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Thesis

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Given the opportunity to be an assistant teacher of a third-year voice class at Cornish College of the Arts with Kate Myre, I thought I knew what teaching was, having witnessed it for the vast majority of my life. I came to discover it in a different way on the other side. Acting techniques began to reveal themselves in the craft of education. Teaching became easier as soon as I embraced that.

Teaching is performing with the objective to reveal knowledge within students and yourself. You have a script, outlined and improvised. You must maintain presence and engagement with your audience and scene partners, the students. Presence within your body helps when working with eyes on you in the classroom and on stage. You're presenting an arc of learning that leads from one thing to the next, building an experience. You're discovering things along the way each time you repeat what you know, as you would continue to make discoveries in the run of a show. Vocal techniques are necessary to be understood and for students to retain what is and is not important. To teach is to reveal insights to a group of people, and so is generous acting.

### **You have a script.**

Every class is structured with a set of activities and series of possible events. There may be a literal script with a presentation, with space for creative liberties. Mr. Raymond Maxwell, a Philosophy teacher at Cornish College of the Arts, prepares lectures on people and ideas throughout philosophical history. Every week in his class we get to learn through an arc about

characters such as Rene Descartes. He ties together the themes of Descartes's ideas, how his world received him, and his beef with other schools of thought. These stories are shared with a structure similar to a play. We have exposition to set the scene with main players, we get to understand what characters want, and we follow through with their main action. The story is told to help us students understand epistemology, the history of how thought structures come through the details of the lives and works of influential philosophers.

Raymond Maxwell's lecture script is tighter than that of other teachers. However, where he uses the Socratic method, he works with much looser scripts. The words he says are more driven by loose guidelines, than a tight script of reading from a page. With the Socratic method, we investigate lines of thinking through questioning in layers that go deeper and deeper. One question leads to the next in a gentle investigation of belief structures. *Merriam Webster* defines the Socratic Method as “the method of inquiry and instruction . . . consisting of a series of questionings. The object of which is to elicit a clear and consistent expression of something supposed to be implicitly known by all rational beings.” His role in this is to get discussion moving with the first question, such as, “Are people ultimately good or bad?”, and then bring it back to the main question if the discussion begins to go too far off-topic. This approach is more improvisational.

Kate Myre's class is based upon bullet points of which exercises will be done as well as points that are intended to be taken away from the experience. Similar to Raymond's class, the discussions are led with Kate's Questions, inviting students to investigate their experiences — every class is ended with “thoughts, observations, discoveries?”.

Lectures with tighter scripts are used when teaching accents. In teaching this, the structure of the class is:

1. Warm up mouths with articulation exercises to get ready for the new sounds.
2. Learn the substitutions of sounds from one dialect (the actor's) to another (the character's). This is taught by writing the sound substitution on the board, followed by a call-and-response with words that implement the sounds and assisting with adjustments.
3. Practice the new sounds with sentences and words that involve the substituted sound.
4. Listen for the sound in interviews with speakers of the dialect; we asked students to research and share what they found.
5. Discuss how the dialect came to be and what influenced it (e.g., hot weather in southern states causes face muscles to relax into that open drawl).
6. Put it into context with monologues and scenes. Scenes allow students to listen to each other and make adjustments, taking more ownership over what they've learned.
7. "Thoughts, observations, discoveries?"

I witnessed Kate teaching the Mississippi dialect with this progression and I taught the New York dialect with this set up, as well. This script had a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. I wrote mine out of sentences I'd use to add some humor to the learning. I was staying faithful to it as a good actor would while maintaining flexibility to meet the needs of the

moment. It was repeatable, effective, and expanded upon the knowledge the students already had.

### **Improv is where listening takes the wheel in acting.**

“Yes, and. . .” is the golden rule of improv. It means that you listen and embrace what the other person is saying, and then add value yourself. No good scenes come from overthinking and completely internalizing as an actor, just as no good discussions come from just one person. High-quality engagement with the class requires that what is happening is acknowledged and embraced, and then added to. It's a very strange feeling when that doesn't happen; frustration, boredom, and low-level anxiety floats through the classroom as time is eaten up and feels wasted. It feels like a bad improv scene where no one hears each other and it's a muddy mess. When a class or a scene gets into an engaged creative groove, people see clearly, dopamine comes a-flowing, and time flies.

