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Teaching and Learning as Improvisational Performance in the Creative Writing Classroom

Shady E. Cosgrove
University of Wollongong, shady@uow.edu.au

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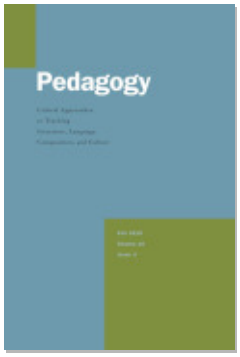

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teachers, rather than conforming to a traditional chronological-analytical syllabus, I had engaged students as participants in—as well as apprentices of—a transformational, relevant pedagogy.

Note

This essay is an adaptation of a paper presented at the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, Atlanta, Georgia, November 2003.

Teaching and Learning as Improvisational Performance in the Creative Writing Classroom

Shady Cosgrove

Example 1: Professional actor Dr. Fox was hired to teach at several U.S. medical facilities during a study undertaken in the 1970s. Though students gave him very high marks in teacher surveys, specifically citing his extensive medical knowledge, he had never been trained in the field, and his lectures—though exciting—contained intentionally meaningless information cobbled together from various journals (Naftulin, Ware Jr., and Donnelly, 1973).

Example 2: When I was an undergraduate, the most popular subject at my college was physics for nonmajors—which attracted students from all disciplines, even from physics. Why? The lecturer had been a successful stand-up comic before committing to academia, and his lectures were clear, informative, and hilarious. In this case, however, it was not simply his performance: the lecturer's knowledge was thorough, as was his ability to explain complex ideas.

These two illustrations highlight the element of performance necessary for strong classroom face-to-face teaching practice. In this essay, however, I will argue that the teacher-as-performer metaphor is too simplistic. Instead, I will make a case for R. Keith Sawyer's (2004) notion of the classroom as a site of improvisational performance, especially in regards to creative writing. Then I will discuss three aspects critical to the improvisational performance within this context, drawing on my own experiences in the

classroom: establishing workshop structures, ascertaining shared language skills, and encouraging student participation.

The Performance Metaphor and the Classroom

Notions of performance in the classroom can be highly problematic. As the Dr. Fox story highlights, students do not always correctly perceive the competence of their lecturer. They can be seduced by presentation and overlook the substance (or lack thereof) actually being presented. If one equates teaching with performance, then some expectation exists that the audience (in this case, our students) have a right to be entertained, which is problematic if extrapolated to an end where entertaining is prioritized over learning.

In addition, the performing metaphor highlights the teacher as active, performing, and students as passive, watching. In the 1970s, Paulo Freire (1994: 54) problematized this active/passive dichotomy where "the teacher teaches and the students are taught, the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing," and since then, educational research has tended to advocate student-centered pedagogies over teacher-centered ones (Freire 1994; Rubin and Herbert 1998; Edens 2000; Villaume 2000; Kain 2003; Showalter 2003). The idea of performance, where the teacher is the performer, fails to take into account the active engagement of students. For instance, how often—say, at the theater—does an actor actively solicit questions from the audience? How often are audience members encouraged to critically engage with the material being presented *during* the performance? It may happen, certainly in creative work that questions the limits of the stage, but it is not the norm.

Another drawback with the teacher-as-performer metaphor is that taken to an extreme, it can lead to scripting the classroom. As Keith Sawyer (2004: 12) states: "Scripted instruction is clearly performative: teachers stand 'on stage' in front of the classroom 'audience'; the lectures and student exchanges are 'scripts' for the performance; teachers should 'rehearse' their presentations; and the teacher/performer must work hard to hold the attention of the audience, with timing, stage presence, and enthusiasm." As Sawyer also acknowledges, the classroom environment is a variable and changing site for teaching and learning: "The flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all participants, both teachers and students," and "an unexpected student query often requires the teacher to think quickly and creatively, accessing material that may not have been studied the night before in preparation for the class" (13, 15).

All of these concerns with the teaching-as-performance metaphor

are valid. However, it would be unfair to overlook the performance element in the classroom. Indeed, considerable work has been dedicated to analyzing the links between teaching and performing (Lessinger and Gillis 1976; McLaren 1986; Harrison-Pepper 1991). Techniques common to performance situations can certainly affect and inform teaching practice: lecturer voice levels, eye contact, reading body language, ease with the subject material, use of humor—in essence, all of the strategies that both Dr. Fox and my physics teacher were implementing.

