Improvisational Pedagogy

Men and women confronting change are never fully prepared for the demands of the moment, but they are strengthened to meet uncertainty if they can claim a history of improvisation and a habit of reflection.

Mary Catherine Bateson

The performance classroom offers opportunities not available in traditional instructional formats - lecture, lecture-discussion - by its participatory nature, its methodology of “embodied practice.” Even students who can hide out in traditional college courses must participate on their feet, must commit - physically at least - to the work of the class. As we know, this is fertile ground for a student’s education. I’ve begun to realize how fertile a ground for my education as a teacher as well. I’m discovering why bell hooks believes: “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”

The Classroom as Collaboration

At the core of my teaching and production work is a question voiced in two parts: Who gets to speak? On whose behalf? It was inevitable that I would turn that question around to my own pedagogy. I became aware of the ways my voice dominated discussions, whether or not I spoke. I’d see students - in the heat of questioning each other - direct their discussion to me. I’d notice how sometimes a student grew silent after a comment or question from me. Regardless of how liberatory my content, how inclusive of marginalized POVs I tried to be, in effect I was teaching them to acquiesce when confronted with authority, especially when - or because? - something material was at stake (their grade; their future).

This is what traditional pedagogy teaches transparently, and so well. I believe this is an institutional assumption, if not requirement, in the academy. Administrators say to faculty and faculty say to students, “I know more than you do. Listen up.” Students know so well how to defer to faculty privilege. Some do it better than others, running a gamut from “You’re looking lovely, Mrs. Cleaver...” to the adoration of a diligent research assistant. In any case, usually faculty don’t know what students really think. This awareness made me wince when I read Bateson’s story of a Japanese woman who clarifies for a reporter: “in Japan we do not respect the father . . . we practice respect for the father . . . in case we someday find someone who deserves that respect” (124).

In my career I’ve been very comfortable as the designated voice in my classrooms. Without thinking, each semester I would take my institutional place. Mine was the first word and the last word. I determined the course content, the students’ goals, the methodologies they would use to meet these goals, and the criteria for evaluating their work. I was teaching my knowledge and point of view; many were simply learning to mirror what it seemed I valued.
Hence the question, “will this be on the test?” We were all reifying my power as professor. Bateson quotes Karl Deutsch’s definition of power as “the ability not to have to learn.” (P.75) It used to be I was there to teach. Now, I find I am there to learn.

We are constrained by the hierarchical culture of the institution, and the student’s horizon of expectation as s/he goes from class to class. A course begins and ends with the professor’s authority, from syllabus to final grades. I’m responsible for students’ education in this course, certainly; but why does responsibility equate with authority? As professor I’m presumably more expert in the subject matter than the students; but why does expertise equate with authority? And what IS the expertise I’m providing? With each successive reworking of a course, despite my innovations, I’m communicating the same thing: “This is how you learn; I know because this has worked for me.”

It was easier than I’d ever imagined to give up my professorial authority and privilege. When I began the project simulAcra, I had no idea what it would turn out to be. I told the students that the first day, and declared - or decreed, since that’s what it takes - that they would determine its every moment, from conception to execution, from this meeting to final strike and wrap-up. There was an awkward silence, for perhaps 2 minutes, until we each began to realize what that meant. “I’m shutting up,” I told them. “I’m speaking up,” they replied. The education I received during the five-month process of simulAcra gave me the courage to now say to my students, “I’m ultimately responsible for this course but I’m not the ultimate authority.” I have a detailed syllabus prepared; as we go over it I tell them, “These are the objectives of the course, this is what we need to accomplish. How do you want to proceed?” Improvisational pedagogy begins with my willingness to play with my own pedagogical constructions and constraints as schematized in the syllabus. The syllabus is prepared, but it is up for grabs as the course evolves. It is only the place to begin.

Performance work is deeply rooted in identity. Performance is generated by and generative of one’s place in the system. Identity is always identity in relation to - whether our families, our neighborhoods, our collective past or future. Our various shifting identities enable us to negotiate multiple social systems, through “communities of location” and “communities of interest,” communities with which we choose to affiliate and those we must endure. As Bateson says, we are “shaped and succored by the reality of interdependence.”(63) And, I would add, we improvise every day.

