CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Creating more dangerous safe-spaces: A performative remedy for classroom solipsists?
Authors	Swakopf, Benjamin
Publication date	2016
Original Citation	Swakopf, B. (2016) 'Creating more dangerous safe-spaces: A performative remedy for classroom solipsists?', Scenario: A Journal of Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, X(2), pp. 82-87. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.10.2.7
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/scenario.10.2.7
Rights	© 2016, The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
Download date	2026-11-16 19:25:36
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/12703



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

ISSN 1649-8526
Scenario
Language • Culture • Literature
Volume 2016 · Issue 2
http://scenario.ucc.ie

Student Voices

Creating more dangerous safe-spaces: A performative remedy for classroom solipsists?

Benjamin Swakopf

Abstract: Although it is now common practice for universities to mandate formal accommodations for students with disabilities, newer calls have been issued by those like Price (2011), who hope to see educators do more. This would involve implementing less formal accommodations for students who might find it difficult to navigate academic "norms" both inside and outside of the classroom. Here I give a brief interpretation of how some of these suggestions might be counterproductive and offer performative pedagogy as a potential solution for several of the problems raised. Specifically, the way that drama forces students outside of themselves while allowing them to hide behind fantastical roles can create a classroom atmosphere that is actually safer – and more vibrant – than before. The following observations derive from personal course journals written while enrolled in the course: *College German Teaching* at Indiana University during the Fall of 2016. The course, designed especially for Associate Instructors (AIs) during their first semester of teaching, comprises an overview of language teaching methodology up to and emphasizing post-method approaches like Performative Pedagogy. The various classroom goals were explored and approached by means of discussion, teaching-demos, classroom observations and in-class performances.

1 Navigating kairotic spaces – what are they, exactly?

"I worry more and more that we are creating an atmosphere where our students can remain in their own little worlds." Although I cannot remember my exact turn-of-phrase, this approximates what I scribbled down on my notecard and tacked on the wall during our unit on *Individual Differences and Classroom Diversity*. It was nearing the end of the semester and each of us were instructed to prepare for a lively discussion of one chapter from Price's (2011) *Mad at School. Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life.* My comment, casually hanging next to several others under the heading "Doubts/Questions," was in fact more sharply directed toward some suggestions in the article we had read

Copyright © 2016 the author[s]. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.10.2.7

and not toward my colleagues, who were co-participants in the course and fellow associate instructors – I didn't dare to think any of my compatriots would be guilty of such a thing.

Price, in her chapter titled "Presence, Participation, and Resistance in Kairotic Space," attempts to push back against what she deems overly "rationalist" assumptions in both theory and praxis as they relate to classroom accommodations. The claim is that we, as educators and theorists, tend to only consider formal accommodations for students with various disabilities (e.g. note-takers, extra time on exams, captions on videos, Braille and large-print handouts, and the presence of a sign interpreter), but continuously neglect what else could be "offered for the student who is earnestly participating, but in ways that do not fall into the [...] pattern of classroom discussions and activities" (Price 2011: 59).

Crucial for discussing these patterns of classroom activities is the notion of a "kairotic space," which designates those "less formal, often unnoticed areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (ibid. 60). While this spans experiences ranging from formal classroom discussions to conversations during office-hours to casual interactions in the hallway between teacher and student, the key component for Price is the "pairing of spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact" (ibid. 61). Furthermore, each of these kairotic spaces involve certain expectations – those classroom "norms" which more rationalist-oriented educators will leave largely unspoken, unchallenged, and unchalleng*eable*. When these expectations are either left unstated or constructed too rigidly, a proportion of students will inevitably find it difficult to navigate their way to "appropriate" participation. It then becomes our job, as instructors, to diffuse as many aspects of the kairotic space as we can – or is it? We can now finally turn again to my initial worry, still hanging there on the wall next to other notecards with concerns about mandatory attendance policies and rowdy students. Where are both "rationalist" norms and these new non-formal accommodations leading our classrooms, and more importantly, our students? Hopefully not *just* back around to themselves.

