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Presence and Unpredictability in Teacher Education [1]

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Abstract

The basis of this paper is the talk held at the 7th SCENARIO Symposium at University College Cork on May 4, 2019. It describes the student teacher training program at Indiana University and makes the claim that performative approaches need to be a central part of teacher education. Excerpts of student teachers' course journals emphasize the need for contextualized learning, the inclusion of physicality, as well as the importance for teachers to be fully present in the classroom and embrace the unpredictability of learning processes.

1 The ceiling fan and the flying duck

In the Department of Germanic Studies at Indiana University-Bloomington (USA), the graduate doctoral students teach the undergraduate German classes, and I am the coordinator of the language program, training them in the art of foreign language teaching.[2] In my methodology class we examine theoretical and practical considerations of foreign language teaching and learning. We investigate language-centered, learner-centered, and learning-centered methods and approaches, and examine ways in which some of their components can be chosen for the foreign language lesson in order to afford a rich learning environment. We start off with the audiolingual method, work our way through alternative approaches or "designer non-methods" (Kumaravadivelu 2009) like *Silent Way* and *Suggestopedia*, and experience communicative approaches and performative pedagogy in action.

One activity that I use as a warm-up goes back to the time when a childhood friend of mine had to stay in hospital for a few weeks and was bored. Now

[2] Quite a number of US-American universities work on this basis: The graduate students finance part of their PhD studies with teaching undergraduate classes or working as research assistants. Training the graduate student instructors is the responsibility of the language coordinator or supervisor of the language program.

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I was 4000 miles away across the Atlantic, and I thought of what do to for entertainment. I thought I would send her pictures on a daily basis of something for her to guess what it was. This was the first picture.



Figure 1: The ceiling fan

My friend's answer was the unexpected start of a new game. She texted back: "This is the shadow of a ceiling fan. But what it really looks like is a flying shoveler approaching touch-down."[3] And then I saw the long broad duck bill to the left and the outstretched wings. This view was much more fascinating than a common ceiling fan. What my friend and I ended up doing was sending photos back and forth, not trying to guess what it depicted but rather telling a story of what it could really be.

When I show my methodology students some of these pictures, they are curious, intrigued. However, in the beginning they are still in "ceiling fan mode" – they try to get it "right" and find it hard to let their imagination soar and see things that weren't there before. But, as time goes on, they trust their imagination more and more and then they see, for instance, the reflection of Snow White's stepmother's beauty vials in her glass dressing table, the road map into Dante's underworld, and the shadow of two dwarves' pointy hats in the evening sun (a small dwarf and a tall one).



Figure 2: Reflection of beauty vials, road map, dwarves' hats

I use this activity several times throughout the semester for the following reason. Great teachers are like improv artists – they take up whatever student

[3] German original: "Löffelente im Landeanflug".

input there is and make something out of it. They do not disregard students' ideas in the attempt to follow their (undoubtedly well thought-out) lesson plans. Instead, they thrive on the unpredictability of student responses. In the words of one of my student teachers: "Wenn etwas nicht so läuft wie geplant, seh ich neue Wege"[4] *(whenever something does not go as planned, new ways open up for me)*. And while German language lessons hardly ever feature unusual photos to make something up with, the activity guides novice teachers to regard their own imagination as one central point of their teaching and trains them to spontaneously react to whatever input they are presented with.

2 A few quotes

In his TED talk *Teach Teachers How to Create Magic*, Christopher Emdin states that "content and theory with the absence of the magic of teaching and learning means nothing" and calls for a reframing of teacher education where teachers "begin in the same space as those who engage."

Azul Terronez, also in a TED talk, asks the question "What makes a good teacher great?" and actually posed this question to primary school children. Two answers in particular deserve further consideration: "A great teacher eats apples" and "A great teacher sings." Surprising but, upon reflection, it makes sense. *An apple for the teacher* – teachers engage with the students and what the students have to offer; *singing* points to teachers taking risks, going out on a limb at times, like singing in front of the classroom. Ultimately, Emdin advocates listening to students, developing relationships with them, stepping out of individual comfort zones, and, above all, realizing that both teaching and learning is a dynamic process of discovery for both teachers and students.

And at the first SCENARIO Conference on Performative Teaching, Learning, and Research in 2014, Manfred Schewe offered the following definition of performative teaching:

Performative as a larger concept means a complete rethinking of education, and you could apply elements of theater aesthetics. If you look at theater aesthetics, one factor is physicality. We need more of that. We have the factor of emergence, meaning that teachers are open to what is emerging in a lesson. So, it's not all pre-packaged, pre-planned. Something happens in the classroom; [let's say you have] a student response ... why not build on that and have the competence to improvise, and then teach on the basis of what actually happens in the classroom. Theater means to be present [...], the teacher has to be in the space, with full concentration, and has to be able to relate to the students.

