



**We Have Lift-Off:
The Pedagogy of Radical Empathy for First-Year Student Success**

By Shawna Mefferd Kelty

A Short Preface on Hope and Grit in the Process of Teaching and Learning

The following essay is unapologetically hopeful. Research by Angela Duckworth and Shane Lopez suggests that the two strongest indicators for student success are hope and grit, and I would argue they are also indicators of educator success. As Paulo Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Heart*, “It is imperative that we maintain hope even when the harshness of reality may suggest the opposite.”¹ Many times I have walked into a course with nothing more than an assignment outline and not only a hope that my students would invest and engage in the project, but that the project would have a positive impact on my students’ understanding of the course material and the world. It takes each one of us—our creativity, perspectives, hope, and perseverance to work as learning collaborators in the classroom—to make those projects happen.

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart*, trans. Donaldo Macedo and Alexandre Oliveira (New York: Continuum, 1997), 106.

Developing a Pedagogical Approach to the First-Year Seminar

Recent studies on our current generation of college students, such as Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean's *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (2012), note that college students face a variety of challenges that can undermine their potential academic success. These include poor face-to-face social and communication skills, minimal coping capacity and emotional resilience, unrealistic estimations of their academic abilities, and a worldview as entitled consumers rather than participants.² In 2014, I joined a faculty learning community on the SUNY Plattsburgh campus that teaches first-year general education seminars. These seminars are geared toward student retention and success by "encouraging our students to consider themselves as part of a larger intellectual world," with two learning outcomes: "1. Participate in and reflect critically on what it means to be part of an intellectual community within and outside of the classroom, 2. Demonstrate, in written and oral communication, an understanding of the value of diversity to the intellectual community of college life."³

As a feminist educator and theatre artist, my pedagogy is disruptive and deeply rooted in the work of Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks—especially hooks' tenets that dialogue is an act of love and a necessary part of learning, and that learning (much like theatre) comes from creating community.⁴ hooks defines love as "a combination of care, commitment,

² Arthur Levine and Diane R. Dean, *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), 161-162.

³ Wendy Gordon and Becky Kasper, "Teaching First Year Students: Gateway assessment results and guidelines" (handout, SUNY Plattsburgh, 2016), 1.

⁴ bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Both are excellent sources for engaged pedagogy.

knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust.”⁵ These are the fundamental elements of love and of dialogue, and both teacher and students must engage in these interdependent facets to create a community of learning. In her article on feminist acting pedagogy, Rhonda Blair also suggests that dialogue “based on love, humility, faith, hope, critical thinking, and a commitment to temporality” is the only means for “liberating change and growth for students of performance.”⁶ Freire argues that dialogue is the means to humanize pedagogy, which is necessary to helping students define their own freedom through education.⁷ Dialogue and love go hand in hand in my classroom. I seek to create a learning community with my students based in care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and critical thinking. This paper is a case study of my approach to teaching Introduction to Acting: Exploring Diversity through Performance using love, or “radical empathy,” to help first-year students transition into the intellectual community of college as critical and creative thinkers. My goal is also to help new students find balance academically, mentally, and emotionally through the lens of performance.

When I began developing my first-year seminar, I was careful and creative in the structure of my teaching and assessment strategies, focusing on low-stakes, effort-based writing and performance projects as well as higher-stakes, achievement-based assignments and assignments structured around Daniel H. Pink’s fundamentals of autonomy, mastery, and purpose. My goal was to help my students discover intrinsic motivation rather than the

⁵ hooks, *Teaching Community*, 131.

⁶ Rhonda Blair, “Liberating the Young Actor: Feminist Pedagogy and Performance,” *Theatre Topics* 2, no. 1 (March 1992): 15.

⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1990), 56-67.

extrinsic, grade-based, “learn-to-the-test” approach in high school classrooms.⁸ I implemented rubrics for assessing performance and writing assignments, which created clear expectations for each assignment and helped to minimize student anxiety about being in a performance course. These were successful elements of my course, and they played a significant part in my students’ overall success in transitioning to college and becoming a part of “an intellectual community,” which is one of the main learning outcomes of our first-year seminars. However, my course focused on a foundational strategy and learning outcome that was far more instrumental in a student’s ability to “lift-off” in their first semester of college: empathy and radical empathy.

Empathy is the ability to understand and share what another person might be thinking or feeling, and its positive impact on learning is not new to educational research. Most theatre educators can offer anecdotal observations on the benefits of theatre and its ability to increase empathic understanding in students. In 1984, T. Darlene Bonner and David N. Aspy linked student empathy to academic achievement (GPA),⁹ and recent psychology studies at McGill University link empathy with students’ abilities to thrive academically and personally. In 2015, researchers examining the impact of attending live theatre found that students increase their knowledge, tolerance, and their ability to read other people’s emotions.¹⁰ Radical empathy goes a step further. As playwright Tiffany Antone describes it, radical empathy is

⁸ Daniel H. Pink, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (New York: Riverhead, 2009), 49.

