

Performing, Learning, and Teaching in a Class: Exploring Possibilities

Sanjay Kumar

Abstract

Emphasizing the importance of performance in teaching and learning, this article looks at performance both on a broader learning canvas and also as a tool for the teaching of specific academic texts. Seeing 'play' as integral to the pedagogic task, it highlights both the importance of 'theatre games' in the classroom and also of 'playing' with texts, of making students perform around characters in their course texts. Catering to students caught in memory-dependent modes of learning, the use of performance enables the teacher to help his class break the rote-trap and make the process of learning more conducive to growth and development.

Keywords: Performance, teaching as depositing, education as prescription, play, development, outperform

This article investigates the close relationship between performance, teaching, and learning. The perspectives shared in this paper emerge from a composite voice. First, and obviously prioritized, is the voice of a teacher who has been teaching English at a Delhi University College (Hansraj College) since 1984. This central defining and collating voice is that of an insider who understands the system and has worked along with it, and at odds with it, for nearly four decades. It is a career focused on improving pedagogical methodologies by exploring innovative practices in the classroom. It is the voice of teacher who has seen 'performance' as integral and central to the teaching process, and it also the voice is also of a dramaturge, a founding member of the theatre group, pandies' theatre.¹

The limitations of this piece are obvious, the points presented are neither universal nor objective, rather they stem from their particular context of Hansraj College (DU), carry the biases of the writer and are applicable primarily on that canvas, extendable as metonyms but only where pertinent and applicable. In the article, I will describe some games and performances that I use while teaching and delineate the theoretical formulations related to these.

Living in a world which has evolved from ideas of Schechner-led *Performance Theory* (1988) and the iconic formulations of Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), we walk around with an explicit realization that all our roles and identities are performative, literally we perform and create what we are. There is a close connection and affinity between teaching and performance: the teacher is the quintessential performer, and the class is his performance space. In theatre, the performing unit comes together with a desire to convey something; it usually finds an audience willing and wanting to listen. A communication process, that is often critical, gets established in the process. In the classroom too, the teacher/performer has something to say and communicate, and has before her/him an audience collected with a desire to listen. The theatrical dynamics need to be replicated for the pedagogical process to be meaningful, the end of teaching needs first and above all, to be a critical engagement with the status quo. Germane to theatrical performance is a negotiation with authority. Starting from Greek theatre down to our contemporaries we find that theatre has always questioned the dictate of convention, and has repeatedly, to paraphrase Brecht (1964), shown universal truths as hegemonic lies. For this teacher the primary importance of teaching has been in (re)teaching the student to say 'no' and ask 'why'.

'Performance' is a complex word with multiple meanings and the hegemonic meaning here is of a theatrical performance. However, at the outset, I am interested in the obvious, oppositional duality of meaning that stems from the verb 'perform' itself. On the one hand, 'to perform' is to do something, on the other it is the acting out of doing something. One set of meanings tends towards achievement, a kind of solidity that is up for appreciation in the certitudes of our world encircled in patriarchy and capitalism. The other meaning, however, militates against precisely those certitudes and infuses a vulnerability that challenges them. The oppositional meanings coalesce in the staged performance where the playing of a role is also the doing/attaining of something. If learning

is the growth of a critical process that dissects the world around and constantly questions its status quo, our learning graph needs to reveal the gap between the received lie and the lived truth. A performance centric learning process makes visible the space for disagreement, and encourages the student to question certainties. Performance, in questioning certitudes, often has an inimical relationship with authority; pedagogy, too, has to exist in resistance for a shorter while to create real possibilities of growth and learning in the long run. I will describe some of the games and performances that I use while teaching that create the space for questions and discussions in the class.

Truth and Lie

Tracing its origins to the methods of Stanislavski (1936/1989), 'Truth and Lie' is one of my favourite performative games for the class. The lead player/performer gives three statements to the class/audience about different aspects of her/his life. Two are true and one is a lie, s/he needs to take care that no one in class knows the lie. And now the collected body has to work out one by one which is the lie. The stress is not on the lie but on the process of discovering the lie: previous knowledge, logic, intuition, watching the contortion of the body, the look on the face, all faculties come into play. The impact of this 'play' is felt keenly by the student and immediately extends her/his learning process beyond the bounds of the text and syllabus. And the liminality of the lie takes us into another zone of understanding and learning. The process of performing opens out and becomes an expression of a radical vulnerability both of the performer and the receiver of that performance. As the game progresses, the notion of truth and leadership changes, it is among the best illustrations of coping mechanism for life in a post-truth world, a world where leadership cannot be taken as perennial, rather it must move and evolve within peership.

