Acting Out the Right Way: Recasting the Reluctant First-Year Community College Learner as an Active Learner by Teaching Dramatic Literature Through Performance

Jayanti Tamm, Ocean County College

Abstract

For a majority of first-year community college students, general education requirements are viewed as impediments. The challenges of motivating students in these courses are numerous, and often the professor encounters students who are stridently disinterested in classes which are—on the surface—disconnected to their major and future career ambitions. Students in a standard community college first-year required courses often express their dissatisfaction through active disengagement with the course material. While professors in all disciplines find these students challenging, for teachers of English the problem is exacerbated by an often vehement reluctance to read. For years, performance techniques and strategies have been utilized as a methodology for enhancing students’ understanding of Shakespearean texts. Whereas with Shakespearean language, students often perceive an outer disconnect between the text and their ability to confidently partake in analysis and debate, for first year community college students, the task of connecting to any text—even contemporary dramatic texts—seems a challenge. This paper describes the findings of a five-year study of employing performance pedagogy to teach a unit on dramatic literature to first-year non-English majors at one community college. The results demonstrate a significant increase in student motivation, appreciation, and comprehension.

Introduction

The never-ending hunt for a panacea in education, at times, seems almost comical. Teaching methodologies that were once heralded as great discoveries are often abandoned to rust, only to reappear in a slightly altered incarnation to be discovered once again. The frantic need to solve persistent and systemic blight is, in many ways, a direct response to contemporary pressures to view education as a business. In higher education, in particular, the persistent call to rebrand and restructure higher education into a corporate model (Bordelon, 2014) inflames the urgency to solve persistent ailments. If students are now to be viewed as customers, then it introduces the onerous problem that the customer is always right and the aim is to quickly satisfy the impatient customer. Within this extremely problematic paradigm, rather than persisting through four year to six years of academic study, student-customers would much rather simply swipe their credit card and instantly exit with a diploma.
Instead, for many students unconditioned to waiting, the collegiate crawl feels excruciating. Many college students find their first two academic years at college to be particularly frustrating because the bulk of their coursework is in subjects removed from their intended major. While their career goal may be to be pediatric nursing, their semesters are filled with seemingly non-related, reading-intensive general education courses. Students’ lack of enthusiasm for these courses manifests itself in their lack of participation and effort. The impact is tangible. For some courses, this deficit can be managed, by an over compensation of instruction by the professor, but for others, such as ‘Introduction to Literature,’ it can be fatal.

Professors who teach upper-level courses at four-year colleges and universities to discipline specific majors may occasionally fret about students who seem more interested in their smart phones than the lecture at hand, but those professors may not realize how fortunate they are. For community college professors who teach lower-level general education courses required for all majors, in-class texting is the least of their worries. In these required general education courses, the students’ irritation is palpable. No matter how often the classical tradition of a core liberal arts foundation is presented as proof of its value and merits, a large cohort of students remain boldly unconvincled. Given their newfound status as ‘customers,’ they wholeheartedly reject these superfluous courses to which they are forced to purchase.

Countless conferences, dissertations, and seminar hours have been devoted to pedagogy designed to engage the ‘reluctant learner,’ the student who displays a lack of drive and interest to succeed (Protheroe, 2004). Yet, while much of the research has been devoted to primary and secondary school learning, the challenges of engaging the college student actively opposed to the learning at hand—again, she is the paying customer, after all—is potentially more challenging. Within various disciplines and courses, some of these students transcend simply being ‘reluctant
learners,’ and take more actively oppositional positions as resistant learners (Stewart, 2001) and worse—hostile learners. Even having a small number of openly defiant learners has the potential to poison a positive environment.