⁹ T. Darlene Bonner and David N. Aspy, “A Study of the Relationship Between Student Empathy and GPA,” *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling* 22, no. 4 (June 1984): 149-154, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-4683.1984.tb00252.x>.

¹⁰ Jay P. Greene et al., “Learning from Live Theater,” *EducationNext* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2015), educationnext.org/learning-live-theater/.

the act of reaching out with an open heart and mind, even if we feel the person or community we are reaching out to is undeserving of such openness. It's the notion that, if we swallow our own hurt long enough to extend empathy to our opposition no matter what (that's the radical part), we will establish connections capable of yielding far greater fruit than any amount of soap-boxing or condemnation ever will.¹¹

This act of reaching out with an open heart in my classroom began with me as their instructor. I had to be willing, no matter what, to commit, care, trust, respect, and learn along with my students. I had to acknowledge that I am a student as well, and they have much to teach me. My intentions here were to create a supportive learning environment for my students by simply committing, as a philosophy colleague of mine says, to teach from a place of love.

I created performance assignments and related writing assignments that were both reflective and reflexive between the self and the other, asking my students to live in that oscillating space between the self and the other so they might develop empathy for the people whose stories they would encounter and perform. The "performance of other" assignment asks students to step into the shoes of a character that is nothing like them; find points where they can identify, empathize, and understand the experiences of a different person; then reflect in their process paper on that experience, examining the connections and contradictions that experience may evoke. The empathy strategy came about, in part, because of the contentious and divisive political climate of 2016, and in part because of our own campus climate regarding a racist macro-aggression the previous year and our failure as a campus to successfully talk about it.¹² Many college students (and faculty) simply avoid discussing diversity issues because

¹¹ Tiffany Antone, "Radical Empathy is the Theatre Artist's New Job," *HowlRound*, February 8, 2017, <http://howlround.com/radical-empathy-is-the-theatre-artist-s-new-job>.

¹² Felice León, "College Paper Prints The Most Racist Front Page in America," *The Daily Beast*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/college-paper-prints-the-most-racist-front-page-in-america>. While this incident

they feel they do not have the interpersonal skills to have the conversations.¹³ Others cannot see the issues because they cannot see their privilege. Empathy is a way into having the difficult conversations we should engage in. It is the currency of the theatre as well; audiences and actors step in the shoes of the other and ask what it must be like to be someone else and to find understanding through the ephemeral art of performance. I decided to try to build a learning community of invested learners by engaging their empathy. I discussed this on the first day, and I put it in the syllabus to make sure it was not forgotten or dismissed:

As John Patrick Stanley (playwright) once said, "Theatre is the safe place to do the unsafe things that need to be done." Performance allows us to step outside of ourselves, to risk, to say the things that need to be said in a safe, supportive environment. Each of you has something important to share, each of you has worth, and your thoughts and creativity are worth sharing. I ask that each of you please be supportive and compassionate towards your classmates. We may delve into subject matters that strike close to home for some and for others are completely new. The performances we create may reflect our vulnerabilities. Each of us needs that safe place where we can explore without judgment or ridicule. Remember: "Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always."¹⁴

Subtlety was not part of my agenda.

In the fall of 2016, I offered Introduction to Acting: Exploring Diversity through Performance, a special section of our general education Introduction to Acting course. It was rooted in performance studies with multiple solo performances and reflective writing opportunities, exploring scripts, rituals, everyday life, and politics through the lens of

made national news, we continue to experience the everyday micro-aggressions of privileged insensitivity and macro-aggressions on our campus such as white supremacist pamphlets and the circulation of racist Snapchat posts.

¹³ Levine and Dean, *Generation on a Tightrope*, 99.

¹⁴ Shawna Mefferd Kely, "THE106YA Introduction to Acting Syllabus Fall 2016" (syllabus, SUNY Plattsburgh, 2016), 3.

performance.¹⁵ The course was not intended specifically to study diverse populations; rather, it was designed to help students develop their empathic understanding of others whose experiences and beliefs were different from their own. At the top of the fall semester I had twenty-three students, including a few theatre majors. Yes, we would explore performance studies and train our minds to see the world through that lens, but we would also explore concepts of diversity (and the assumptions we make with that problematic word), inclusion, otherness, privilege, difference, representation, and—most importantly—empathy.