Teaching and Learning as Improvisational Performance

Sawyer (2004: 13) augments the idea of teaching as performance, arguing instead for teaching as improvisational performance, where teaching practice is informed by the immediate environment and context of the classroom, emphasizing "the interactional and responsive creativity of a teacher working together with a unique group of students. In particular, effective classroom discussion is improvisational, because the flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all participants, both teachers and students." Sawyer's differentiation is key because it shifts the classroom dynamic from one of teaching/performing and learning/watching to one where both students and teachers are actively performing together. It positions the classroom as a cooperative site between teachers and students, while also acknowledging the performance elements of teaching and learning. The class discussion is an emergent space; no class participant can control or predict the outcome.

The Creative Writing Classroom as Improvisational Performance

Sawyer's ideas about improvisational teaching/learning apply well to the creative writing workshop setting. The writing workshop, where students read and critique one another's work, is, according to Nicole Cooley (2003: 100), "both the most essential and the most problematic aspect of teaching creative writing." Cooley cites issues that affect workshops, ranging from students attacking the person rather than his or her work, the brutality of criticism, the issue of personality types (e.g., the presence of shyer students who do not engage with the discussion), as well as the obvious benefits of feedback and teaching students to be critically engaged readers (2003). In a sense, any workshop session follows Sawyer's tenets of improvisational performance. While he or she can consider possible outcomes, a teacher cannot know beforehand what issues will be raised by students, how they will raise them, or whether the student being critiqued will be defensive or enthusiastic toward criticism. Creative writing teachers must think quickly to ensure that

students critically engage with workshop pieces without doing so in harmful or offensive ways. I've found this especially the case in first-year university classrooms where students are first exposed to the workshop setting and must learn appropriate ways of giving and receiving feedback.

Indeed, in the improvised performance, like a workshop, the very course of the show depends on the immediate reactions of the participants, and this is fundamentally a collaborative endeavor. As Sawyer (2004: 13) states: "The emergence of the play cannot be reduced to actor's intentions in individual turns, because in many cases an actor cannot know the meaning of her own turn until the other actors have responded." Creative writing classroom discussion follows a similar tenet. In workshop sessions, the student who has supplied a workshop piece cannot know how he or she will respond to the class's critical insights until he or she knows what those insights are. In productive workshop sessions, thoughts and ideas can often compound throughout discussion for those analyzing the piece. For example, if a student reads a short story and feels the tone is not successful, she or he could attribute the flaw to several different reasons. Throughout the course of the class discussion, perhaps someone else raises the issue of point of view. Through a collaborative brainstorming session, these two students can inform each other's criticisms, making connections that might not have happened had they been working separately.

Receiving peer feedback and rewriting work has been linked to student metacognition and critical thinking skills. In "Metacognition in the Classroom," Nancy Joseph (2003: 111) writes about student self-reflection and metacognition (which she defines loosely as "planning, analyzing resources, being open to feedback, and assessing the effectiveness of one's actions"). She states, "Some students, of course, do use self-analysis to process information. For example, a student changes the focus of her project because the class discussion of the text on which it is based has prompted her to reread the text and to consider her project from a new point of view" (110). Likewise, in "Fostering Critical Thinking through Effective Pedagogy," Lisa Tsui (2002: 747) supports the connection between peer feedback and developed critical thinking skills: "Assessing the work of others may be conducive to the practice of critical thinking skills as students attempt to comprehend and critique material. Moreover, the rewriting process appears to stimulate students to think more deeply about their own written product and to utilize peer feedback to improve upon it."

I would argue that the creative writing workshop session supports this kind of self-reflection with particular vigor. Students become practiced

in giving and receiving feedback through the workshop sessions. Through this process (sometimes better than others), students are able to interrogate what is working in a piece of writing, then change it as desired, before handing the final portfolio in. This metacognition is especially obvious when students receive conflicting advice on how to solve a problem in a piece. As the portfolio is an individual task, the final choices are left to the student. He or she needs to be open to feedback, assess that feedback, and then judge which course of action to follow.

In order for the creative writing workshop to succeed (and indeed, in order for any improvised performance to succeed), three components are necessary: an understood structure for the participants to engage within, common language, and participation.