This paper will examine the results of a study conducted over a five-year period at Ocean County College, a public, two-year college, in a first-year course of Introduction to Literature. Part composition class, part literary survey of short fiction, poetry, and drama, every single student—no matter their major—is required to successfully pass English 152. While for some students, passing may be enough, yet of course, the fundamental goal is to deliver a rich and vivid experience that demonstrates the bountiful rewards of literature. But how can that be achieved in this age of instant gratification? The aim of this paper is to describe a successful teaching strategy that can be replicated in any required first-year introduction to literature to replace students’ reluctance and resistance with engagement using a mandatory participatory approach of acting the text.

**Background**

Since the earliest days of America’s public education system, there was a strong belief that memorization and recitation be utilized to ensure lasting learning. As with so many trends and beliefs in educational pedagogy, the pendulum has swung far away from this approach in primary and secondary school education. Gone are the days when the full “Gettysburg Address,” or all the verses of the “Star-Spangled Banner” are committed to memory and then performed standing at the front of the room. In higher education, of course, traditionally the figure posed at the front of the room was always the lone faculty member. Students were relegated to receive what floated back to their affixed rows. Over the last thirty years these models have been thoroughly vetted and reexamined. Where to place the students? Where to place the instructor?
Who, exactly, is in charge of learning what? It is understood that the engaged learner, the active learner, no matter the name, the basic concept of the engaged learner entails the student doing something.

Doing. ‘Dran,’ the Greek word for ‘doing’ is the root of the word ‘drama.’ ‘Theatron,’ the Greek word for ‘seeing’ is the root of the word ‘theatre.’ Drama and theatre are essential to action, to doing. In teaching a unit on drama in a literature class, it serves the modern student who has been raised on an inordinate amount of video, film, and television, to introduce a piece of dramatic literature as a performance text (Riggio, 1999). Certainly, teaching is performing; it is an act that can be as thrilling and theatrical as the professor creates it. There can be great reciprocity between the actor and audience as between the professor and student. Unlike TV and video, it is live and raw. Live performance is the daring risk that makes theatre so unique; it is what has captured the imagination of audiences from Ancient Greece to present time—just what may happen at any moment? Its power cannot be denied. It can indeed transform resistance and wipe away reluctance, boredom and even the most ardent disinterest.

Yet, for performance to work in the first-year classroom, it needs to be the student upon the stage and not the professor. It is the duty of the student to become critically engaged and emotionally invested in the intellectual performance. It is through that the entire classroom can be transformed. In order to even begin to summon students from their resistant stance, they have to be alerted to the fact that they can and should, effectively undue much of their educational conditioning. For many first-year college students, they are too well-conditioned to the passive state which they have experienced since primary school. Stay in your seat. Keep your desk in neat rows. Wait to speak until called upon. While these may be imperative to keep order and discipline in hyper-energetic second-graders, by the time the students reach their first-year of
college, these commandments have been absorbed, cementing them to their desks and affirming that their duty is to simply answer the pre-selected question at hand. The professor, not the student, takes the material, parses through it, formulates questions and theories, and then, finally, feeds a narrow question with the expectation of a specific answer in return. The pressure is off the student. Years of this style of spoon-fed thinking, renders a deep deficiency.

Any attempts at disrupting that well-worn model are often met with discomfort. This level of discomfort in a college classroom, while initially adding to student complaint and rebellion, eventually, may lead to an awareness that what had been requirements for past success no longer apply. The classroom, like the theatre itself, has multiple possibilities for how to build a stage, for what area will demarcate the audience from the actors, and when and how those lines of demarcation become blurred and then finally erased. At what precise point do the lights appear and reveal the audience to be the main attraction? The ‘fourth wall’ can be removed as easily as it is erected through a single gesture or utterance. Just as some theater audiences cringe when finding themselves in the spotlight of Brechtian techniques, for some students, an interruption of the comforts of sitting passively in the dark creates discomfort. Many students desire that their classroom allows them to be a shielded audience member safely ensconced in the anonymity of the back row.

