Teaching as stand-up comedy: the metaphor of scripted and improvised performance of teaching

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Paper presented at SCUTREA, 33rd annual conference, University of Wales, Bangor, 1-3 July, 2003

Introduction
As part of a larger project investigating the relationships between teaching, learning and humour, this paper specifically examines the correspondence between being a teacher and a stand-up comedian. The assumption made is that the role of teacher remains critical to the learning process. Before we can engage with the analysis of the corresponding processes, there is an inevitable need to outline the theoretical framework being used. This involves a discussion of the discourse of performance and performativity – indeed, this is essentially a meta-discourse. Rooted in Goffman’s symbolic interactionism, who focused attention on the use of the metaphor of theatre in sociological theory from the late 1950s, the focus is on performance. By the 1990s, sociological theory under the influence of post-modernism had shifted its discourse to focus on performativity. Given the confines of word space this will be a necessarily brief excursion into the discourse. This is sufficient to establish that performativity itself has different origins and meanings. I will follow the suggestion found in social geography that performativity re-establishes links to the theatre - no longer a metaphor for everyday life, but in its performative sense, a social setting in which, it is argued, critical pedagogy takes place.

Whilst word constraints are a disadvantage, an advantage of a pre-constructed conference paper is that it does not have to do all the work. Instead it provides the essential background to the performance of presenting the conference paper. You may have been attracted to this paper as its title promises a humorous diversion. Not so. There is very little space in the paper to do much more than substantiate the theoretical position around performativity. But it will be in the performance of the presentation of the conference paper that the analysis will take place through the use of actual examples of stand-up comedy, and invite us to reflect on the performance of teaching and stand-up comedy and consider implications for critical pedagogy.

Performance and Performativity: a meta-discourse

Erving Goffman’s sociological predecessors from the mid-nineteenth had been using the language of the theatre to assist understanding of social life, particularly ‘role’ (especially in the discourse of Functionalism, stemming from Durkheim) and ‘actor’ (Social Actionism, stemming from Weber). The idea of individuals performing roles was particularly comfortable for Goffman’s contemporary Functionalists such as Merton and Parsons. What was significant was that role was a social performance, necessary for us to all to learn to play for social order and thereby for society itself to persist. It had little to do with individuals’ sense of self or identity – they were social beings, and - to use a more contemporary language – almost entirely socially constructed through socialisation. By the time Goffman was conceptualising the world, the influence of psychology from which sociologists had kept their distance, was beginning to be felt on the periphery of the discipline in the domain of social psychology, and within that, a new world view that had been emerging since the 1930s, that came to be known as symbolic interactionism, heavily influenced by the writings of Mead and Cooley.

Goffman’s contribution to this new world view was immense, but here we can only focus on his recognition of the theatrical discourse found in sociological analysis, and his attempts in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life to take the metaphor and push it to it is limits. Taking seriously Shakespeare’s assertion that ‘all the world’s a stage’, Goffman extended the dramaturgical analogy: role, audience, front-stage, back-stage, on- and off-stage, props, costumes, cues, routines, scripts and, of course, performance. Goffman used performance to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his (sic) continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. (Goffman, 1969, 32)

This paper has a particular interest in the difference between scripted and improvised performance. Goffman’s use of the dramatic metaphor has something to say about the significance of scripted performance in defining the situation.

… almost anyone can quickly learn a script well enough to give a charitable audience some sense of realness in what is being contrived before them. And it seems this is so because ordinary social intercourse is itself put together as a scene is put together, by the exchange of dramatically inflated actions, counteractions, and terminating replies. Scripts even in the hands of unpractised players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. (Goffman, 1969, 78)

The issue about scripts is how far our performances are already determined for us, leaving little room for the expression of our own identity. We can always hide behind the mask, and distance our sense of self from the role. We are only playing a role. When we watch a scripted drama it does matter who is playing the role – there is always a strong element of interpretation of the role and script when acted out in the performance. Similarly, as we shall see, improvisation is not totally unscripted; it follows conventions and is recognisable as improvised theatre or comedy.

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Goffman concluded his book on *The Presentation of Self* in a playful way. For having spent some time developing and justifying the ‘dramatic metaphor’, he said:

> The claim that all the world’s a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, and knowing that at any time they will be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously (Goffman, 1969, 246)

Goffman stated that an action staged in a theatre is ‘a relatively contrived illusion’, because, he says, ‘nothing real or actual can happen to the performed characters’. But then crucially added that ‘although at another level of course something real and actual can happen to the reputation of the performers qua professionals whose everyday job is to put on theatrical performances’ (Goffman, 1969, 246). He used the metaphor of scaffolding to suggest that the dramatic metaphor is merely useful to ‘build other things with, and should be erected with an eye to taking it down’. Goffman was not concerned with the drama of social life, but with understanding life as a structure of social encounters. He wanted to argue that in theatre, there are ‘contrived characters’ being acted out, without ‘real consequences’, but ‘successful staging ... involves the use of real techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations’ (Goffman, 1969, 247).