All three quotes above point to something fundamental in teaching and learning that is often missing in teacher education: being present and embracing the unpredictability of learning processes. In times when standardization of teaching content, learning outcomes, and assessment has become paramount, and when education is all too often mistaken for memorization of facts, it is

[4] Conversation with Lane Sorensen (2018).

of crucial importance to revisit educational goals – and to educate teachers accordingly (see also Even & Noelliste 2018).

3 Training my students

As language coordinator, responsible for the training and mentoring of our graduate students who teach our undergraduate German classes, I get asked from time to time how I make my students "teach with drama". The answer is, time and again, "I don't." Performative teaching transcends drama methods and drama activities and, indeed, might not feature dramatic performances at all. Instead, it points to a different *mindset* of what it means to teach – and to learn – away from mere presentation of facts, standardized procedures, and static knowledge towards an approach to teaching and learning that is characterized by teachers and learners making their own connections, forming relationships, co-constructing knowledge, seeing mistakes as learning opportunities, and regarding the process of learning as essentially dynamic and unpredictable.

How does such performative teacher education look like in practice, in the concrete daily running of a language program? How can I prepare my graduate student teachers for a performative teaching and learning culture where learners play an active role in shaping the lessons, where the process of co-construction is forever fascinating in its unpredictability, and where both teachers and learners are frequently surprised by where the lesson is going? One central point for me is to convey that these surprises are neither signs of losing control nor of insufficient lesson preparation, but integral components of collaborative learning processes.

This is a source of irritation and doubt particularly for novice teachers who – understandably – want fail-save methods and teaching manuals to follow in the assumption that „getting it right" or „not doing it wrong" automatically leads to meaningful learning. With time, they realize that there is a considerable difference between the lesson plan and the actual lesson: well thought-out grammatical explanations leave learners flummoxed, carefully conceptualized lesson plans do not translate to successful lessons, and some of the most creative ideas just fall flat. They also experience the contrary: some lessons that have not been prepared so well take off like a jumbo jet, to their utter surprise and delight. And they learn that their lessons are not *their* lessons but are time and again co-constructed by teachers and learners. My role, as I see it, is to accompany them on their individual pedagogical journeys, make them aware of lesson dynamics, encourage them to take pedagogical risks, and help them reflect on successful and less successful outcomes.

Lesson observations take place at least once a semester. Novices tend to be quite nervous about these observations at first. They quickly realize that they are not expected to deliver a perfectly orchestrated lesson following a perfectly orchestrated lesson plan, but that the point of these class visits is to observe how they navigate the actual lesson. The observation reports highlight successful strategies, offer suggestions, and encourage them develop improvisational

skills. This corresponds to Sir Ken Robinson's call for "forms of assessment that are descriptive and not judgmental, [...] forms of assessment that are empowering rather than disenfranchising [...], forms of assessment which focus on the complexities of learning [...]" (Robinson 2011). – In general, our graduate student teachers welcome lesson observations: they like to show their expertise and know that it is the ongoing process and attention to this process that matters, irrespective of whether a lesson went well or not.

4 Student teachers' voices

Apart from making up the content of unusual photos in my methodology class, we read about approaches and methods in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers 2001) and, at the same time, problematize the concept of *method* and look at possible principles and parameters of a post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivu 2009, Even 2011). We stage former methods and newer approaches for foreign language teaching. Participants prepare teaching demos for the whole group according to the method/approach in question. And when it comes to pedagogical principles and parameters, they draw pictures. In both instances they translate what they have read to another, a physical medium. We do not compare methods; we become their inventors. So James Asher, Caleb Gattegno, Stephen Krashen, Georgi Lozanov, and others are panelists at a conference on language teaching, arguing about the best method for teaching foreign languages.

The methodology students write weekly course journals, and it is fascinating to read of their thoughts, their ideas, their doubts and their delight.[5] Course journals are another form to stage your learning – you are, as it were, both author of and actor in your own play. My 2018 group was generous to give me permission to use some of their writings.[6] All of them took the methodology course parallel to their first teaching assignments.

4.1 Jonathan

Jonathan is a linguist with mind and soul and had little faith at first in his ability to teach. Over the first half of the semester he went the whole gamut from "Teaching has been an absolute joy" to "I feel devoid of all hope in my teaching" and back again. I chose two quotes from him. The first is about a grammar sequence on the perfect tense (for beginners).

> I had the teaching of the perfect tense at first for my students completely butchered. [...] I suppose I thought I could get away with introducing the perfect tense in all of its grammatical nuts and bolts with minimal damage, taking the structural units I would introduce to my class

[5] I leave it up to the individual students what they want to write about, apart from "Don't summarize the lesson."

[6] Names changed.