A Good Rule for Empathy: Names Matter

The literature on first-year seminars is quite specific about setting up “who you are” to your students—how you dress, how you wish to be addressed, the language you use—to set the tone for the entire course. The climate I wanted to co-create with my students was an inclusive, supportive, and democratic space for learning. Beginning from a place of love, I wanted each of my students to know they had value and deserved recognition for simply being themselves. I introduced myself as Dr. Shawna Mefferd Kelty and offered a multiplicity of ways they could address me—Dr. or Professor Kelty, or Mefferd Kelty, or simply Shawna—but I instructed them to use my *name*, not just my title.¹⁶ I spent time that first day on my students’

¹⁵ The course fulfills both arts and oral expression categories of our general education program, which requires the course to provide the following outcomes: Students will 1) explore the creative process of an art form, 2) develop proficiency in oral discourse, and 3) develop an ability to evaluate an oral presentation. Our art form was performance and our proficiency in oral discourse was demonstrated through performance, but more importantly through our dialogue because dialogue is the act of love that creates empathy and community.

¹⁶ I inform my students if they address me as “Professor,” I will address them simply as “Student.” Each of us is a person, not an occupation. I also have a difficult relationship with the power dynamic that is implied with the title and as someone who works closely with young people in examining the intricacies and vulnerabilities of the human condition.

names, too—I always do. As my name has never been simple, I wanted my students to be comfortable and know that, at the very least, their instructor knew their name and how to pronounce it. One of my students was from South Korea and asked to be addressed by the English name of “Edward” to avoid confusion over pronouncing his Korean name, a common accommodation made by international students. By the end of the semester, however, I would become Dr. Shawna (which I appreciated) and Edward would return to being Ui Yeon. Names matter.

Creating Our Own Rules for Empathy: Listening with Respect

Beyond names, we created the rules for our democratic learning community. With an extensive background in Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) and interactive theatre, fostering democratic discourse is the cornerstone of my teaching approach both in small and large group discussions. Stephen D. Brookfield describes it as “the ability to talk and listen respectfully to those who hold views different from our own,” and it is the hallmark of facilitating interactive theatre discussions on difficult and divisive issues.¹⁷ Creating class rules *with* my students created a learning environment wherein each person’s perspective was valued and validated. I opened the discussion with a question: “What do you need from me or your classmates in order to have a successful learning experience?” Then I offered an example: “I need the right to step away if the subject or the tone of our discussion becomes too much for me.” It is one of my favorite questions to ask because it tells me so much about my students and because it lets them know that I want them to be successful. The question also places my students in a

¹⁷ Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 5.

position of agency and expertise; they are the experts of their own learning experiences, and the floor is open for each one of them to be heard. My role in the process is to document and ask for clarification or consensus, not to reshape the rules to conform to a traditional classroom model. I serve as a facilitator to their needs and will do what I can to help meet them.

Students offered general rules such as “respect” and “listening,” but we had to parse out those ideas and get specific about what it means to offer respect and to actively listen: not interrupting and being present when others are speaking rather than thinking of a response/comeback or a story to top the previous one. Taking the time to discuss specifics brought general concepts into concrete, identifiable behaviors or actions that they could then engage in as a citizen of our classroom. Other rules included “don’t yuck my yum” and “step up and then step back” (meaning: contribute to the conversation, but let others contribute, too, so it is a conversation rather than a monologue). The rules were compiled, emailed, posted on Moodle, discussed, and revisited over the course of the semester. As this was a performance-based class, we worked on modeling the rules (through improvisations, Theatre of the Oppressed exercises, or short TO forum theatre pieces) to create a habit of listening and responding rather than reacting. Also, because my students would be performing, some perhaps for the first time ever, respect for risk was essential to building a supportive and empathetic learning community. I asked my students to use phrases such as “It worked” or “It didn’t work” when providing feedback to peers rather than evaluative statements such as “I liked it” or “I didn’t like it.” Using new language reframes the mind, creating a different way of thinking that focuses on skills instead of subjective preferences or personal anxieties of judgment. With every first showing or in-class performance, I modeled a few responses so

students had a working example of how one can give helpful criticism without being harsh or mean. Thinking about how something *works* allowed students to see beyond what was performed or presented, to see possibilities rather than judgments, and to find supportive and constructive feedback for their peers. An embedded, long-play goal of this feedback practice was that over the course of the semester my students could then turn their constructive feedback approach toward their own work. Instead of comparing their work against a more experienced classmate's and condemning it as being of lesser worth, they could evaluate what worked or what needed more work.