The call for students to abandon the safety of their private desk and chair, their island, their barrier that protects them from having to engage in any meaningful way, is not one that is met with great acceptance. Again, for the first-year student, the fact that they are forced to pay for admission to this ‘show’ that they never wanted to see in the first place—the one they actually want to ‘attend’ for their major will take another two years—makes them even more determined to be miserable. In order to produce results, there needs to be a bold and radical shift
from adamant disengagement, and that requires steps and indicators that the students will no longer be permitted to be the skeptical learner. It happens from day one in the course, and yet does not move to the classroom stage until the unit on drama.

Transforming Introduction to Literature into a Theater of Learning

Three years after teaching full-time at Ocean County College, a public, two-year college in Southern New Jersey, I grew despondent teaching Introduction to Literature. The literature electives that I taught on campus had the traditional span, from bright, engaged and capable students to those barely putting in enough effort to scrape by with a low ‘C.’ The classes were filled with young adults who seemed, perhaps at times exhausted, distracted, or even bored, but these students still a palpable stake in the material; after all, they chose to be there—or the advisor for their major told them they needed the class. There were lectures and assignments that worked better than others; there were discussions that fell flat, and others that seemed never to have really started, but sure enough, on a new day, with a new text, the students would bounce back. By the end of the semester, when I asked the students to write a self-assessment about their experience in the course, many would scribe a rather contrite paragraph about how they wished they didn’t have to spend so many hours working at their job (many students work multiple jobs) or didn’t have so many family disruptions that they could have put more time and effort into their course work. I get it. The majority of students who attend community college—unlike many students who live on campus at four-year colleges—work. They may be considered ‘full-time’ students, but they are also ‘full-time’ workers, working twenty, thirty, and even more hours per week. It is out of necessity; they have no choice, and they are doing the best that they can. Those students, in the end, will be fine. They always will. Their grit, their tenacity is preparing them to
multi-task, to survive. Those students are already performing—they are acting multiple roles, darting from one stage to the next.

It is the students in the first-year classes who are not so sure-footed. They are the actors who need prompters—in fact, they are the actors who need to learn how to act. At the start of the class, English 152: Introduction to Literature, I explain that the course relies on readings of short fiction, poetry, and drama as the basis of the class discussions and writing. To offer the students a chance to get to know each other and their tastes, on the very first day, when I ask my students their favorite books and favorite authors, a majority of the students boldly declare that they don’t like to read and certainly don’t read for pleasure. This is a difficult challenge for any teacher, but a particular challenge for a course that is structured entirely on reading. When I inform them that, sorry, there is no way around reading this class, a collective huff is emitted. It feels as though it is them against me. 24 to 1. Majority has it: reading blows.

As I apply a slight nod, an acknowledgement that I am familiar with this public opinion, and I have registered their sentiment, I remind them that, fortunately or unfortunately, this is a literature class, and, that being the case, it demands reading. Eyes roll. Phones emerge.

At many academic conferences, there is a general dismay expressed by not only how little students are reading, but also complaints about the dearth of quality texts being read. To these rumbles, I often add with great honesty, “at least your students read.” Often I receive a sympathetic grimace, as though I am stating a hyperbole. “No,” I repeat. “My students don’t read.”

On day one with my students, I read aloud the course syllabus and inform them that, despite what they may feel about reading, they will not only be required to read, but also, they will also be required to perform. To this, they frantically eye each other, as if to confirm it is
some type of gag. She wouldn’t really make us do that. Would she? I explain that this classroom is a parallel to the theatre because the average audience who attends a play is there with a direct expectation: they are in their seats to receive the message; they are in their seats to be given something. However, the real role of the audience is to be part of the spectacle, to shape, to shift, to expand, and to contract what is occurring by offering their emotional intensity. At times, the lights are raised, and at times the audience becomes the actor and the actor becomes the audience. When I elaborate that the performance element is not optional, that it is a requirement for the course, I sense more venom being cast my way. I am undeterred and explain that participation, true participation in the course means a commitment to the work of the class in an experiential way. Physically being present in class is not participation. In the back row of the classroom sits a group of students with the body language of extreme resistance and hostility—folded arms, stony faces, occasional snickers and whispers. I offer that they have the option to find another course, that they could certainly drop and add into another section---it is the first day of the semester—but that participation means doing more than simply raising a hand and mumbling a vague response. I inform them that during the three units covered in the course—short fiction, poetry, and, lastly drama—the expectations for their efforts would rise. The course, I explain, culminates in their staging a play in class. To certify that they understand the expectation and their obligation to the class, on the final page of the syllabus, I insert a formal contract.