> and then constructing sentences with it, but the experience of doing so showed me just how broken certain Chomskian assumptions about language cognition are. I've never had more frequent and flabbergasted questions from my students [...]. The next day, I offered a conversational prompt utilizing the perfect tense, and then offered some simple ways to respond which also utilized the perfect, and everything went much better. This whole experience drilled into me the importance of teaching/learning language in a contextualized manner. My students are not grammar-generators who simply need some rules and some dictionary forms to thrive linguistically; they respond to sentences, to phrases, to brief utterances, as one ought to expect any human would do!

In the week-long orientation session prior to the semester we covered the necessity to teach grammar in context. However, hearing something and realizing it are two different things. Jonathan chose for the perfect tense the way that he, a linguist, learns foreign languages in the assumption that what works for him, should also work for his students. He experienced failure, rallied, and came to his own conclusion in his own time – something I find crucial to be able to do.

The second quote talks about Jonathan's experience with a teaching demo of Neurolinguistic Programming, the approach he chose – or rather not chose; all others were quick to opt for their teaching methods or approaches to demonstrate, and Jonathan, not really having looked at them, chose the one that had "linguistic" in its title. Here is what he said:

> My experience leading Neurolinguistic Programming proved rather unpredictable, but finally pleasant. Upon reading what NLP entailed, I groaned with every last atom of my being. I had remarkably little confidence in its implementation [...]. During the process of designing my lesson, I decided to at least offer myself the consolation of teaching a language that I deeply love (living languages are simply too modern) and one which would lead to the unusual scenario of commanding my colleagues to eat a 9th-century apple. Being dedicated to design my lesson in Old English, I found myself really appreciating some of [NLP's] principles and the suggested methods for its implementation. It was a joy to encourage everyone to use what they knew to comprehend material that they were readily capable of comprehending [...], and finally to guide the class through the feeling of the tenses. I was happy to see that this last section garnered positive responses, as I felt skeptical that it could really make a difference in learning; but that's where the strange magic of pedagogy had its fun with me, as this part pleased the class best. In short, NLP took me to unusual places, and left me in an agreeable one.

At the intersection of Neurolinguistic Programming and Old English, Jonathan experienced the importance of making connections between the learning matter and oneself. Despite him being skeptical of the method's claims (for good reasons), he managed to combine some of its tenets with imagination and creativity and arrived at surprising results.

4.2 Kay

Kay is a reticent student whose focus is on German philosophy. For her, learning a foreign language is associated with difficulty. To her surprise, she experienced several instances where learning was both fun and effective when, being physically and mentally engaged, she overcame her own tiredness and resistance.

> For class on Monday, I was totally exhausted and I could tell that others were as well. I found it to be really great how you had us stand up and do an improv activity. This kind of spontaneity was really good for me. At first, I was stressed and tired, but the zip-zap activity made me laugh and get my mind in the moment. Yes, that's exactly what it's there for!
>
> On Wednesday, we engaged in a variety of drama pedagogy activities. To be honest, I was having a bit of a rough day, and I would have preferred to do something a bit more passive. However, it was interesting to be in a state where despite feeling slightly resistant (perhaps in the mindset of some of my students), I found myself deeply engaged at certain parts of the activities. This was perhaps mostly the case when we were negotiating meaning together and deciding on one story and biography for the woman at the window.[7]

The next quote refers to the panel discussion with Stephen Krashen and other method inventors mentioned above. For the first time, Kay experienced the dynamics of the performative convention *teacher in role*.

> On Tuesday, we did a role-playing activity where we all took on alter-egos in a panel discussion setting. I was Donna Briton, representing Content-Based Instruction. This activity was fun and helped us engage with Krashen's hypotheses while also reinforcing our knowledge of the previous methods/approaches that we have engaged with. I found it to be particularly effective that [the professor] participated in the activity as Krashen. This helped set the stage as a collaborative activity, where the teacher does not intervene and direct as an external observer. This also worked to create the fictional world, since there was no one present in the classroom that was outside of the fictional world. We were not performing but experiencing together.

In Kay's view, 'performing' is something one does for an audience, even if it is only the teacher. The fact that all of us collaborated in this dramatic improvisation levelled everyone's status and helped create the fictional world in which genuine 'experience' took place.