Eliciting Empathy Through Course Materials (Required Texts)

One of the first “texts” I used in the class was facilitating “Complete the Image,” a Theatre of the Oppressed exercise that uses the skills of observation and interpretation. Two volunteers stand before the group (to thunderous applause for volunteering),¹⁸ shake hands, and then freeze. The group is then asked to share what they observe—quite literally what they see: two people, usually right hands grasped, one person leaning forward. Inevitably, a student will offer an interpretation. This is welcome as it allows the facilitator to start the discussion on the difference between observations and interpretations or assumptions. Once all observations are finished, then participants offer interpretations. Then the facilitator introduces the next step in this process. One of the volunteers is asked to step out while the other remains frozen, no longer shaking hands. The class is asked to let go of the image of the handshake and offer

¹⁸ The simple act of applause helps build love in the classroom, supporting individual students for taking a risk. Practicing introductions, volunteering for exercises, performing, and receiving feedback in front of the class? Applause!

new suggestions about what this person might be doing. What could this scene be about? What do they think is happening? There is more to the exercise, but the significance of this section of the exercise is that, without all the information, we make assumptions of what is going on based on our own backgrounds and experiences. We have no knowledge of the person's reality. The exercise is then related back to the elements of performance, underscoring that when the context is removed, the text of the performer is rewritten through the lenses and assumptions of the audience. Remember: "Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always."

Assigned texts for the course included the usual suspects in performance studies (Schechner, Turner, and Goffman) and others, including *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century* (2000). I also included Allan G. Johnson's *Privilege, Power, and Difference* (2006) to give us language and concepts of privilege and oppression and Dael Orlandersmith's *Black N Blue Boys / Broken Men*, a play that asks the audience to radically rethink empathy. It is easy to engage in what psychologist Martin L. Hoffman calls empathy bias, or empathizing with people who are like you and whose belief systems or actions are in line with your own.¹⁹ It is not necessarily as easy to empathize with those who differ from you, your moral compass, or your experiences. Rather than reducing characters to good or bad, Orlandersmith asks us to see her characters as complex, to take on the difficult task of seeing those who are easily dismissed and dehumanized and find compassion and understanding. We examined Anna Deavere Smith's TED Talks and recorded

¹⁹ Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 297.

performances so students could see and learn her ethnographic approach to telling other people's stories, observing her stepping carefully and respectfully into someone else's shoes. In addition, they learned that whose story is told, who tells it, and how it is told matter even more. (Thanks, *Hamilton*.) As part of our examination of Anna Deavere Smith's work, I also included a YouTube video in our assigned viewing materials: a high school performance of her play *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*.²⁰ I did this with the hope that if my students watched performers nearer their own age experience performing, they could imagine themselves stepping into someone else's shoes and telling their story.

Non-Content as Opportunities to Learn Class Concepts and Empathy

While my syllabus included a comprehensive schedule for the semester, it also included the words, "subject to change . . . not all activities are on the schedule." It gave me permission to take the time for seeming "non-content" that still contained important issues to discuss. As I was teaching a class of first-year students, I made sure to take time each week to check in: "How are you doing in your other classes? How are you adjusting? How is your roommate? Here's how to write an appropriate email. Let's talk plagiarism! And office hours are not scary."²¹ Since the first semester of college is filled with multiple liminal experiences, I wanted to provide space to reflect on those first-year experiences and to help my students to reframe them via performance with an eye for empathy. For example, when my students returned from

²⁰ The original video is no longer available, but the Bronx Acting Ensemble videos are worthwhile examples of young people performing *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*: <https://youtu.be/W434o88eFNo>.

²¹ Arizona State University has an effective and humorous YouTube video on "FOH: Faculty Office Hours": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQq1-_ujXrM.

fall break, I asked them to think about the experience of returning home: “What did you discover about your family when you went home? What role do you play in your family? What are the rituals of your family? Has your role changed? Do you have new rituals?” One student talked about returning reflexively to her role as “defender of Mom’s wishes” with her siblings and her frustrations about “having to play that role.” Another talked about how nothing had changed, how everyone was the same, and that their parents could not see how they were becoming someone new (crossing through Victor Turner’s liminal threshold). Another student talked about how going home helped her realize how she felt about her roommate—in fact, she had adopted new daily rituals from sharing space with her roommate and, in that way, “took her home” with her. Contextualizing their experiences with the concepts of performance gave students the opportunity to step outside of themselves and to see them in a larger framework of building, strengthening, or maintaining social bonds. Returning to the idea of empathy, of stepping into someone else’s shoes, I asked what they thought their family felt in having them home. What did the visit mean to them? What might it be like for them to see the student coming into their adulthood? Maybe Mom and Dad didn’t want them to change. Maybe that roommate wasn’t so bad. Consensus wasn’t 100 percent; empathy builds understanding, not necessarily agreement.