Structure and the Improvisational Performance Workshop

In an advanced prose writing course I taught, a student brought in a short story detailing the graphic suicide of his best friend. While the piece was well written, there were structural and pacing issues with the work. Fellow students looked to me, wondering how honest to be in their critiques. Because we knew each other well (one of the advantages of small classrooms), students were sensitive but honest about the work, and the student was grateful for their suggestions. In part, this workshop was successful because a clear structure had been established in previous sessions. Structure is integral to notions of improvisational performance in the classroom, especially in a workshop setting. As Sawyer (2004: 16) states: "Professional staged improvisation always occurs within a structure. Jazz ensembles improvise using the framework of a familiar song; improv theater groups use broad outlines to help provide their 30-minute improvisations with an overall plot structure." Like the improvisational music piece, the improvisational classroom has rules, especially for the workshop process. For instance, musicians following a twelve-bar structure in the key of C know when to shift from a C to F. Without this consistency among the participants, the result would be dissonance. Likewise, in workshop sessions, similar rules apply.

When teaching creative writing, I use many tenets to uphold structural consistency among workshops. In first-year classrooms, students break into smaller groups to discuss a piece before reporting back to the class. This encourages classmates to examine the work without feeling the pressure of relating to the whole group. Students can test their ideas in a smaller, less formal context, before committing them to the entire class. By shifting groups throughout the semester, students also become familiar with one

another, which makes the workshop process easier. Class discussions are also structured so that students begin by detailing a piece's positive merits. This process acts as an introduction: the author is able to become accustomed to hearing his or her work discussed without immediately being confronted by its negative aspects. When the workshop shifts into criticisms, students must be specific and cite exact sentences/page numbers to contextualize comments within the work. Another directive is that authors are not allowed to speak until the workshop session is finished. This strategy keeps students from answering comments about their work. It also ensures authors are not able to explain their intentions. For creative writers, it is useful to learn what outside readers glean from their work (and what isn't coming across). If an author is able to speak during the workshop session, this can influence the way readers respond to the narrative, thus affecting the success of the workshop.

Some teachers enforce a structured workshop discussion with a strict order of speaking—for instance, going student by student around the class. To empower the spontaneity of improvisational discussion, I do not enforce such an approach, but I do encourage participation in the discussion and require every student to write comments on the workshop piece. Encouraging participation demands much sensitivity in light of shyer and marginalized students (as discussed below within the context of class participation).

In addition, I employ the same physical structure to the classroom for each workshop session. This arrangement can have a large impact on the success of a workshop or discussion where students are expected to engage with one another. Like musicians playing in a room or actors involved in an improvisational performance, physicality is key to successful interactions in the classroom. I ensure desks are pulled close to one another and students are seated in a round formation so every class member can have eye contact with one another. In her study "Faculty Attitudes and the Development of Students' Critical Thinking," Tsui (2001: 18) notes that many professors interviewed used similar tactics to dismantle the authoritative structures common to hierarchical classrooms: "For example, classroom seating . . . was frequently arranged in a circular format rather than the customary order of rows of chairs facing an instructor's lectern located at the front of a classroom." In a workshop setting, there seems little choice: the customary rows of chairs would be farcical, demanding students shift around in their seats to receive feedback, but such absurdity only underlines the critical nature of physicality in the classroom.

Classroom structures, or indeed the twelve-bar approach to creative writing workshops, need to be established at the beginning of a course. There

was a protocol in place when we examined the student's work about his best friend's suicide. Because the workshop rules had been clearly defined, the author understood the process and the potential ramifications of using such a personal piece. As well, his classmates were able to respond to the story with constructive criticism, guided by established formats.

Common Language and Improvisational Performance in the Classroom

In addition to following established workshop structures, students must have a common understanding of the topics being discussed and an ability to articulate their ideas using appropriate language. Issues have arisen for me in first-year courses where more explanation about technical terms was necessary to guide students. Despite laying the ground rules for productive discussion, I found discrepancies in student engagement. One of the reasons for this was that some students didn't feel confident in articulating textual issues. As Robert Williams and Stephen Worth (2003: 200) note, class participants come from a variety of backgrounds: "Students in required entry-level courses typically vary widely in their work habits and thinking skills, as well as in their course performance (often approximating a normal curve)." Taking into account this spectrum, it was important for me to revisit and define the literary terms we were using. In order for improvisation to succeed in workshop discussion, everyone needs a common language: participants need to understand how to play their instruments in order to play them together. Because first-year writing students often come from diverse circumstances, it was key for me to back up and explain the language that we were implementing in the classroom context: this is point-of-view, this is description, structure, pacing, et cetera. Only with a common language could students communicate effectively about the prose work being examined.

