

Teaching as Provocation: Using Backward Design and Blogging to Engage Students in Discovery and Reflection

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Summary:

Incorporating reflective student blogs in a course redesign of Movement I gave students a particularly engaging personal space to make connections between in-class activities and course themes, and to reflect on their own development.

BACKGROUND

An actor's instrument is herself; body, imagination, voice, emotions, intellect and spirit. Movement training is designed to explore the unique challenges that are faced by the actor in terms of developing that instrument as an artistic vehicle. Movement I: The Acting Instrument (TH 213) is designed to be taken as an introductory movement class in an acting sequence, following Acting I and adjacent to Voice and Speech I. It is a required course for the B.G.S. degree with an acting emphasis but not for the B.A. in Theatre.

The course is a prerequisite for more advanced movement classes and might easily be transferred as such to a professional training program in acting. The maximum of 16 students are an eclectic mix of abilities, ranging from freshmen to seniors. They are largely theatre majors, although vocal performance majors are increasingly becoming a significant population. A very small number of the students will go on to careers in the theatre, and sometimes students from other disciplines entirely will seek permission to enroll.

I teach this course every semester and had become troubled by the feeling that I had become less effective, not more effective, in the classroom with time. It seemed that most of my students were not visibly demonstrating the results I had hoped, and my evaluation responses were often less than positive. Was this simply a function of accumulated changes I had made in response to my own research, as well as to student comments? Was it my own failure in and out of the classroom to provide meaningful scaffolding upon which they could build? Or, was it due an understandable variation in the level of talent and skill development made inevitable by the lack of homogeneity about when in their four-year program students took my course and by the fact that there are no required prerequisites to a student declaring a theatre major? Finally, were there ways in which the students might grasp the principles intellectually at a higher level than they were able to demonstrate physically?

My efforts at responding to student criticisms had resulted in adopting a more practical, skill-based approach in the hope of helping the students to be able to *apply* the principles more quickly and tangibly. What I found, however, was that the students were unable to apply the principles without further immersion, simply acquiring more basic skills. I also knew from self-evaluative writing assignments that in many cases the students were gaining understanding that surpassed their visible development. In some cases, though, neither kind of learning was clear. I hoped that attending CTE's Best Practices Institute (BPI) would allow me the reflective space

and guidance to make changes to the course that would improve student learning and my own sense of confidence and authority.

Through BPI, I established these goals:

- Use backward design to re-design the readings and classroom activities
- Develop assignments that would reveal learning
- Revisit the grading criteria
- Develop greater technical proficiency with Blackboard

IMPLEMENTATION

Backward design

In redesigning this course, I began, with Dan Bernstein's prompting, to narrow my course goals down to five that encompassed fundamental principles of movement that could then be referenced continually over the course of the semester. During the process, I discovered that I had been trying to squeeze four semesters' worth of training into one and, in doing so, had sacrificed clarity and simplicity.

Ultimately, I decided to focus on three over-arching goals for the course:

1. Freedom is essential to the development of technique and discipline.
2. The actor must create an uncommon, finely tuned conscious awareness of him/herself as a psycho-physical being.
3. Engaging in the creative process with its element of the unknown is fundamental to the artist's development.

These goals tackle the students' need to free the body, the voice, the entire acting instrument. Through freedom and movement, actors (and acting students) absorb the psychological qualities of the movement. The skill the actor has is the ability to repeat this discovery as an inner thing that the body and the self can follow. I realized that students could begin to develop the tools necessary to apply their knowledge as a reliable technique to becoming a theatre artist by engaging in classroom activities that involved plunging into the unknown.

After outlining these fundamental goals, I asked myself if in grading there were actual guidelines I could develop about characteristics that seemed to me highly subjective? It seemed important to separate the students' creative doing from evaluation, because how could I encourage my students to take risks and explore if I was positioned as a judge of their efforts? I tried to look for what things could reveal this basic physical and creative freedom and consciousness: flexibility, fluidity, poise, grounded-ness, responsiveness, focus, and energy.

The challenge that continued to emerge was in differentiating the goals of professional actor training from what might actually be achievable in a class that met twice a week for two hours to an eclectic student body unlikely to be receiving the reinforcement of voice and acting classes simultaneously. Dan encouraged me to develop specific language for the characteristics that I would look for: Were they poised? Were their bodies becoming flexible and free? Were they engaged? Had they developed embodied "presence"? Could they relate to an image and let the image transform what it is they did and how it is was they felt? Could they then apply the tools they had learned with small pieces of text? Would grading then be heavily weighted toward class performance, creativity, progress and cognitive understanding? Were there other ways that significant learning could be demonstrated other than performance?

Utilizing backward design, I began redesigning my course by beginning with the desired end and working from there, rewriting the course objectives for the syllabus in an effort to narrow them down. Then, I faced the challenge of selecting classroom activities from innumerable possible pathways, simplifying assignments and activities as much as possible. I chose fewer things, focused on activities that had had impact in the past, and on doing them earlier in the semester.

