

## **Show and Tell: Using Recorded Feedback to Improve Learning in the Acting Classroom**

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How do we learn to act? One can read about acting, watch acting, and apply performance concepts in class and in production, but how does a young actor know if she is actually improving? Unlike chemistry, history, or American Literature, in an acting class the subject and the student are intermingled. This circumstance makes it challenging for the acting student to assess personal improvement from an objective point of view. Students in chemistry can see and touch and manipulate objects in the lab. In a literature or history class those objects may be books and papers. In most subjects of study, students have the tools with which to objectively identify progress. The materials they use to assimilate knowledge and demonstrate subject expertise are independent of the student herself. Not so for the young actor. Actors are their learning material. They do read plays (which they are not), and participate in character research (also objectified material), but tests and papers cannot demonstrate performance acumen. An actor must use the self—his own voice and body—as he struggles to demonstrate ability in the subject. This inside/out perspective makes it difficult for the student to objectively determine if learning is taking place. In order to improve performance technique, students have traditionally relied on the teacher/director, trusting that she will guide the young performer. The student cannot see the performance because he is embodying it, so the teacher/director must see for him. Much must be translated when getting notes from a teacher, and it can be a struggle to know how to fix an acting problem when a young actor can only infer what happened on stage through the lenses of embodiment and memory.

One of the enjoyable aspects of teaching an acting class is that acting teachers naturally provide opportunities for students to self-actualize. That is, students taking a performance class almost inevitably learn something new about themselves because acting

requires self-examination in order to accomplish the task. Personal connection to subject matter, a challenging goal for other fields, is a natural by-product of a performance class. And personal connection is often a key component of real learning. Dudley Herschbach, a nobel prize-winning chemist at Harvard, describes his teaching aspirations in an interview with Ken Bain: “I want to help them learn something about themselves so they can become better learners and thinkers. I’m not interested in just adding up so many scores like a cash register” (Bain 151-152). Self-awareness and the personalization of subject matter may be an added benefit in a chemistry class, but personal perspective can create obstacles for the young performer. If the acting student cannot analyze the learning experience independent of emotional value, how can she distinguish what is objectively working well in her performance versus what just feels good? When receiving feedback from a teacher/director, the acting student may respond variously. She may object and insist that she was ‘already doing that’; he may nod and agree to the notes provided and then fail to demonstrate a change in behavior. Or in some instances, she may accomplish the task and apply the requested change but then struggle to understand how to replicate the results. When trying to comprehend the right and the wrong of performance behavior, it can be difficult to know what is working because it is hard to see from the inside out.

One of the issues with effective learning in the performance class paradigm is the locus of authority. Traditional acting classes tend to follow the rules of the rehearsal hall. The teacher/director is in charge and decides what will be studied and how. The student learns and presents the assigned role; the teacher/director offers critical feedback according to her standards; and the student attempts to live up to these standards by embodying ideas communicated through verbal or written notes. In this paradigm, all knowledge flows downhill: The teacher knows, the student does not. But contemporary pedagogical practice recommends a different approach; “Psychological research shows that the most effective learning occurs when students build

their own associations between new information and their previous knowledge base, not when they memorize how others have framed it” (Blumberg 33). Acting teachers, like Stephen Wangh, author of *The Heart of Teaching: Empowering Students in the Performing Arts*, already incorporate this practice,

I am always concerned about the ‘meta-lesson,’ about how students can become their own teachers, so I see each and every training exercise and scene-sharing as an opportunity for them to improve their ability to perceive their work while it is happening. (44)

If the best teaching in an acting classroom should include self-assessment and discovery, how can one achieve this in a discipline in which students struggle to see what they are learning because they are the subject? “Is there a way to say something that simultaneously speaks to the particular moment (e.g., the piece the student has just performed) while promoting the student’s slowly developing ability to give himself the feedback he needs?” (Wangh 43)

Several years ago, a colleague mentioned that she had just been given the opportunity to see a recording of her most recent stage performance. “If only I had had the opportunity to see my work before opening night, I could have made so many adjustments.” That seemed an astonishing idea. Provide the opportunity for an actor to watch a recording of a rehearsal and allow her to perform her own self-assessment? That was far from standard protocol in the professional theater. But why is that? Other disciplines like Communications and Business have long been using recorded feedback as an assessment tool. Primary and secondary teacher training programs now regularly include recordings of student teaching events because student teachers often misremember what actually happened during the teaching session.