What Goffman was pointing to here is the difference between performance and performativity. The idea of performativity emerged some 30 years or more after Goffman originally wrote *The Presentation of Self* in 1959, primarily out of the postmodern challenge to sociological analysis. Much of the impetus for the emphasis on performativity has come from Judith Butler’s work (1990, 1997) whose radical conceptualisation of gender as performance has enhanced the critique of the idea that gender differences are ‘natural’, and that gender identities are fixed. Gender is constituted through performance – the *doing* of gender. The shift is represented in the idea that ‘you are not wearing a dress because you are a woman; you are a woman because you are wearing a dress’. This captures performativity in contradistinction to expressivity. Importantly, Butler – influenced, in part, by Foucault – recognised that speech is action, and the importance of language and discourse in performance. Identity formation is inscribed by the reiterative (performatve) and regulatory power of discourses. Performativity is that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names.

Butler’s work on the compulsory performances of gendered identities has been critiqued and extended by social theorists and has contributed significantly to the popularity of performativity across the humanities and social sciences. In an interview with the journal *Radical Philosophy* in 1994 (reprinted in Woodward, 1997, 235-238), the interviewers (Peter Osborne and Lynn Segal) suggest that Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was popular because it proposed the idea that gender is ‘a kind of improvisational theatre, a space where different identities can be more or less freely adopted and explored at will’. However, in *Bodies that Matter*, the parallels with improvised theatre are less clear, as Butler strengthens her argument that we cannot just voluntaristically construct or deconstruct gender identities. In her reply, Butler warns of the dangers of making the example of ‘drag’ that she used as an example of performativity to show the possibilities of transgressive performance, paradigmatic. Drag is not a paradigm for the subversion of gender. In this sense she is close to Goffman’s position on the social reality of dramatic performance. For her, the problem of drag is that it is parody – and parody is resignification, not subversion. The debate about parody and performativity in Butler’s work is developed by Lloyd (1999).

The focus on the distinction between performance and performativity is helpful for the theoretical clarification of this paper, enabling Goffman’s dramatic metaphor to be modernised. And we can take it further. Inevitably the idea of performativity has several representations depending on the theoretical perspective from which it is formed. Whilst Butler’s view has taken shape through feminism, there are other theoretical possibilities. For example, Cowen in his examination of performativity in the university is clearly rooted in postmodernity, using Lyotard’s notion of performativity to ‘denote the discourse of business and management’ (Cowen, 1996). The version that I identify with is outlined by two social geographers, Donna Houston and Laura Pulido. They make a case for thinking about performativity as a form of embodied dialectical praxis via a discussion of the ways in which performativity has been recently understood in geography.

Turning to the tradition of Marxist revolutionary theatre, we argue for the continued importance of thinking about the power of performativity as a socially transformative, imaginative, and collective political engagement that works simultaneously as a space of social critique and as a space for creating social change. (Houston and Pulido, 2002, 401).

Although the trope of performativity has provided a necessary corrective to formulaic notions of identity and resistance, we also feel that there is an urgent need to reconnect performativity to historical materialism and collective social action. Indeed, we argue that, despite providing many useful and imaginative insights, poststructural and postmodern theories of performativity, although often claiming to be about the everyday practices of ordinary people, have become increasingly abstract. (Houston and Pulido 2002, 402).

From the perspective of this paper, the emphasis on performance as dialectical practice demonstrates the importance of thinking about cultural politics and performance from a radical materialist perspective. In their study of the performatve strategies employed by food service workers at the University of Southern California, their use of the tradition of radical theatre grounded in Marxist theory and practice (Brecht, Boal and Valdez) to consider performance as an ‘oppositional, critical, and collective form of political and social action’ enables us to consider the performativity of teachers as ‘a dialectical operative that makes connections between labour, work, and the practices associated with the material production of everyday life and with imaginative work as a means of engaging in political action and resistance’.