Assignments to Elicit Empathy

As this was a performance studies class, major assignments were performances—of self, of other, of the digital self, and then a final collaborative ensemble performance project that included ethnographic interviewing and performance of their classmates. The assignments

were designed to be reflexive between the self and the other and also reflective, contextualizing their experience through concepts they had learned over the course of the semester. One of my students referred to the entire semester as an experience of extreme exposure, referencing the title of one of our textbooks: “Dr. Shawna exposed us to different types of performance, but she was [also] exposing us to ourselves and others.”²²

Each performance required a reflective process paper on the experience of creating, the intentions of the performance, research, rehearsing, performing, and responding to a classmate’s performance. The performances themselves were low stakes. The rubric on physical presence and vocal clarity focused on skills, learning to be comfortable in front of an audience, and their ability to evaluate an oral presentation, which aligned with SUNY’s general education learning outcomes. However, I was more interested in students’ thoughts about the experience, including the connections they made between the reading material and their performance as well as between *their* stories and the stories of others. I was interested in their ability to step into someone else’s shoes, find compassion and connection, and to see the bigger picture, even if that bigger picture was contained within a room of twenty-three students in New York State.

“Start with the Known and Meet Them Where They Are”: Building Empathy through Performance of Self

My students’ first performance was a performance of self—telling the story of how they came to be who they were right then. In performing their own story, students were positioned

²² Student, THE106YA Student Learning Outcome #2 Assignment Description, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

as the experts of their own experiences and started from a stable position of knowledge. They already knew the characters, the story, and why they were sharing it with us. “What do you want us to know about you? Why is it important for us to know this about you?” Over the past fifteen years, I have been assigning a performance of self in my acting classes. It helps students find a way into performance, and, more importantly, it helps them to empathize with their classmates—to see each other as people with dimension and depth from the first week of class. This fall, Edward told the story of his given Korean name, Ui Yeon, which means “the meaning of nature.” He noted that in his parents’ generation the infant mortality rate was so high that names were not particularly significant, which is why his mother’s name means “third daughter” and why she, in turn, wanted him to have a special name. She wanted him to be like nature, to be natural, to be himself. He also noted that asking about the significance of one’s name is a sign of friendship, and from that point forward Edward became Ui Yeon in our class. We were building empathy.

As part of the creation/research process for their performance of self, students were required to interview a family member or someone who was involved in a life-changing “incident.” They were asked to write out the script of their story, rehearse, revise, rehearse, and then perform a two-to-four-minute monologue in class. One student wrote about interviewing her father for the assignment:

At the time I was unaware why I was getting so emotional at a story I had heard so many times. I guess I never truly understood how much my parents loved me. I don’t mean I thought they didn’t love me, I just mean I hear them say I love you so much and so I guess I’m used to it. But now that I am in college I don’t get to hear it every second of every day.²³

²³ Student, THE106YA Performance #1 Process Paper, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

Several other students noted in our debriefing session that they were so happy to talk to their family and friends from home. Some were clearly already feeling homesick, but others had not quite realized how much they missed home until the assignment. In addition to sharing their story with their classmates, the assignment offered an opportunity for students to reconnect with family or friends that they may not have talked to since leaving for college, reminding them that they were not alone, and support was just a phone call away.

“Help Them Understand Reasonable Expectations for Success”: Cultivating Empathy by Embracing Failures

At times, my students may see my love as tough love—engaging with difficult questions, asking each of them perhaps to fail in the process of answering them, yet reassuring them that failure is part of how we learn and supporting them fully in their failures. I often demonstrate failing (or “not it” solutions) so together we can learn from it. Beyond the structured solo performances of self and the other throughout the semester, students created in-class performances, including a fascinatingly silent but active performance art cell-phone/Snapchat “happening”²⁴ and a fall ritual around the campus pond. These assignments gave students the chance to apply what they learned into creating a group performance and then reflect as a group on what worked and where they could, to quote Samuel Beckett, “fail better.” These in-class exercises were intended to help my students move away from the idea and anxiety that a successful learning experience could only be connected to a good grade. We engaged in

²⁴ Happenings are performance art pieces that meet the five elements of performance (performer, audience, space, text, and context). They are not traditional scripted drama or improvised scenes. They emphasize audience-actor interactions and an improvised text that develops organically. Also, they are events and actions that seem to “just happen”—thus “happening.”

dialogue to discover where we might rethink or redesign our performances and projects. While the happening was a quickly devised piece that met all the requirements of a happening, the ritual was planned over the course of a week and purposefully scheduled for the day before fall break. It included a procession, costumes, and ritualized objects that they would release to let go of summer and embrace the fall. The ritual did not necessarily go as planned. Although there were elements that worked, the class decided that if they had rehearsed in the space they may have been more successful and could have adapted their ritual to its challenges. While we were discussing the structure and execution of their fall ritual, my students began creating their own ritual about leaving for fall break. They decided to go around the circle and share a gratitude for fall and what they were doing for break, and the whole thing ended with a song and a group hug—because it was a ritual. This meta-moment was not lost on my students either; they became quite aware that they were creating a ritual about creating a ritual because they were going to be away from each other for the first time since school started. Creating a new ritual out of their “failed” one gave them space to try again, but it also provided a place to voice and validate their thoughts and feelings and to give and receive good wishes from each other. I would like to think that, via a classroom environment where failure was part of learning, my students understood that a new ritual was not only possible, but encouraged.