Having students sign a contract has been an effective tool increasing motivation for middle and secondary school teachers (Theobald, 2005). In higher education, studies have shown the ‘learning contract’ has also proven useful in fostering self-direction, commitment and aid academic performance (Frank & Scharff, 2013). The act of signing a contract that clearly states
that the student is responsible for adhering to the policies set forth in the syllabus and is directly responsible for any and all consequences that result from breaking the policies, in the very least, clarifies the expectations, and, at its very best, may inform the student that she must assume personal responsibility for her own learning outcome. After twelve years of formal schooling, while first year community college students are not novice learners, many do not display a deep psychological drive to be self-directing and to import and synthesize their own prior experiences into their new learning environment. Many young adults have yet to possess the full characteristic of adult learners (Frank & Scharff, 2013). Successful self-direction, develops as part of a maturation process in the transition from adolescent to adult learner. Yet, it does not always come naturally, and while the odds of achieving this state by their final year as an undergraduate, it rarely is present for their first-two years. Thus, the community college students often need to be nudged and led, even reluctantly, toward a more mature state of learning.

In the first unit on fiction, we establish seating in circle. The decentralization of authority—no podium to signify an answer-depot—is a spatial recognition of the shared democratization of the classroom space. For some, the face-to-face seating arrangement, eye contact, and physical proximity in an academic setting are unnerving. Through repetition of holding the text, referring to the text, alerting ourselves to the possibilities contained in the text, discussions of unsympathetic characters from Flannery O’Connor to character transformations from Jhumpa Lahiri, we parse the stories, requiring that around the circle, the task of pulling out examples from the text, and reading the line aloud before attempts at interpretation begin as awkward, even painful exercises. Countering mumbles of, “I don’t know. . . “ with, but you do know, read it, it is right there, make for some dramatic pauses. The pauses, too, are part of the theatrical experience and of learning itself. Characters, like students, at times, need to wait,
weigh their options, and prepare their own defense. The waiting creates intrigue and its own form of drama. The safety comes from the text. The lines provide the version of truth that can later be disassembled. This is all the beginning.

By poetry, mid-semester, comes the mandate that poetry is, at its foundation, an aural art form, it demands to be read aloud, and every student provides poems to perform. Still seated, still safely in their circle of desks and chairs, the students, many blushing, many stammering recite Billy Collins or John Donne. The attempt to desanctify poetry by inserting elements of biography, alert the students that the poets were not passive dandies but many were outcasts striving for social change. Recitation of the language leads to hearing the structure upon which the poem is constructed, including all of its rhythms, rhyme scheme and meter. The physical properties of the poem then are revealed (Kenner, 1988). The ownership of the discovery of the sounds in the poem is theirs; they utter the lines, filling the room with the power of the images that had, just a second prior, been silent upon the page. Still doubtful of their ability to pronounce and articulate, they confess to favoring certain poems. As a group, they agree that certain poems have a ‘tight flow.’