One may ask why undertake these activities, we do so as there is an intrinsic desire among all of us to 'play'. From childhood, play is has been opposed to work, to arduous study. Maybe that is the reason for its ever-resonating attraction of play for all of us. One of the meanings of play connects with theatre, as with 'perform'. Play was earlier seen as extra-curricular activity, though in our world its importance as an integral aspect of teaching is being felt across boundaries and countries.

The Social Corridor

The Social Corridor, is an interesting performative game popular with theatre people and often also used for psychotherapy. It is a game that brings us closer to the characters in a text and also to text teaching. In its raw form, the game consists of the facilitator creating characters that push the participants out of their comfort zones. For instance, a cross-dressing boy or a woman who suspects her husband is gay are among my favourites. One participant takes the role of the central character, the rest make a 'corridor', two rows facing each other, and the central character walks through this corridor. S/he keeps quiet and walks through, absorbing like a sponge, while the others assume positions aligned to the character, relatives, friends, neighbours, somebody who has a crush on the character and so on, and they speak/yell from that position. The central character absorbs the words, often harsh insults that we keep for all alterity. The experience can at times be quite traumatizing for this character. S/he then collects a group from the participants and after a discussion creates a performance around the experience of the central character. This performative game works as a general teaching device and can also be used for characters and texts, especially those that push us out the usual zones of experience (Rochester or Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, Medea in Euripides' play with the same name), the ability to see and understand increases for the students. For instance, to take various feed ins on Bertha and how Bertha (from the one who plays Bertha in our game and creates a small enactment/discussion around it) looks at things before we, maybe take another input from Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)², return to the course text.

The game works well for the learning graph of the class. The protagonists (and also others who are forced to think through difference, through profiling) are forced to step out of skins literally, to not just speak about the need to emphasize but to actually empathize. This begins the tussle and interrogation against biases and bigotry in the class.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the Classroom

We need to perhaps look closer at the relation between the teacher and his class. What constitutes a 'class'? A motley word, the priority meaning in this context is of course a group of students collected and grouped together for purposes of being taught by their teacher. What is the basis and the ingredients of this relationship? Even within the performative

mode, to see the teacher as performer and the students as audience belies the depth that is germane to this process. The class is a space where the performer/audience are not dichotomized. Each is a participant and the learning-growing process takes place across the spectrum. We get closer to truth when we think of the Boalian³ specta(c)tor or the umpteen attempts of theatre groups like pandies with workshop theatre, specially with people in the margins.

One thinker whose work, in my opinion, provides a good entry point to help us with our notion of a class is the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky⁴. He saw the teacher's role as facilitating growth and not providing content. Talking about the much-needed reform in the contemporary education system, Vygotsky (1931) saw learning as an essentially social process in which the support of parents, caregivers, peers, and the wider society play a crucial role in the development of the learner's higher psychological functions. The class then finds a parallel in Vygotsky's (1978) notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the development takes place across the spectrum of class, gender, caste, religion, region, and more. The main idea of the ZPD is that a person with more knowledge can enhance a student's learning by guiding them through a task slightly above their aptitude. The teacher induces the student to propel himself beyond the usual learning process to outperform her/his status quo and to take her/him beyond the accepted, even beyond the acceptable.