4.3 Cecily

Cecily, whose focus is on literature and culture of the 20th century, thinks a lot about learning in general. For her, both creative learning and the emotional

[7] We were reading Ilse Aichinger's *Fenster-Theater* (1949).

connection between teachers and learners is of great importance. She loves teaching, and she loves to speak – and write – in German (the original journal entry is followed by the English translation):

> Fast jedes Kind hat ein großartiges Talent, das die meisten Erwachsenen nicht (mehr) haben: die Fähigkeit aus nichts irgendetwas zu machen. Als Erwachsene vergessen wir manchmal, wie wir unsere Fantasiekräfte ausdrücken können. Aus diesem Grund unterrichte ich Sprachen gern, weil man wieder die Erlaubnis hat, die Fantasie zu benutzen und, sozusagen, "den Hut eines Kindes" zu tragen. [...] Ich hatte eine Deutschlehrerin, die tatsächlich einen amerikanischen Hut trug, während sie Englisch in dem Kurs sprach. Gleichzeitig trug sie immer einen metaphorischen Fantasiehut, weil sie immer coole Aktivitäten entwickelte, und wir als Studenten mussten sehr kreativ sein. In dieser Klasse habe ich mich als Kind sehr wohl gefühlt und es hat total Spaß gemacht, aber ich habe auch viel gelernt. Ich glaube, das ist ein Geheimnis beim Lehren, den Studis zu helfen, sich über Lernen zu freuen.
>
> Almost every child has this great talent that adults don't have (anymore): the ability to make something out of nothing. As adults we sometimes forget about our powers of imagination. This is why I love teaching languages, because you are allowed to use your imagination and wear the hat of a child again so to speak. [...]. I had a German teacher in school who actually put on an American hat whenever she spoke English during the lesson. At the same time, she always wore a metaphorical fantasy hat, because she always came up with cool activities, and we had to be very creative as students. I felt very much at home in this class as a child; we had a lot of fun, but we also learned a lot. I think this is a secret of teaching – to help students delight in learning.

In another quote, Cecily lays out in a simple and concise way why the quest for the 'best method' is pointless: A one-size-fits-all solution to teaching would have to be a one-size-fits-all-*at-all-times* solution.

> Die Frage, wie gelernt wird, ist natürlich eine große Frage. Deswegen haben wir so viele Methoden/Ansätze, Hypothesen und Theorien, die versuchen, den besten Weg zu finden. Bestimmt haben wir generelle Regeln, was ein Lehrer tun oder nicht tun soll. Aber vielleicht kann diese Frage nicht genau beantwortet werden, weil jede Person auf verschiedene Weise lernt. Es wäre praktisch, wenn wir einen perfekten Weg hätten, eine Sprache oder ein Fach beizubringen, aber wir müssen unsere Studis kennen lernen, um herauszufinden, was am besten für sie ist. Das kann sich natürlich in jedem Moment ändern und das ist eigentlich sehr schön.
>
> The question how learning happens is, of course, a big question. This is why we have so many methods/approaches, hypotheses and theories that try to find the best way. For sure, we have general rules what a teacher is supposed to do or not to do. But perhaps we cannot firmly answer the question because every person learns in different ways. It would be convenient to have the perfect way to teach a language or a subject, but we have to get to know our students to find out what's best

> for them. Of course, this can change from one moment to the next, and that's actually very neat.

For Cecily, successful teachers are attuned to their students and able to decide on a course of action in the given moment. This ability is based on the teacher being *present*, "in the space, with full concentration" (see Schewe quote above).

4.4 Nelson

The idea of being present is taken up again by Nelson, who is doing a Master of Teaching with German as a Foreign Language as his main subject.

> One of the important tenets of Performative Pedagogy that has really stuck with me is the idea of being "present," both as a student and a teacher. Both the students and teacher need to be prepared for the ever-changing dynamic that this type of approach affords and checking out of the lesson will lead to vastly sub-par results. Because the students are in charge of creating so much novel content during this lesson, the teacher needs to be attentive to their thoughts and ideas in order to successfully interact with the material. [...] As the teacher provides structured activities that gradually build upon each other and slowly help the students create a new story/reality, it is important to be open to the multiple directions in which the lesson can go.

According to Nelson, careful scaffolding of learning content provides spaces for students' own ideas. At the same time, he emphasizes the need of teachers to listen to their students and embrace the unpredictability of collaboratively constructed lessons.

5 Summarizing thoughts

From my student teachers' learning journals, I learn myself. What I learned or what was reinforced for me in this particular methodology course, is the importance of

- providing space for learners' own experiences;
- letting learners come to their own conclusions;
- challenging learners to trust their imagination;
- incorporating mind and body in the learning process;
- inviting learners to a joint journey of experience;
- letting things emerge;
- encouraging reflection.

This translates to pivotal components that facilitate learning: trust, imagination, collaboration, body and mind, and – to come back to the title of this paper – presence and unpredictability.

Being present is a fundamental requirement for any teacher: developing the intuition to decide what is needed in a given situation, and welcoming the unpredictability of learning processes. Which brings us to performative pedagogy that is inspired by the theater. In order for any show to run well, there needs to be creative collaboration and mutual trust between the actors. And in the performative classroom, teachers and learners work together to get the show on the road; they need to be open to learning with and from each other (Even & Noelliste 2018). An atmosphere of trust and collaboration, openness for what emerges in a lesson, the inclusion of physicality, and reflection on learning keeps the show alive – whether it be the language classroom or teacher education.

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