“Create Opportunities to Help Them Learn to Communicate”: Telling Someone Else’s Story/Performance of Other

In *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching* (2002), James E. Zull argues that mimesis is a fundamental learning process of human beings and that we are hard-

wired in the brain to copy what we observe.²⁵ Mirror neurons engage when one performs an action, but also when one witnesses an action being performed. The neurons “mirror” the behavior of another and, along with the motor cortex of the brain, allow a performer to embody observed movements and speech patterns of another person. Out of this embodiment of a character, a performer develops an understanding about that person from how they move and speak to how they connect words and ideas together, which shapes how they interpret the world and their experiences. Mimesis both requires and elicits empathy. Bruce McConachie describes empathy in *Theatre and Mind* (2013) as a cognitive function of the brain “that allows one person to step into the shoes of another and experience that person’s world from his or her point of view.”²⁶ Students engaged in their own radical acts of empathy through two “performing the other” assignments. The first assignment asked them to select a solo piece from our anthology text that was unfamiliar to their own life experiences, perhaps concerning gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, citizen status, sexual orientation, or mental health. I was asking them to wrestle with their discomfort and respond to their own assumptions about difference and levels of comfort/discomfort with representation. What does it say when a young woman with white skin, long blond hair, and blue eyes performs the words of a middle-aged black woman who is portraying a young black girl who wants to be white with long blond hair? What are the texts that we write with our bodies in our performances?

The second assignment, as part of the final performance project, asked each of them to interview a classmate and then perform them, embodying them and representing their

²⁵ James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain: Enriching the Practice of Teaching by Exploring the Biology of Learning* (Sterling: Stylus, 2002), 195.

²⁶ Bruce McConachie, *Theatre and Mind* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 15.

experiences and perspectives to an audience. The final project itself was a group performance on how place shapes who you are. Each student used ethnographic interviewing techniques to interview a classmate, which we practiced in class. Through respectful dialogue and active listening techniques, students moved past assumptions *about* their classmates and into understanding *for* their classmates, moving from a passive judgment to active engagement with someone different from themselves. One student noted in their final paper that interviewing her classmate “was the best thing I ever done in my life,” as the assignment gave her the opportunity to get to know someone quite different from herself. The students represented their classmates with such care, far more care than they exercised toward their own personal monologues. In the talkback with the audience and in their individual reflective research papers, students mentioned that they felt a drive of respect and an obligation to represent their peers as best they could for the audience. Fourteen weeks prior, each student was a stranger to the other. Through the process of engaging in intentional acts of empathy in performance and in-class discussions, my students demonstrated a commitment and responsibility to represent their peers with care and respect—and trusted their peers to do the same.

“Have Real Discussions about Values, Responsibility, and Civility”: Walking the Talk of Empathy

The day after the 2016 presidential election was a heavy day, to say the least. Several faculty members simply canceled their classes. I wanted to provide a space for my students to voice their thoughts and feelings—to be heard, valued, and validated. A senior colleague emailed suggestions for how to talk about the election in class and engage in respectful

dialogue. I modified it a bit, but the basics included giving my students two index cards and asking them to write out their thoughts or feelings onto the card. They could write a word, a sentence, a paragraph, or whatever they needed to say. Some asked if they could rewrite what they had shared on social media already. Sure, why not? After ten to fifteen minutes, the cards began to collect on the floor in front of me. I shared with them how I was feeling, my concerns, and my fears for my friends, colleagues, students, and family. Then I asked them what I should do with the cards—did they want to help read them? I got a resounding and unanimous, “No.”

Before I began, I asked that we take a few long, deep breaths together to calm our minds and our hearts. Then I began reading each aloud, giving no single card more weight than the other. Some were more difficult to read, and there were lots of tears and sniffles and catchings of breath in the room. I realized that perhaps this was their first big “adult” moment—when you realize the world is not what you thought it was. So, in an act of empathy, I sat in for each student. Carrying the weight of their words, I came across a single “I voted for Trump” card. The reactions from my students were no different to this card from the one that read, “I’m scared.” I opened the floor to comments and questions, and several openly wept and voiced concerns for friends, family, and themselves. Others were frustrated and did not understand how an Electoral College win could usurp the popular vote. Then questions began about why someone would vote for Trump. We talked about values, we talked about privilege, and we talked about fear and xenophobia. My role in this conversation again was one of facilitator rather than discussion leader. Students asked each other questions; one noted, “I’m asking so that I can understand where you are coming from. I want to understand you.” Twenty-three people were having one of the most difficult conversations anyone could have,

and they were doing it with compassion and working toward understanding each other's perspectives, wanting to understand what it is to walk in the shoes of someone who thought, felt, valued, and maybe voted differently than they did.