Participation and Improvisational Performance in the Classroom

With workshop structures and common language established, the metaphor of teaching and learning as improvisational performance can still only succeed as long as students and teachers are active participants in the classroom. Students must be engaged and inspired to contribute—otherwise the performance cannot occur. Musicians who don't play their instruments can hardly take part in an improvisational experience. Moreover, participation has also been linked with developing critical thinking skills. As Tsui (2002: 754) expounds: "Perhaps participation in classroom discussions encourages the exercise of critical thinking skills by allowing students to test out their ideas verbally, to reflect upon the views of one's peers, and to modify

critically one's own views through incorporating feedback from others." But how does one establish a classroom where students feel comfortable honestly critiquing their own and others' creative work? How does a teacher monitor one student's critical awareness and subsequent discussion about another student's piece of work?

Pedagogical approaches to participation have been explored at length (see Rogers 1983; Heron 1992; hooks 1994; Brookfield 1995; marino 1997). As Jay Howard (2002: 771) suggests, many instructors are aware of the discussion dynamic of the classroom as "a fragile social construction" and know that methods for encouraging workshop discussion (for examples, see Howard 2002: 772) are particularly relevant when considering shyer or marginalized students. The teacher's role in classroom discussion can be quite complex. As Tsui (2002: 755) says: "To propagate useful discussion, instructors need to skillfully guide discussion and to facilitate student participation. This means knowing when to interject and when not to, how to pose thought-provoking questions, and what to do when students too readily reach consensus." One advantage in the workshop situation is class size: after all, creative writing classes must be small enough for each student to share a piece of writing, and smaller class sizes can enable teachers to become acquainted with student interests and personalities. Often the workshop discussion will carry itself, but with students who are particularly shy, lead-in questions that cater specifically to their interests are useful. For instance, if a student is negotiating point of view in his or her own work, a teacher can ask him or her about that aspect of the narrative at hand. Moreover, by knowing students well, teachers can trust those with advanced social skills to offer feedback in useful and tactful ways when situations arise. Small classes can also affect student familiarity. I work at developing student relationships by assigning out-of-class workshop combinations. If students are acquainted with one another outside the classroom context, they tend to be more comfortable in workshop.

Another method I use to help establish an environment where students feel comfortable engaging in self-criticism is to showcase early, unimpressive drafts of my own work. Sometimes I use pieces with obvious errors; sometimes the flaws are subtle—depending on the level of the class. Like student workshops, positive attributes are raised first (albeit briefly) then constructive criticisms. During the discussion of how the piece could be improved, I am particularly brutal, often raising issues myself if the class is reticent to comment. Because students might be wary of criticizing their professor (understandably, given the power structures at work in the teacher-student relationship) participation is not enforced, but most students are

enthusiastic to put me under the same scrutiny that they themselves face. This practice provides many positive outcomes: first, students use their critical analysis skills to determine how the piece could be stronger. Second, they are able to witness a palpable example of someone enthusiastically dissecting her own work critically. Third, the process highlights the importance of rewriting and revision, countering the romantic image of the inspired writer who needs only one draft to achieve perfection. And finally, the discussion can often be quite stimulating, inspiring me to rework the piece with student opinions taken into account.

These are just a few methods for engaging student participation. Obviously, given the variety of classes, personalities, comprehension levels, and subject materials, there is no foolproof plan to ensure class involvement. Yet in discussion-based subjects, it is vital to pedagogical success and critical in the application of the improvisational performance metaphor to the classroom. If students are not engaged and participating, the performance cannot be successful.

To summarize, the notion of improvisational performance can provide an apt metaphor for the creative writing workshop situation in light of teaching and learning. Necessary components for its success include an established structure, a shared knowledge base for students and teachers, and active participation. As for improvisational musicians, these facets are key—they keep both class members and performers from falling into cacophony or silence.

Note

An earlier draft of this article was presented at the ninth annual Australian Association of Writing Programs Conference, November 2004.

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