In an effort to reinforce course themes through other instructor's voices and alternative artistic experience, I organized a guest lecture with Janet Hamburg from Dance and a pair of field trips to the Spencer Museum of Art. During those field trips, we attended a lecture discussion in the Print Room on gesture facilitated by Kate Meyer, and subsequently visited the main collection with Celka Straughn, Director of Academic Programs, who focused on three-dimensional works of art in the same theme.

Next, I chose readings that would support the course goals, or possibly introduce some of the goals through someone else's voice. Planning out the readings, I worked to align them with the newly designed course goals. In keeping with the idea of doing less but going deeper, most of the other readings were iterations or reiterations in some other form of the same themes. In order to really know that the students had read the readings, I found that it helped to come up with three specific questions for them to answer as homework. This made a big difference in the class's ability to discuss the readings and eliminated the dead silence, even among the prepared students, generated by the question, "What did you think?"

Reflective writing/blogging

In many areas of learning, the goal is visible long before the skill catches up. An important issue that seemed to surface for me every semester of the Movement I course was the challenge of evaluating students' intellectual learning that they were as yet unable to demonstrate as physical skills and how to weigh each element in a student's final grade. In the Best Practices workshop, we talked about reflective writing as a tool that wasn't something that necessarily needed to be graded every time it was turned in, but would have an overall cumulative effect.

In past offerings of Movement I, I had students turn in a "journal" each week with less than satisfactory results. This semester, I decided to set up their reflective writings as personal blog spaces on Blackboard which, incidentally, began the process of achieving one of my other goals: greater technical proficiency. I had realized that in order to improve course organization and the quality of assignments, and to give students more timely feedback and better access to grades, I needed to increase my utilization of Blackboard tools. With the invaluable aid of Doug Golick from IDS, I added some important Blackboard functions, including individual student blogs that replaced the weekly journals.

Each week, the students were required to write in their blog on Blackboard. Each blog was due before the first class of the week. In their blogs, they wrote about the assignments and work we had done the previous week. Generally, I would provide them with specific questions to spur their writing. These prompts asked them to describe what we did in class and then to reflect on those assignments and activities. Since the blog function on Blackboard displays all of a student's blog posts together in a single space, the students could easily scroll through their previous posts each time they added to their blog. This set-up allowed them to do the critical thinking work of responding each week and to also go back and revisit what they had done throughout the semester.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Student reflective writing

Click [here](#) for a sample of student reflective writing blog responses.

Novice

Novice entries often included only descriptions or judgments about students' experience, such as "I liked it" or "This was fun." In my comments to these entries, I asked the students to add to this by making a connection to the art of acting or performance, to derive a generalized statement about acting principles, or to apply this experience to something particular outside of the classroom. In a novice entry, thoughts were not typically attached to a description of students' reasoning or process for arriving at that thought. For example, the student might write, "It was overwhelming if you ask me," but not continue on to explain how or why it was that way.

Novice blog entries were often very short, and novice writers made factual errors about course readings.

Developing

In the developing entries, students more thoroughly answered the prompt questions. The descriptions of in-class experience were detailed and extensive. Students at this level began to articulate connections between in-class exercises and out-of-class readings, and to discuss the larger principles and themes of the class, though these were not elucidated in a highly articulate fashion. Although an attempt has been made to find some entries that fit into this category, very often the student entries were either Novice or Advanced.

Advanced

While the blogs are an informal writing space, the advanced students had a greater sense of clarity and articulation of the ideas in their writing. These entries were often detailed and extensive, but more importantly advanced students both generalized and particularized the course concepts. In the advanced writing, students extended the course concepts beyond the work that had already been done in class. For example, rather than just describing an activity, an advanced entry would also describe when this skill or exercise could be useful again in the future, projecting the work ahead rather than just reflecting on the past. Advanced entries often also included a description of how students had developed in their understanding of an idea over time, beginning with where they started and describing their own development. Finally, advanced students described particular instances where they applied a course concept outside of the confines of the course, perhaps in another class, or in another performance setting. In these instances, the students were describing their application of the concepts and becoming their own teachers, using the tools they had acquired.

General notes

In all three levels of performance, students posed questions, but the type and content of the questions was different as student understanding increased. At the novice level, questions pointed out in a very general way what the student "didn't get." The developing question could more particularly describe the concept or aspect of an idea that the student was wrestling with.

Advanced blog entries articulated the question more precisely, often describing the potential interpretations the student could conceive.

My experience was that the student writing did not develop or change much over the course of the semester, so students whose first entries were novice continued to write novice-level entries throughout the course; likewise for developing and advanced students.

Finally, it is an ongoing concern of mine that these writing assignments, including the final self-evaluation, may somehow be manipulating me into mistaking descriptions of effort and learning for the actual thing itself.