Then the student who wrote "I voted for Trump" spoke. While he was not the only one in the room who voted for the Republican presidential candidate, he was the only one who wanted to openly discuss his choice and provide some context. He is an adopted son, originally from South Korea and raised in the rural North Country of New York state. He identifies strongly as an American, a New Yorker, and an outdoorsman, and he believes strongly in the Second Amendment. He talked about how difficult it was casting his vote—the last bubble he filled in on his ballot was for the president. He spent a long time weighing the decision and, in the end, he said, "I voted my values . . . but now, I regret my vote," meaning he voted party line and the values of the Republican Party, not necessarily those of Trump. Another student spoke up and said, "Don't regret your choice. If you regret it because you think you hurt me, don't. You made that choice from your heart. You voted your values. You didn't vote to hurt me." That moment made the entire semester worth it—empathy in everyday life. My students were engaging in radical empathy, that notion that, if we set aside our own hurt and "extend empathy to our opposition no matter what," we can achieve understanding.

A few of my students submitted our class discussion about the 2016 election as an "event" for assessment—an experience in their first-year seminar that they believed reflected their achievement of the learning outcome "successful engagement in an intellectual community." In their own words:

The attitude of the class shifted and we all were vulnerable at the same time . . . It was not demeaning nor was it confrontational . . . There was no judgment and

we spoke of politics . . . Personally, I am now more comfortable with my classmates. The reason I chose this specific situation to be the ideal engagement in an intellectual community was because . . . People spoke with conviction and believed what they said, but they were also willing to listen. It was not something we had to do for an assignment or put work into prior to speaking about it. This, by far, was the best experience.²⁷

In addition, another student wrote:

We came to class and all sat together discussing our beliefs. Not everybody in the class had the same beliefs, but everybody had a safe place to share their ideas. I got to listen to people who had different beliefs than me discuss their opinions, and I listened. I wasn't angry or upset with them, I wasn't planning my response, I was just listening to hear. It was one of the greatest discussions of my life, because I wasn't planning my responses. I was just listening.²⁸

Creating an environment of empathy and giving my students space to practice and participate in performances of radical empathy allowed them to engage in the interpersonal and public cultural conversations that matter. Their dialogue about the election and their desire for understanding demonstrated to me that all twenty-three of my students successfully completed both learning outcomes of the first-year seminar: understanding what it means to be a part of an intellectual community and “understanding of the value of diversity to the intellectual community of college life.”²⁹

Radical Conclusions

Intentionally employing radical empathy as a pedagogical strategy allowed me to create a strong learning environment where my students felt safe and supported to risk, fail, risk again, and thrive in terms of both performance and empathy. Students noted in their final

²⁷ Student, THE106YA Student Learning Outcome #2 Assignment Description, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

²⁸ Student, THE106YA Student Learning Outcome #2 Assignment Description, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

²⁹ Gordon and Kasper, “Teaching First Year Students,” 1.

reflection papers and assessment submissions that radical empathy allowed them to engage in active, constructive, and difficult dialogues with each other and to take risks in performances.

One student described how our use of empathy in the classroom shaped their final performance and the audience talkback that followed:

Our way of engaging with each other is in our talking circles and it allows us to exchange ideas in a civil and effective manner. One of the most significant parts of our final performance was the fact that we considered it a work-in-progress even as we were in front of an audience. Instead of making the assignment “do or die,” we made it an opportunity we can all learn from since we were still just trying to make progress. Because we looked at the performance from this mindset, we were able to have a meaningful talk-back [with our audience] Additionally, we were able to discuss how we’d move forward and improve our work if we had the time. We consistently have discussions that allow us to evaluate the work we’ve done and the progress we’ve made.³⁰

Over the course of the semester, my students learned how to engage their empathy and approach each other and their learning through that lens. Empathy helped them see learning is an ongoing process, not the product, which I believe helped them find their academic and personal success in the learning process rather than being tied to a grade or “getting it right.”

