, and critical reflection. Pedagogy of the discipline may be discussed in terms of ownership. The concern is not so much that pedagogy and knowledge are socially constructed, but why in these particular ways, and for whose benefit?

The performance of the Socially Critical teacher is community-oriented. Both performer and audience are members of the same shared education community. The performer sees his or her position as being almost totally indivisible from the audience. The performer and audience are co-researchers, co-learners, and co-teachers. They belong to the same community whose common aim is the advancement of learning using essentially collaborative learning techniques. This is despite the kind of physical theatre the performer has to work in. The performer will strive to create community theatre - as a co-expression of radical performance. So, what kind of performance do we expect to see when the socially critical performer enters the theatre?

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