2 That old cellular "bête noire" and problems with participation

Embedded within a broader consideration of how classroom participation can be assessed, Price stresses that a given teacher's "experiences of 'rudeness' might ... [actually] be a student participating in a way that performs, or attempts to accommodate, her own mental disability" (ibid. 74). Included in this discussion (and what initially provoked my own reaction) was the suggestion that instructors specifically rethink their immediate perceptions of cellphone-use in the classroom. While we might think that the students pulling out phones in class are those most bored, most uninterested in the topic at hand, perhaps that isn't the case. "The cellphone might represent not 'incivility'

but any one of a number of strategies to enhance participation, including an attempt to diffuse the stress of sitting quietly in a classroom in the first place" (ibid. 75). Although I would be willing to grant this possibility on a case-by-case basis (though my limited observations of my own students seem to corroborate the typical narrative – boredom, technology addictions – rather than the latter suggestion), how one handles this issue in the individual classroom and the educational system at large adopts a much wider significance. If the suggestion is that we then strive to lower the stress-factor of our classrooms in order to compensate for a typically high-stakes atmosphere – great! If, however, the suggestion is that we perhaps allow our students to engage in this specific type of coping mechanism, then I do happen to worry more and more about the message we are sending students.

I was relieved to hear my instructor say, in a follow-up discussion of classroom diversity and accommodations, that in class we are trying to bring our students "up to the edge of their comfort zones." This gets to the exact concern that I am raising, as most of the time I would go farther to say "bring our students *past* the edge of their comfort zones." A lot of the measures we discussed from the article – opening up non-face-to-face venues for student meetings, allowing cell phones in class, holding office hours via Skype – should be legitimately considered, and one can find helpful suggestions about other possible "complementary spaces" in the last few pages of Price's chapter. However, in many cases I believe that their implementation might only lead to more solipsism among the student body. As far as high-stakes "kairotic spaces" go, talking with a professor face-to-face can be one of the most difficult ones to navigate. But what are we actually telling students and teaching them (especially in terms of developing competences beyond the rudiments of grammar and vocabulary as emphasized by approaches like Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences*[1]) by encouraging them to communicate only from behind a screen? While many facets of life seem to be shifting to accommodate this trend, entering potentially high-stress situations and coming out unscathed is a part of daily life and functioning as a human in society – *especially* when learning a foreign language and going to test it out with a native speaker. While conversations with a professor may have more immediate chance for professional/academic impact, I can remember few moments more stressful and high-stakes than my own experiences abroad as a foreign language learner.

3 Navigating via performative spaces and parting considerations

Our cohort in College German Teaching had the opportunity of being the locus of a Master Class Workshop for the School of Education at Indiana University in

[1] For an overview of Multiple Intelligences, see Richards Rodgers (2001).

early December 2016. We demonstrated several exercises[2] in drama pedagogy with novel and semi-novel circumstances, which elicited the usual gamut of giggles, snorts, and claps. One notable "attendee" was a character by the name of Ralph Hirsch, a persona whose background we had initially created and then elaborated throughout the semester. It all began about a month prior to the Master Class visit when our instructor showed us a picture of a young man standing on a train station platform. We were asked to step outside of ourselves and physically adopt the position of Ralph (though at that point unnamed) against the wall. Our experience of this embodiment was then enhanced by silently responding to several "empathy questions" (e.g. are you cold? how long have you been there? what/whom are you waiting for?).

Having properly abandoned our roles as students – though never abandoning our own individual creative faculties and previous experiences – we again took our seats. After discussing our shared emotional interpretations, we baptized Ralph with a name, a story, and surroundings. Our "text" was thus constructed, a product of democratic consensus founded upon subjective (but very real) imagination. The question for many of us afterwards was not the usual "how can we make Ralph – this text – relate to us?" Rather, the consideration became "what can we make of Ralph? How can we cope with and explore our surroundings *as* Ralph?" Opportunities to lay flesh onto these considerations were provided in the following weeks via improvisational activities. One of our classmates put herself – as Ralph – on the "hot seat" and brilliantly responded to our questions off-the-cuff, carefully detailing Ralph's every anxiety about his family, his pet rat, and his struggles as a lonely graffiti artist in Berlin. Later on, having decided to follow the theme of loneliness, we had Ralph "run the gauntlet" of deciding whether or not to show up to a blind date he had organized. This involved having a different classmate of ours (in-role) walk through a narrow passageway of the rest of us, who were berating her with reasons for/against going – all outworkings of Ralph's own desires/apprehensions.