**Teaching as performance and the performativity of teaching**

Although Goffman used other professionals as examples in supporting the dramatic metaphor, teachers did not figure significantly in his analysis. Yet, the metaphor can be applied to the teaching context. The setting is typically (though not always) a defining feature. The
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People think of good and bad teachers as engaged in the same activity, as if education was substance, and that bad teachers supply a little of the substance, and good teachers supply a lot. This makes it difficult to understand that education can be a destructive process, and that bad teachers are wrecking talent, and that good and bad teachers are engaged in opposite activities. … It was only by luck that I had a brilliant art teacher … It wasn’t so much what he taught, as what he did. For the first time in my life I was in the hands of a great teacher. … When I gave workshops, I see people frantically scribbling down the exercises, but not noticing what it is I actually do as a teacher. (Johnstone 1981, pp.16, 18, 29)

Here we have a teacher of improvisation talking about his experiences of teaching and learning. This reminds us immediately that when talking about the metaphor of stand-up comedy, we should not make it paradigmatic. For here we have a reflection on performativity of teaching performance. What does Johnstone actually do? He plays ‘low status’, he takes ‘the blame for failure’, makes positive comments as far as possible, and as directly as possible, as well as physically placing himself lower than the students by sitting on the floor in his effort to dissipate fear and dissolve the ‘normal teacher-student relationship’. This, he believes, is not only essential for effective teaching, but for successful improvisation and in their relation to the audience. The literature on learning to become a stand-up comedian is dominated, as in teaching, by the performance techniques, but in a number of publications there are also analyses of performativity (Double, 1997; Goldberg 1991, Greenbaum, 1999; Roberts, 2000, Rutter, 2000; Sankey, 1998). Of which there will be off-stage and out of costume they can still be in role displaying the ‘appearance’ and ‘manner’ of teachers) and the audience (the students) becomes a defining characteristic of what is identified as a learning event.

There is an additional feature of performance identified by Goffman which is worth dwelling on. If all else fails to indicate an appropriate setting, the teacher in role gives the impression of being a teacher through appearance, which may include a ‘mask’, or the ‘personal front’ of the teacher. Goffman used this idea to refer to what he calls the ‘expressive equipment’, those ‘items that we most intimately identify with the performer’, and that which performers will take with wherever they go to perform, and those which contribute to the ‘appearance’ of being a teacher. This, of course, has an interesting relationship with identity. For whilst some features of appearance may be transitory and changeable, others will be relatively more fixed, and do include discourse (language and vocabulary), as well as voice, facial expressions and body posture. Taken from Robert Park, Goffman lingered on the significance of the mask to ‘represent the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be’ as a ‘person’ (which in its earliest meaning is a mask).

The important point for Goffman was that this front, and its associated appearance and manners, its scenery and props, already exist. They are not defined by the individual: when an actor takes on an established social role (such as teacher) the front has already been established, and the actor must both acquire the front to perform the role, whilst maintaining the front itself (Goffman, 1969, 37). It is scripted. The construction of what it means to be a teacher and to perform teaching is a social process, negotiated through social interaction, consistent with the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

There has been surprisingly little analysis of teaching as performance. One exception is Sarason who begins his discussion of teaching as a performing art on the basis of hearsay evidence from ‘more than a few’ teacher colleagues who apparently said ‘Teachers are actors. We perform’. (Sarason, 1999, xi). There is no evidence that he has been influenced by Goffman’s dramatic metaphor. Indeed, he is at pains to distinguish teaching from show business. Yet, he begins with a discussion of the artists performing for an audience, and describes a range of contexts in which the artists perform, including concert halls, where ‘conductors are professors’ (an illustration of expressivity rather than performativity). Teaching as artistry. The origins of Sarason’s views on teaching stem from Dewey, and in particular the ‘passion’ of teaching, drawing on Garrison’s (1997) analysis of wisdom and desire in the work of Dewey. His metaphor is less dramatic and more artistic.

In this paper, the metaphor is neither dramatic nor artistic, but specifically comedic. How far can we utilise the distinction between performance and performativity to consider the processes of stand-up comedy and draw parallels with the teacher in critical pedagogy?

References


Stand-up comedy is a comedy art form performed in front of a live audience. As a result, feedback is one of the main features of this type of comedy, since the show receives an immediate response from the audience. Ideally, the response is a continuous stream of laughter. However, if the audience is not pleased, they can show their disappointment by booing or whistling at the performer. Also live stand-up comedy performance has many venues in London. More alternative Stand Up improvised, theatrical or cinematic has also become popular in America, Britain and Europe (McIlvenny 1989). In Chile, the peak of this type of humour started in 2005 with the TV program “SCA” (Sociedad de Comediantes Anónimos) in which their participant criticised various aspects of Chilean society. Improvised stand up is a comedy format where each comedian gets a list of topics that they have never seen before, revealed to them one by one as they are on stage. The audience and the comedian see the topics for the first time, at the same time. The comedian acts as if these topics are their own notes about the jokes they planned to tell that night, and consequently improvise an entire stand up set. It is high pressure, surprising, hilarious way to incorporate improvisation into an art form that is usually pre-written, prepared, and rehearsed (even if it doesn’t appear that way!). When I got

*This document was added to the Education-line database on 26 June 2003*