On a daily basis we perform various identities to maneuver through shifting social structures, norms and values. We improvise and reflect without thinking about it, in an odd irony. We engage in what Alan Read describes as “the reciprocity of identity.” He elaborates, “My everyday life inevitably impinges on someone else’s and it is there that the pleasures of human interaction occur and the possibilities of theatre begin.” It seems to me that the performance classroom, of all pedagogical formats, offers a laboratory for examining and experimenting with identities and roles.

In a collaborative classroom, the system we are “in relation to” is particularly anarchic and emergent. During the term, relationships progress quickly, and shift unexpectedly. Engaging this chaos encourages experimentation, a sense of play and exploration. When I was
teacher as authority, the extent of students’ exploring was often, “what does she want?” rather than “what can I do?” or better yet, “what can we do?” Too often, the students’ notion of play was figuring out my rules. In my old “I’ve got a secret” mode of teaching, the students would follow clues to determine what they should know, and how they should articulate what they know. There’s no denying this can be a fun and even productive game, but it can seduce us from the task at hand.

**Reflexivity and Risk**

Augusto Boal says that “theatre is the capacity possessed by human beings . . . to observe themselves in action.” I believe that in any communication classroom this reflexivity is at work. Communication students in general learn to apply theories to their everyday practice, as we do as teachers. I don’t know a communication teacher who doesn’t use examples and stories from her/his own life. In the past, my focus (and thus my students’) was usually on their performance exclusively. As the teacher, I supplied the gaze, and I was the arbiter of standards and thus possibilities in the course. My performance was not at issue; while it may have been under scrutiny (what teacher’s isn’t?) it wasn’t a subject for open discussion. As a result, my pedagogy went unexamined, though wielding its influence. In effect, I was saying, “pay no attention to the [wo]man behind the screen.”

In my Boal class this semester, students developed several image theatres in the first third of the course. They created images of the group based on the first night of class and then the fourth night of class. They developed images of their learning styles; they showed me images of my teaching style. It was enlightening to see their assessments of my methods and the climate and dynamics of the class. We developed images of the institution and their place in it, images of the power relations among students and faculty, majors and non-majors, students and staff. We found ourselves looking at the power relations between us. Freire states

> The difference between the educator and the student is a phenomenon involving a certain permanent tension, which is, after all, the same tensions that exist between theory and practice, between authority and freedom, and perhaps between yesterday and today . . . What we have to do is . . . cope with this tension between us - a tension that is reconcilable. Recognizing this situation as reconcilable, and not antagonistic, qualifies us as democratic educators ...

Improvisational pedagogy requires my willingness to experiment with my own identity(ies), to problematize my own place in the emerging system, no longer secure. I believe it is a question of authentic commitment as well. Freire continues, “It is impossible to experience and appreciate someone in this concrete relationship if the educator and the learner do not know about one another, and if they do not teach each other” (177). Boal invokes Che Guevara: “solidarity means running the same risks.” If my students have agreed to tell a crossroads story, I tell one too. As hooks insists, “Professors who expect students to share
confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive” (21). In the collaborative classroom my identity is as provisional as anyone else’s; in Bateson’s words, “. . . all those others present with me now are a source of identity and partners in my survival” (75). In this sense, the personal is pedagogical.

The Classroom as Microcosm

It has been easy to set up the classroom as microcosm because I teach in communication. In a communication classroom, “the object of knowledge becomes a critical agent, rather than a possession ...” (177). We in communication use theories to analyze, evaluate and improve our own constructions and practices. Conversely, we teach communication BY communicating. In a perfect world, we practice what we preach.

In a performance classroom, because of its focus on lived experience, and its on-your-feet format, the microcosm is particularly engaging and dynamic. We work in the mode of the performative “as if” - the subjunctive mood, which is busy with intention and filled with unintended outcomes. Boal attributes the “knowledge-enhancing” power of performance to “three essential properties: (1) plasticity ... (2) the division or doubling of self ... which allows - and enables - self-observation; (3) finally, that telemicroscopic property which magnifies everything and makes everything present, allowing us to see things which, without it, in smaller or more distant form, would escape our gaze.”

The group itself is a subject of study, as we develop our own processes of improvisation and reflection. We can explore dynamics of our social systems, and rehearse alternative strategies for coping with these. We can create a system that suits our needs and purposes. We can decide to collaborate rather than compete. I’ve always in some form taught the social construction of reality -- that reality and truth are constructed in communication, and intensively so in performance -- but for years I stopped there. Now, I take another step and ask, “so what is it you want to construct?” In Boal’s method, “theatre [is] a language that must be spoken, not a discourse that must be listened to...”