Studying video records may shift [teaching] interns’ attention from the exploration of vague perceptions about what

transpired [during a teaching event] to a more complex and evidence-based analysis of whether and how classroom interaction in discussions promotes student learning in literacy and other content areas. (Rosaen et al. 349)

In the education classroom, teaching is a form of performance. Student teachers had been struggling to objectively assess the effectiveness of their lesson plans. They could not see what happened during a teaching event and so tended to talk more about how it felt. Much like young actors, this emotion-based response failed to provide the objective analysis that is critical for a change in behavior. Recorded feedback helped rectify the problem. This new approach (using recorded feedback to enable critical self analysis), entitled 'Noticing Noticing,' refers specifically to the process of helping the performer (in this case the student teacher) see behavior that is hidden, disguised or distorted by emotional response or the vagaries of memory; "Explicit noticing is critical to change because if persons do not notice, they cannot choose to act differently." (Rosaen et al. 349)

Given the ease with which one can now record and post movies online, why haven't more performance teachers begun using this tool in the classroom? One issue may be American acting training history. Lee Strasburg and the Group Theater founded a movement dedicated to "truthful behavior" on the stage. American training schools may disagree about a particular methodology, but most believe that behavioral truth is paramount for excellent acting; "Even in stylized dramas, American audiences prefer to be tethered to acting behavior they perceive as real. For Americans, perceived reality equals truthfulness" (Bartow Introduction xx). This need for truthfulness, which has the potential to supersede all other elements of craft, can lead to problems with technique. Marlon Brando was riveting and believable as Stanley Kowalski, but he was sometimes difficult to hear and understand (Milne). Truth and emotional believability may be the holy grail in American acting, but for a performance to be perceived as excellent, it requires craft as well:

In order to effectively evoke the inner life, it is vital that actors spend an equal amount of time developing the vehicle for this expression, the physical skills of a flexible and evenly produced voice, a supple and strong body, musical rhythm, and controlled, relaxed movement (Bartow Introduction xxvii).

Michael Chekov recognized and articulated this challenge when training young actors; “There are certain actors who can feel their roles deeply, can comprehend them lucidly, but who can neither express nor convey to an audience these riches within themselves. Those wonderful thoughts and emotions are somehow chained inside their undeveloped bodies”(1-2). He insisted that, “The art of acting can grow and develop only if it is based upon an *objective* method with fundamental principles” (author’s emphasis 172).

So the need for the objective analysis of technique has been an ongoing challenge in acting training. One might argue that the teacher/director’s point of view is objective and can provide the feedback necessary to enable these corrections. In some cases this may be true, but teachers and directors are humans who must communicate within the boundaries of language. And sometimes it is hard to say just what you mean in a way that can be heard by the listener. Robert Lewis encourages the young actor to overcome the challenges posed by poor communication skills: “Even if the criticism falls short of a correct analysis of what happened, the fact that the director or teacher feels *something* is awry should interest you enough to try to trace the source of the trouble” (author’s emphasis 150). This is sage advice for the young actor, as the teacher/director is probably right, at least to some degree. But how much easier it would be to make the point clear, if only the actor could see what the teacher sees rather than trying to infer the meaning intended.

It can be argued that good teaching provides students the opportunity to self-assess, that finding a way for students to personalize subject matter provides for more effective learning, that one of the greatest obstacles in the acting classroom is the challenge of helping

students objectify behavior, that only through the process of ‘noticing noticing’ can a student see what is actually happening in a performance event. Opportunities to review digitized recordings of rehearsals and performance projects can provide all of those learning advantages. The vagaries of memory and the boundaries of language can interfere with accurately communicating what happened in a performance presentation. Teacher/directors may attempt to articulate what they saw, but is what they say they saw what actually occurred? Digital feedback can remove any debate about the moment in question. In addition to providing hard evidence about what happened during a performance event, recorded feedback has the advantage of slowing down time. Small moments that might normally be missed in a real time presentation can be identified, reviewed and parsed when watching the digitized version. In addition to clearing up any misconceptions, mistakes or misremembered moments, digitized feedback can provide opportunities for more in-depth analysis as the student can rewind and review the clip again and again. This tool facilitates an accelerated assimilation of new behaviors and the elimination of old habits by allowing the student to see what actually happened, not what they think may have happened based on the memory of an embodied experience:

[A recording] not only slows but allows moments to be frozen in time through the isolation of specific clips that can be extracted from the whole lesson for further analysis. These functions of video have a compelling effect: The dissonance created between what interns recall from memory and what they see on close analysis is hard to ignore. (Rosaen et al. 358)

Not only does the student learn much from this process, but the instructor can learn as well. Performance teachers are all too human when working with actors in the classroom. The instructor may not always remember properly. She may be tired and distracted, or bring bias into her analysis. Outside factors can color how he remembers what actually occurred. The recording provides evidence of the truth



without these distorting filters. Even on a bad day, one can rely on the digitized recording to show what really happened and then construct notes from this hard evidence. Students can compare the digitized recording to the feedback they receive, reducing the probability of misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

Some acting teachers worry that having students watch themselves perform will harm more than it helps. The first time a student sees a recorded version of her performance it can be uncomfortable. Film actress Candy Clark, an Academy Award nominee, would watch her performances five or six times in a row, primarily as a personally constructed classroom exercise. In an interview she admitted that, “The first time I see myself in a picture, it’s a shock” but by the fifth or sixth time, she can “really study what I’m doing right what I’m doing wrong as impartially as possible” (Scott 20). She goes on to say, “Maybe the best reason for studying myself on the screen is to try to avoid repeating my performances, falling back on familiar patterns and mannerisms” (20). She began using this process long before the advent of affordable digital cameras. Acting students need not wait to win a big role and watch themselves on the big screen. Instructors can record project performances, post them on web-based platforms, and allow students to view their work in the privacy of their own homes. An easily accessible digitized recording can be studied, analyzed, contextualized. Not all acting problems are easily solved using digital recordings. But this kind of objective analysis can eliminate obvious issues in technique enabling the student and instructor to move on to more challenging aspects of performance training. Here’s what some students had to say about watching their digitized performance for the first time:

- “It was weird to see myself on video! I saw what you mentioned in your notes about the little smiles.”
- “So watching myself perform wasn’t as bad as I was expecting, but still sort of strange. Probably the biggest thing that I noticed was that I looked down so much!”

- “Normally I am extremely unhappy with the sound of my voice when watching a recording of myself but I wasn’t too upset about it in this video. The only vocal issue I noticed was that I seemed a bit too quiet and wasn’t nearly loud enough.”
- “I noticed that I speak very fast and mumbled throughout the scene. I also saw how terrible my posture is when I am sitting in the chair, but I have struggled with that forever.”
- “I kept asking myself, ‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR HANDS?!?!’ I didn’t realize this, but I tend to have almost limp wrists, yet I talk with my hands constantly. Arm movement in general is something that I need to spend some serious time on.”
- “The whole time I was up there and for much after, I kept thinking that our scene was terrible, it didn’t make any sense, etc., but watching it, although it was definitely odd to be watching myself, it didn’t look that bad.”

Recorded feedback can be a valuable tool for the performance classroom. Digital recordings provide key information for behavior adjustments as young actors struggle to see what the teacher sees and to overcome the obstacles inherent in objectifying embodied practice. Acting teachers want their students to learn and to learn deeply about their characters, about their craft, about themselves, and about the world in which they will create their art. Using digitized recordings, instructors can help students “see themselves in relation to larger contexts...critically aligning their action and identities within those contexts” by providing the means to look with distance and an objective, critical eye (Swaner 79). By slowing down time, providing hard evidence of what actually happened, teachers can give students the material they need to self-assess and apply knowledge. Rather than relying on what ‘feels right,’ the young actor can now objectively analyze her performance, learning to eliminate bad habits, amplify strengths, and accelerate the acquisition of the technique that will support her craft.



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