One student stated his most successful experience “was our final performance. For me it really engulfed everything that we as a class stood for.”³¹ Another described the final performance and our class as “a learning experience I am proud to be a part of.”³² Perhaps one of the most illuminating reflections about our final performance came from a student who described how performance elicited his empathy:

. . . this performance hit me more than any other reading or movie that I had in [the] recent 6 months. As Schechner said in his writing, “performance mark

³⁰ Student, THE106YA Final Performance Process Paper, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

³¹ Student, THE106YA Final Performance Process Paper, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

³² Student, THE106YA Final Performance Process Paper, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and tell stories.” (Schechner, 28) I could see it really mean it The final performance made me to realize my ignorance and indifference toward the social issues: the social disparity and diversity were not so far from me to find, but it was right next to me, and I was living with it.³³

Radical empathy allowed my students to interview and represent each other with respect and care because how you are represented and how you represent others matters. To me, that is a learning community: a group of engaged and empathetic learners. Having empathy is the foundation of our intellectual community on campus; it is how we achieve success, how we lift-off, and how we effect change on the micro-level, person-to-person, in the classroom.

³³ Student, THE106YA Final Performance Process Paper, SUNY Plattsburgh, Fall 2016.

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Appendix

Sample Performance Rubric

6-30 possible points	5	4	3	2	1
Time:	Meets minimum and maximum				Does not meet minimum/or exceeds maximum
Introduction	Introduction is clear and confident and contains all required elements (greeting, your name, title of piece).	Introduction is missing one of the required elements or lacks some confidence or clarity.	Introduction is missing one or more of the required elements and lacks some confidence or clarity.	Introduction is missing two or more of the required elements and lacks confidence and clarity.	There is no introduction.
Evidence of preparation	Performance is fluid and easy.	One or two errors, but still fluid.	Some choppiness and some lack of fluidity, needs more rehearsal.	Performance is choppy, many line errors, needs much more rehearsal.	No evidence of preparation.
Vocal expressiveness	Excellent use of vocal expression to convey meaning and emotion. Words are clear and easy to understand.	Strong use of vocal expression but needs work in one of the following areas: vocal variety, projection, or diction.	Acceptable use of vocal expression but needs work in two of the following areas: vocal variety, projection, or diction.	Difficult to understand or hear and lacking emotional expressiveness.	Trouble hearing or understanding words and is monotone, devoid of vocal expression.
Physical expressiveness	Specific choices are made as to how and when to move based on the performer's meaning and purpose.	General choices are made as to how and when to move the body based on the performer's meaning and purpose.	Some choices are made as to how and when to move/use the body, but some unmotivated or random movement.	Movement is choppy and feels unmotivated overall and/or does not relate to the performer's meaning and purpose.	Very little movement and/or movement that does not relate to the performer's meaning and purpose.
Connection to audience	Delivery is natural, confident, and enhances the performance; indicates a strong willingness to communicate.	Delivery is mostly natural, confident, and enhances the performance; indicates a willingness to communicate.	Delivery is somewhat natural and confident; however, some hesitancy is observed; indicates a general willingness to communicate.	Delivery seems generally effective; however, some hesitancy is observed; somewhat uncomfortable with audience and may lose audience's interest.	No connection to audience, no eye contact, may look at floor. Clearly uncomfortable with audience.

Sample Writing Rubric

Adapted from rubric from Dr. Suzanne Burgoyne, University of Missouri

1. Style (10 points)
 - Writing is clear, appealing, and unique (clear voice)
 - Writing has a hint of individuality or inspiration (moments of clear voice and unique ideas)
 - Writing is acceptable (meets the basic level of communicating information)
 - Writing is problematic (communication breakdown because . . .)
 - Unclear Lacks vitality Wordy
 - Awkward sentence structure

2. Ideas (10 points)
 - Ideas are engaging and provide insight to your process and perspective
 - Some good ideas; a few hints at your process and your perspective
 - Ideas are acceptable; documenting process, but not engaging in reflective thought
 - Insight does not go beyond the obvious; reaffirming goals stated in the assignment
 - Random or underdeveloped ideas (ideas are not connected or fleshed out)

3. Supporting evidence and arguments (10 points)

Support your ideas with examples or writing about your experience in detail—what did you think/feel, what were your reactions to the process and performance, and WHY?

 - Major points/perspectives are strongly and clearly justified (clear examples from your process or performance)
 - Major points/perspectives are supported acceptably (general examples or repeated same example for your major points)
 - Perspective or opinions are not always supported
 - Major points are unsupported (making claims without helping your reader understand how you got there)

4. Mechanics (diction, grammar, spelling) (10 points)
 - No errors
 - Some errors; see notes in paper
 - Multiple major errors; see notations in paper

5. Purpose (fulfillment of the assignment) (10 points)
 - Fulfilled the assignment in a creative and thoughtful manner
 - Fulfilled the assignment satisfactorily (content as well as length of assignment)
 - Fulfilled the assignment partially
(did not meet page minimum or did not fulfill the elements of the process paper assignment)
 - Made interesting use of concepts discussed in reading materials
 - Connected project to learning in other courses