In the Boal class we tackled what we termed “Debbie’s dilemma.” Debbie is a young single mother of a 3-year-old daughter; she is a full-time (9 to 5) office manager in a law firm so can only take classes at night. She is finally going to graduate. Our class met at 4pm once a week, and Debbie needs this class to graduate. She needs her job so she can support herself and her daughter. Although she secured an agreement with her boss at the outset of the semester, she is finding it impossible to leave work early to make the class on time. We did a forum theatre to develop various strategies for dealing with her demanding boss and coworkers indifferent to her problems. In the end, we didn’t solve her problem at work, but what we did do was save her place in the system of the class. Normally, someone who is habitually late for a performance class is marginalized by the group, written off as unreliable, disengaged; “phoning it in,” as one student said to me. While a student in Debbie’s situation might come to the teacher to explain the situation, most of the class would not know or care why she’s late; they’d just be trying to avoid working with her. The decision to work on Debbie’s problem profoundly affected not only Debbie’s ability to belong and thus participate, but the character and climate of the group.
My classrooms reflect the diversity of my community, the greater Los Angeles area. Students are California-born, immigrants and refugees who are staking a claim or passing through; residents of urban neighborhoods, suburbs, the exclusive coastline; returning students responsible for the livelihood of their families, as well as students fresh out of high school - some of these with children of their own. When given a voice, they tell amazing stories, stories that humble me, stories completely outside my own experience. The Eastern European refugee who fled political persecution literally in the middle of the night, leaving behind a daughter who can come only to visit, not stay. Southeast Asian refugees who are estranged from their traditions and alienated by their parents’ nostalgia for a world they are unable to recall. African Americans and Latino/as who encounter suspicion and fear whenever they enter a 7-Eleven, or a neighborhood outside their own. Middle Easterners who confront stereotypes of class and privilege, and the invisibility of their own ethnicities lost in the “Middle Easterner” totalizing label. Caucasians who feel displaced and defensive as their neighborhoods are “colorized”; those who may or may not understand their own privilege.

These and multiple other POVs populate our classrooms, and have much to teach us. In the academy, we are used to -- trained in -- reflection. We engage in impassioned, but too often passive contemplation of the consequences of actions, of how life is lived and expressed. We in performance are uniquely suited to teaching improvisation, and teaching improvisationally. The future of performance studies, like any other future, will consist of change; that’s all I can be sure of. I’m hoping I can better equip my students, myself, and maybe even my institution for confronting change by embracing its uncertainty, engaging its energy and reflexivity, and enacting multiple possible futures.

When I was in graduate school in 1971, I had a poster on my door. It was a photo shot from inside a room with a door open to the daylight outside. Framed in the light was the silhouette of a child of about 10, leaping through the door, arms and legs akimbo; sheer forward velocity. The caption read “The real classroom is outside. Get into it.” These days in my classrooms, when the magic works, this image comes to life before my eyes. Even when it doesn’t, I find I’m learning more than I ever used to about my students, my community, myself, and my discipline. I’m learning how to improvise as well as reflect.

NOTES


4. *simuLaCra: LA by Angelenos* was an interactive mixed media performance installation, using live performance by students from CSU Northridge and CSULA, interactive posters, video, and photo images and texts. It was presented at WSCA in Pasadena in 1996.


8. In Image Theatre, the actor sculpts an image of a situation, relationship, context or moment of oppression, using class colleagues, and then takes her/his place in it. The image “can be realistic, allegorical or surrealistic, it can be symbolic or metaphorical. The only thing that matters is that it is true, that it is felt as true by the protagonist” (*Rainbow*, p. 77). While the image is sculpted without using words, and is initially frozen as a nonverbal image, the image is “dynamised” in a variety of improvisational exercises that bring the image to life and the characters to voice and action. Actors create solo images as well. The students’ images of “education,” though different, all expressed a receiving and submissive pose.


12. This is a particular blessing of Boal’s method. In doing Theatre of the Oppressed, he insists, “Nothing should ever be done in a competitive manner – we try to be better than ourselves, not better than others” (*Games*, p. xxx). In Forum Theatre, he maintains “it is more important to achieve a good debate than a good solution” (*Games*, p.230), and “the aim of the forum is not to win, but to learn and to train” (*Games*, p.20).