Performing Franca Ramé⁵: The Rape

The Rape: A Dramatic Monologue (1975/1984) by Franca Ramé is one of the favourite performative texts for an early breakthrough in the teaching/learning process. In my experience of using this text, the language comes as an attractive assault on the mind as read-performed by the teacher and then by the student in class. Franca Ramé and her husband, Dario Fo, were theatre activists, they were at the receiving end of the worst kind of violence that the combination of capitalism and fascism are capable of unleashing. *The Rape* is a weaponizing of trauma, it hits out at the system which made Ramé the subject of a horrifying rape orchestrated by corporate interests supported by the contemporary Italian state. The graphic description transcends the naturalistic by its sheer horror. At the end, the debate to go or not go to the police station comes as no surprise for the young performer/audience. And when probed, most of them

articulate that the performance of this script (actually within two months of the horrifying act itself) is Ramé's 'answer', her activist 'performance' against the business and state interests that sought this traumatizing infliction on her. The prologue, often dropped in enactments of the script, has a glaring obviousness as we see the hostility of the entire patriarchal structure against the rape survivor:

A woman's best chance of making people believe that she's suffered sexual violence, is if she's "lucky" enough to appear before the relevant authorities bruised, beaten, and covered in blood. If she turns up DEAD, so much the better! (Ramé, Introduction, para 1).

The entire justice system is rallied against her. The police, doctors, lawyers, and the judges, all seem set to destroy her in a deep-rooted misogyny.

I have always felt that gender, as compared to class or caste, works as a good gentry point to unlock the cliches and propel the students to outperform. Of course, this is open to revision, our students often see class privilege as given and are uncomfortable if that is challenged too early, and it takes a long time to form a critical attitude towards the issue of caste. Despite the subject, or maybe because of it, *Rape* is extremely enabling. It connects with so much of gender violence around, also the openness of the text allows the student to question and abjure many conventional holds. Our class is readier for greater learning.

Learning itself is a complex process. It is obviously not confined to mastering a curriculum and doing well in an exam (though that cannot be just set aside and is not inimical to what follows). The process of learning is closely tied with the ideas of growth and development. The student comes to us with a given set of templates, dictated by the twin institutions of patriarchy and capitalism, conventionally perceived as paradigms for growth. On the personal set are the pursuits of marriage and family (almost as if there are no possibilities outside of those two institutions) and on the professional side, the idea of performing well in exams and jobs and earning well. From early schooling, the child is propelled to perform 'better'. The drive is competitive with little space for manoeuvring. Most of our students are used to being in an education system that prioritizes her/his mnemonic faculties in the task of learning, trains her/his mind to scoring high marks. Even 'solving' is a matter of remembering how to solve.

Paulo Freire and Pedagogy

The first task of the teacher is to evolve a method that at least mitigates the process of rote learning and takes the students towards a collective, co-operative process of learning. S/he needs to junk at least some of these older performances. It is not easy, we are asking for a performance that outperforms the certitudes we have been dealt, that gives a lie to the status quo. The myths of success create their icons and theoretical frames, alterity is always more difficult to frame and theorize. In my teaching career, I have leaned on more than a few theorists of alterity, the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire⁶ and his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/1996) is significant in this regard. Freire's notions of pedagogy provide possible directions for us, including which directions not to take. Castigating a prescriptive, memory centred mode of education, Freire iterates:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiques and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorise, and repeat. This is the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filling, and storing the deposits. (p. 28)

That the idea of memory as a basic learning tool is flawed is obvious, it rather hampers the ability to grow. It always has the end in mind: of solving questions, of moving with surer steps towards cracking the exams. It offers simplistic obvious truths: good marks equals a good future. It is the act of duplicating, what Freire calls 'depositing', the developmental space is rather limited as the syllabus, its completion and mastery becomes the prescription.

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about a conformity to it, or it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 1968/1996, p. 16)

The Goodperson of Szechwan

To further repudiate the act of duplicating and depositing of conventional teaching, I decided to do something special for one particular batch

of students, B.A. (Hons.) English batch of 2013-16. The first step was watching and commenting on pandies' rehearsals. The next step was more than usual use of performative techniques, but the litmus test lay in asking them to create a performance from course texts in the third year. 'Open play with the curriculum' was the order of the day. And the process became the result in one of my cherished experiments as a teacher. The students selected texts from the paper, "Modern European Drama" and put together excerpts from two extremely challenging plays, Brecht's *The Goodperson of Szechwan* (1948/1953) and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952). The learning inputs were obvious, Brecht the repository of nay-saying thought and this play, with its infectious humour prioritizing the method of social reform over content, provides a big jump in the learning graph. We started with the difficult question of goodness. Who is a good student: One who does well in exams? One who is an all-rounder? Or one who is the favourite of teachers? Who helps other students?