The class grade distribution is as follows:

A: 6

A-: 7

B: 2

I hoped that these grades were a reflection of greater clarity of expectation and better planning, and to a certain extent I think they were. However, in the interest of full disclosure, the semester immediately following showed far wider grade distribution.

REFLECTIONS

During BPI, Dan and others encouraged us to begin with one small change in our course. Focusing on backward design revealed a number of deficiencies to which the reflective writing, redesigned course assignments, and grading adjustments all tried to respond. I, not surprisingly, found that I couldn't achieve all the goals I had set for myself, particularly with regard to solving the grading problem in a satisfying way. Luckily, I was blessed in this semester by a superb group of highly motivated, talented and intelligent students who made the usually painful process of grading relatively simple and straightforward. I would still like to refine measuring tools such as performance rubrics to better assess demonstrable acquisition of skill for future semesters.

However, some innovations were surprisingly effective and useful. The visits to the Spencer Museum of Art were extremely popular with the students and demonstrated the far-reaching nature of learning, giving the students an opportunity to make connections between Movement class and the instrument of an actor, and other forms of art. Certain combinations of readings, classroom activities, and assignments also seemed to shore up course goals. One assignment in particular turned out to be both effective and popular, since it utilized a BPI tool of providing a visual example of classroom goals to stimulate discussion and learning (see Rickman prompt in Student Work: Reflective Writing in Blackboard Blogs).

The reflective writing turned out to be an invaluable tool. As a result, I increased its weight in grading the following semester. Initially, the goal was to help the students frame what we were doing in class. The blogs were a way of getting them looking at the acting process, asking them to make the connections between the larger goal of acting, and the things we do in movement class that may or may not look like acting. It was set up to be a conversation with themselves, as well as with me, a dialogue about what *they come to think*. This process of critical thinking, connecting the dots, is ideally teaching the student that, contrary to popular assumptions, we write and speak in order to find out what we think, and not necessarily the other way around. The writing assignments also gave the students another way to demonstrate their progress, since some students who are articulate and responsible are not as advanced in the classroom. Conversely, there are always those who are brilliant in the classroom but do not possess academic discipline or skills.

Over the course of Movement I, we don't produce a body of material in the same way other types of classes do. Often the two hours fly by and there is a lot of activity, but at the end of the semester it can be difficult, for me as well as the students, to take inventory of what we have accomplished. The blog entries created a piece of evidence for the work that we did each week in class. The reflective writing was also a means of underscoring academic rigor in a studio class as a part of the liberal arts mission. Our department believes strongly that artists need to be articulate, as well as skillful and expressive.

The blogs also became a point of reference for the students when they were making connections between isolated exercises or readings, and linking them with the course's larger themes and the application to acting. In fact, the display format of the blogs in Blackboard encourages this comprehensive perspective, since all of the semesters' previous entries are published below the most recent entry. Each time students add to their blogs, they see the visible accumulation of

their work up to that point. The blogs also became a way to document students' progress in their level of understanding and in the types of questions they were posing, and the connections and applications they were making. The final blog entry, a self-evaluation assignment, also encouraged the students to consider this long view of the semester's work, asking them to begin their self-evaluation by reviewing their blogs before writing.

Finally, blogging seemed to engage the students more deeply and consistently than the standard word document. Perhaps ownership increased because blogging possesses a certain glamour. Also, the blogging space was truly their own; I quite literally could not write directly in that space, even when I wanted to. Although copying and pasting their writing into my comments added under their posts was often frustrating and time-consuming, the students had a greater sense of ownership over their reflections, and an increased sense of importance since I had to quote them in my response rather than write on, over, or next to their writing.

The reflective writing prompts also served to underscore the themes of the course established by the backward design, including that of engaging in the creative process. One of the readings we did was by Natalie Goldberg, a writer who writes on the creative process (primarily of writing). One of her numerous insights is that an artist must be able to work separately as both a creator and then as an editor. Goldberg explains that the editor cannot be present all of the time, but must allow the creator part of the artist to work, and then enter in, understanding what the creator can and has done and where there is room for improvement. So, for the Movement I students, the reflective blogging gave them an opportunity to see that it is the creator who comes to class and jumps into the unknown, and it is the editor who talks or writes about the experience afterwards and is able to put it in this frame.

In some sense, the structure of the course, with in-class experiences and reflection afterward is a reiteration of the creative process, which is in itself part of the course goals. I can't, as the professor, proscriptively tell students step-by-step what they as individual artists need to do. Instead, they need to start by jumping in the pool. This is a whole new way of learning for most of my students, but once they try it, they find they love it.

In the future, I would like to meet midway through the semester one-on-one with each student. Though this represents an enormous time commitment, I believe that the individual feedback, formed against the backdrop of classroom activity and assignments, may help each student to take more ownership of her own progress. I would also like to continue to expand my technical proficiency and provide students with more examples of professional goals.