We kicked off the Master Class with similar activities. To begin, several of us were instructed to form "still images" of random people in front of a department store in Ralph's neck of the woods. The workshop progressed with a few novel scenarios where we were required to synthesize previously developed characters with both new surroundings and personas we had encountered in other components of the course. It became easier and easier to suspend our own realities for the moment for the sake of acting empathetically. Most intriguing to me is how this creative impulse tended to override fears about being wrong or "inappropriate" in a classroom setting. But far beyond the effect of the creative project itself (as well as the fun we had), I was encouraged by several parts of the follow-up discussion and debriefing. Although I've only begun figuring out how to use some of its principles and methods in my own classroom, this performative pedagogy could be the best solution to concerns on both sides of the aisle – those hoping to diffuse kairotic spaces at all costs and those (like

[2] For several examples and more detailed descriptions of the activities mentioned below, see Even (2008).

myself) who fear some of the consequences of doing so.

Price refers to a prevailing trend of differentiating between "bad" and "good" types of resistance, where the former are used to impede the flow of knowledge and the latter work to enhance that flow through careful provocation and the challenging of authority (ibid. 79). However, I'm under the impression that the process of performativity rewrites the standard (maybe we should call it "rationalist?") metaphor of the "flow of knowledge" itself – and rightly so. The reality of classroom learning is far more complex than the image of an instructor simply packaging up information and sending it downstream to all motivated, attending, and participating recipients. When students are engaged side-by-side in the process of fashioning or even simply elaborating the text for a given class period, this serves to blur the distinction between what is disruptive and what is appropriate. When our class was engaged in the activity of "hot seating" Ralph, for instance, there was no telling in advance whose question or which response would ultimately contribute most to the narrative we were fashioning. This is precisely because we were in the process of *fashioning* it. There is rarely a single, fixed trajectory for how we get to know someone, whether imaginative or real. In fact, the only definite goal for us was elaborating a persona, and this can be accomplished by all sorts of approaches. Any student's comment that could have been deemed bad resistance under the former kairotic regime could, within the confines of a new performative regiment, have the effect of "good" resistance. In other words, it's quite difficult to dam up a flow of knowledge that was never assumed to be flowing in the first place.

Above all, this form of pedagogy actually makes serious demands that the students step outside of themselves (perhaps more seriously than any other method), but – if construed correctly – it's exactly this demand that lowers the threat of embarrassment, personal harm that necessitated the caution in the first place. Inevitably, the students will be bringing whatever they have (skills, perceptions) and whoever they are (background, life experience) to the table during the activities, which is a great success in terms of garnering diversity, but they always have an option to hide this under who they are currently *playing* and adjust per comfort-level. In any case, I would much rather my students protect themselves behind a performance than some sort of screen.

As trust and respect builds throughout the semester (at least, we all hope this is the case), the need to hide/hold back diminishes, and what can be seen is an extremely vibrant classroom. This last aspect was most clearly articulated by a classmate of mine during the workshop debriefing: performative pedagogy in many ways provides students with the opportunity to be impressed by each other – to marvel at the creativity, humor, and boldness of one's classmates. It's certainly something I've walked away impressed by after every single class period of this semester's pedagogy course. Quite possibly the most comforting feeling is knowing that one's colleagues (both in learning and teaching) have so much to show you and even accept you as a fellow contributor.

Bibliography

Even, Susanne (2008): Moving in(to) imaginary worlds: drama pedagogy for foreign language teaching and learning. In: *Unterrichtspraxis Deutsch* 41/2, 6l-70

Price, Margaret (2011): *Mad at School. Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Richards, Jack C. & Rodgers, Theodore S. (2001): *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge University Press