With Beckett, we attempted to rescue *Waiting for Godot* from the burden of New Critical thought⁷ and Martin Esslin's⁸ absurd. We sought to stimulate the connection with Clifford Odets' stirring agit prop⁹ play *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and attempted to connect with Adorno on Beckett's *Endgame*:

Were drama to try to survive meaning aesthetically, it would become inadequate to its substance and be degraded to a clattering machinery for the demonstration of world views, as if often the case with existentialist plays. (Adorno, 1961/1992, p. 92)

In this activity, the process was king, the process had become the result. I would like to quote a student report on the activity:

The students of B.A. English Honours (batch of 2013-16) adapted and performed a play based on *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Waiting for Godot* by Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett respectively on November 15, 2015 to encourage creative understanding and analysis of both texts and their performances.... Scenes from the two plays were translated in vernacular languages and lingos and re-written to fit an Indian context. Themes, tropes and major characters were re-imagined within an Indian setting to allow for an interesting engagement with the form and politics of these texts. For instance, rather than doing an ahistorical and apolitical reading of Beckett's play, scenes from *The Good Person of Szechwan* were

meshed with Lucky's speech... The entire experience of getting students involved with adapting, scriptwriting and play-acting was ultimately to help them to engage with the work of the two playwrights not only at the level of textuality but understanding how a live performance becomes a text in itself.¹⁰

In furtherance, this writer is happy that universities are increasingly adding performance-oriented courses to their syllabi, perceiving perhaps the importance of performing in learning and teaching. A performance-led pedagogical practice is possibly most conducive to the growth and development of learners.

Notes

1. Performing 'activist' theatre since inception in 1993, pandies' theatre has a close connection with Delhi University, most of its members emerge from the student/teacher community here.
2. The celebrated 'prequel' to *Jane Eyre*, that looks at Rochester's marriage from Bertha's (Antoinette Cosway) perspective.
3. Augusto Boal (1931-2009), the celebrated Brazilian dramaturge needs no introduction, insisting on greater participation from the audience, he gave us the famous Forum theatre and the specta(c)tor.
4. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), A Russian psychologist who did pioneering work on the psychological development of children. His concepts today are widely used in framing education policy.
5. Franca Ramé (1929-2013), iconic Left, feminist dramaturge who along with her Nobel prize winner spouse, Dario Fo, took on the contemporary Italian fascist regime.
6. Paulo Freire (1921-97), a Brazilian educator whose critical pedagogy is a reference point while framing any pedagogical method.
7. New Critical Theory, a mode of text evaluation that dominated western universities in the middle of the last century and unfortunately is often resorted in our classes even today. Seeing the text as autonomous and autotelic it seeks to divorce it from context including its history and the role of the writer.
8. The specific reference is to Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1960) where he looks at many iconic European playwrights of the middle of the twentieth century and sees their work as projecting an absence of meaning and purpose and the breakdown of communication seeing it as reflective of the contemporary world.
9. A vigorous pro-Communist theatre form, it originated in USSR around 1920 and spread globally specially after 1930.
10. Report on class activity, Swarnika Ahuja, 2015.

References

- Adorno, T. (1991). *Notes to literature* (Nicholsen, S. Weber, Trans. and Ed.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1961)
- Beckett, S. (1952). *Waiting for Godot*. Faber & Faber.
- Brecht, B. (1953). *The good person of Szechwan*. (J. Willet, Trans.). Penguin. (Original work published 1943)
- Brecht, B. (1964). *Brecht on theatre: The development of an aesthetic*. (J. Willet, Ed. & Trans.). Hill and Wang.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M.B. Ramos, Trans.). Penguin. (Original work published 1968)
- Ramé, F. (1984). *The rape: A dramatic monologue* (E. Emery, Trans.). Theatretexts. (Original work published 1975)
- Schechner, R. (1988). *Performance theory*. Routledge.
- Stanislavski, K. (1989). *An actor prepares* (E.R. Hapgood, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1936)
- Vygotsky, L. (1931). Adolescent pedagogy: The development of thinking and concept formation in adolescence. marxists.org
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Sanjay Kumar is an Associate Professor at Hansraj College, University of Delhi. A practitioner of activist theatre, he is the founding President of pandies' theatre, and has published extensively on drama.
sanjay.pandies@gmail.com