### **You must maintain presence and engagement with your audience and scene partners, the students.**

Acting really benefits from presence and freedom in the body. Having lots of impressionable people watching can be a pressure that makes bodies contract out of fear. On the fear of public speaking, glossophobia, Psychology Today says:

“Fear and anxiety involve the arousal of the autonomic nervous system in response to a potentially threatening stimulus. When confronted with a threat, our bodies prepare for battle. . . . The fear often arises when people overestimate the stakes of communicating their ideas in front of others, viewing the speaking event as a potential threat to their credibility, image, and chance to reach an audience.”

Relaxation and preparation is key and *The Actor Prepares*. The first class of three in which I took a lead position was one that had many unknown variables which led to a touch of fear. Kate Myre was out of town, so a substitute teacher was arranged for the class. She came in and helped by giving me advice while I was presenting the introductory information about the dialect. I had never before taught for this much time. I was scared that I would get called out for inaccurate information and my credibility would be lost. I was also afraid that I wouldn't be able to impart the knowledge in a clear manner. Despite the uncertainty, I was definitely prepared and that gave me relief. I knew what I was talking about.

During the class, the acting training I've received came in handy. I was immediately able to integrate the notes I was given by the substitute teacher. Yet I was not relaxed and it showed in my shaky hands, small voice, foggy vision, muddled memory of the day, and an uncentered stance. Luckily the students were kind.

For the second of the three classes I got to lead, I dug into my acting training. I looked at how I could own the space more. “Own this space” is a note many actors often receive (or that's what I tell myself). I had just learned about acting with the chakra system, courtesy of Mikey

Place and his introduction of the works of Fay Simpson in *The Lucid Body: A Guide for the Physical Actor*.

The correction I gave myself was to explode my root chakra. The root part of the energy body (stay with me) holds our sense of ownership and home. People with exploded roots take up a ton of space, which can be seen in a sense of entitlement to things, controlling the world, open body language, or in a room with every wall covered in objects this person loves. My personal root tends to be imploded and that is shown in how my physical body makes itself small when it is scared, my voice goes up in pitch, and I become ungrounded.

Next class I exploded it.

Before the class started, I spread my stuff out more on the table, closed my eyes, and imagined that my body was larger than it is and kept growing out into my space. Going to this extreme allowed me to reach the balanced point in the middle, a mix of authority while holding compassionate space for the students in the room. Using this acting technique, I externalized my focus, which automatically increased my sense of being an authority in the room while not feeling the fear of being exposed. This confidence allowed me to see more clearly what was happening in the room and embrace it with humor. My body was relaxed and I was ready to share what I had prepared, and to receive what people had brought into the room. My shoulders opened, my face relaxed, and a smile came more easily. Students engaged in a different way in response to that (shout out to mirror neurons). Discussion was more open. The class felt more receptive. Of course there are many unknown variables, but my technique of being grounded and owning my space helped shape the outcome. We were reviewing the substitutions and students

were giving me words that contained the sounds — I can't remember the specifics but we had a few laughs about it.

**Vocal techniques are necessary to be understood and for students to retain what is important.**

Just as with all storytelling, what we need to remember gets repeated. Repetition creates a neural superhighway where there used to be a small hiking trail. Coming back to key points helps to build those highways. Repetition of ideas, names, and events (also known as callbacks) create these connections that give us a hit of dopamine. The emotional connection that is made in that moment of joy or “oh!” is what makes connections stick (*Imagine: The Science of Creativity*, Jonah Lehrer, 2012). When we make an emotional connection, it's easier to recall information when we need it.

Vocal techniques such as anchoring a word at a certain pitch makes it easier to connect back to the last time it was said. We use the same substitution sentences in different class periods, such as repeating the sentence “Hugh Grant’s Huge Hubris made Him Human” for the rule of dropping the “H” sound in a NYC dialect. Hopefully the repetition of this humorous sentence helps students remember to drop the “H” sound in front of the “U” sound.

Repetition helps in discovering new things as you repeat what you know, as you would continue to make discoveries in the run of a show. Every night on stage, the character is experiencing the world around them completely anew. It doesn't matter how many times the



actor has done the show. Audiences don't want to perceive in the first scene of Romeo and Juliet that the two main characters are going to fall in love and die for each other at the end of the play. The characters don't want to discover that yet either. Fresh perspective lends itself to discovery. It doesn't matter how well the teacher knows the subject, they are presenting it for the first time for these students and are always reviewing and finding new things within it.

### **In conclusion.**

Teaching's ultimate goal is to become irrelevant in the lives of students who need enough tools to effectively carry on beyond the classroom. Performative skills make learning much easier for both teachers and students. Having an outline or improvised script, maintaining presence and engagement, and discovering things along the way through repetition, creates a room where expansion of self is possible in both acting and teaching. To teach is to reveal insights to a group of people, and so is generous acting.

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