RISK, REHEARSAL, READING and WRITING: THEATER PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUES IN THE CLASSROOM

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Introduction
- Cornell undergraduates, required to take first-year writing seminars, often limit themselves in terms of their creative risks and view only the essay grades as final markers of their success.
- Fostering daring creative choices and a more nuanced understanding of what “celebration” of student learning looks like can destabilize the top-down power structure of the writing learning process.
- Instead of treating performance-based activities as mere “supplements” to writing and critical reading instruction, this study explored the ways that abstract concepts cherished in writing pedagogy (close reading skills, reading for subtext, revision) can be animated and approached by theater exercises.

Objectives
- To enrich textual analysis and comprehension of abstract theoretical concepts through theater exercises
- To elicit a high level of student engagement in risk-taking, exploration and creativity by encouraging diverse forms of responses to show mastery of the subject material.
- To explore the ways that teaching can be thought of as directing, including the notion of approaching the dramatic text with a 'vision', classroom time as 'rehearsal' and guiding students (actors) express their understanding of the play with their own voice.

Methods
- Nine different theater activities: creative approaches to costume, music, voice, bodies, gesture and space were designed to instruct abstract concepts and a closer understanding of the text
  - In-class activities: improvisation to illustrate the spatialization of power, the nuances of equivocal language, and the effects of absence
  - Take-home activities: preparing a performance of one scene two different ways and close textual analysis to make costume and musical staging choices (see image on the right).
  - Final Project: small groups staged a scene from one of the five Early Modern dramas which we read, with their own creative twist. Groups also presented a theater program and justified their creative choices in a “talk back” session afterward (see photos in header)
- Students reflected on their experience in freewrites, class discussion, online postings and class presentations

Challenges
- Students chose the course, “The Drama of Sodom and Incest on the Early Modern Stage” partially out of genuine interest and partially for its ideal time slot. Students brought a mixed level of motivation for and interest in the course subject matter, including sexually sensitive issues and early modern texts.
- While the course description alerted students to the planned drama activities, not all students were equally enthusiastic or experienced in theater activities.
- Although I was able to draw upon my own knowledge of activities, exercises and concepts from previous study, I was hardly a professional director.

Results
- Seeing the theater exercises in class provided me a way to gauge students’ levels of textual comprehension and amend my lessons accordingly.
- The students’ freewrites reflected that they enjoyed the aspects of interpersonal learning: group members had to explain and teach each other about the text in order to put together a cohesive performance.
- In students’ essays, I found that many students latched on to difficult abstract concepts and were able to express these ideas more clearly.

Results, continued
- Of the 14 students enrolled in the course, 13 provided freewrite responses. Five (38%) thought the theater activities were both enjoyable and useful for their writing and reading comprehension. Three students (23%) thought it provided a creative outlet for textual exploration (ambiguously “useful”), and two (15%) thought activities enjoyable but not useful. Two (15%) found the activities to be not at all useful. (See graph below)

Discussion
- According to their freewrite responses, most students found the take-home theater activities more useful than the in-class ones. This may be due to the fact that at-home activities required a high level of close textual analysis, which meant that they dedicated a good deal of time to interpreting the text.
- It remains to be seen how to help students see the direct connection between the work they are putting into developing theater performances and their improvements in writing.
- Students who were more naturally extroverted and had previous theater experience gained the most from their activities. It remains to be seen how to craft activities which can be broadly inclusive of all students.
- My role as a director needs to be better developed. I would rework these activities with a greater attention to certain types of skills and use classroom time for “rehearsal, as interpretation.”

Conclusions
- Theater activities need not be viewed as merely a “fun” extra supplement to rigorous classroom discussion or analysis
- Properly structured activities, at the very least, make classroom time more “enjoyable” for the students and may provide a useful venue for students’ creative expression, for instructors’ analysis of student comprehension, and for interpersonal learning.