And then it is drama. Many students, as well, as professors, feel a profound hesitancy about performing, albeit for different reasons. Most students struggle with their own insecurities of seeming foolish or not getting it right; the risks seem high; their fears feel very real. For some faculty, the idea of performance also may feel uncomfortable. The stigma attached to performance—to literally playing the text—lingers where it may be viewed as an anti-intellectual gimmick (Showalter, 2003). Questions may arise of what the point would be of using acting when it is not an acting class taught by the theater department. Acting courses, some professors may assert, belong in an acting class, and why spend time in class acting when one should
simply be analyzing the text. Yet, according to J.L. Styan’s seminal book about teaching drama, *The Dramatic Experience* (1965), “the great advance since mid-century has been the recognition of it as a performance art.” David Bevington and Gavin Witt, at the University of Chicago assert that there is great virtue in using an acting approach to teaching literature because it is interactive. Teaching drama as performance certainly has had the most attention with regards to teachers of Shakespeare. The Modern Language Association’s anthology, *Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance* (1999) is a rich resource of techniques and performance strategies designed to aid in the appreciation of Shakespeare’s work. While some first-year introduction to literature courses may include some Shakespeare, others may avoid it altogether. With or without the Bard, the way to get students involved, to have them speaking and moving and engaging, is by removing the barrier between themselves and the text. The students are forced—required to inhabit the text.

Princeton theatre professor and Tony-Award winning theatre director, John Doyle asserts: “A practical and visual approach always works best for teaching. Students connect to a text best by getting up and doing it. They do not necessarily need to perform a whole text, but at least sections. Moments. Key moments. Students need to picture it, think of how it will look. For students should not be made to feel that they have to be ‘good’ at it, but to understand that the text is a living thing and was meant to be spoken and enriched by the human experience. Made vital.” (personal communication, February 13, 2015). Doyle believes that drama has the capacity to encourage learning in almost every discipline (2015).

I begin by informing the class that there is not a single play written to be read. No playwright labors to craft a dramatic work with the great hope that it will be silently read in a textbook. Theatre is doing and seeing. And that is what will occur. Even the roughest staging of a
scene, stripped bare of all props, costumes, lighting—all the artifice of stagecraft—can be revelatory. In the class, students are asked to volunteer for roles. Limitations of needing to cast according to the gender or race or ethnicity as deemed by the original playwright are tossed aside. A reminder of the traditions of Elizabethan theatre where males played all the female roles, helps to assure students of long established patterns of crossing gender boundaries. Once liberated from those constraints, students request roles with an understanding that these characters are open and available to them no matter their age, gender, or ethnicity. The students, by this point, will have finished reading the play. Their knowledge of the text may however be superficial. They can parrot back simple answers about what occurred, who did what, but it is clear that the play is a flat, one-dimensional text housed inside a textbook. It is yet another text, written by someone at some point that they, for some reason, have to read. It is not their story; it does not portray their life. Their disinterest is apparent. Who cares?

Elaine Showalter, the renowned Professor of English at Princeton University, argues (2003), “of all teaching techniques, performance can be the most active and student-centered, and can lead to engaged intellectual discovery of the text” (p. 87). Among the many discoveries that students make through performance is the sound of the language. Students need assistance in comprehending the alterity, and they need to discover the modernity that exists with texts that may, at first, appear arcane. This is where speech and performance, gesture and movement begin the magic of erasing the chasm between student and text. In a classroom performance of a play, the students have the opportunity to create the actual object of their study. Showalter writes (2003), “by becoming themselves involved in the complex interaction of text, actors, and audience that constitutes a play in performance, students can gain unique insights” (p.81). When the students who normally would be dozing or texting in the back row of the classroom are now
on their feet, reciting and moving, listening to dialogue and anticipating their queues, the play is no longer an inanimate text; it is alive, it is current, and, most importantly, it is theirs.

The hesitation to engage with a text is quickly erased when the students forego the concept that a classic drama is like a fragile, obscure and remote object encased behind a barrier in a museum. Students need to strip away the so-called sanctity—especially when working with a play by Shakespeare. When students are handed the play and have full authority to interact with it with their own bodies and voices, they are the ones defining meaning, and they are, with their own sensibilities, modernizing and reinventing the text to their own culture. As the students seize control of the text, the former reluctance toward literature dissipates. It is no longer a dead text, remote and apart from their lives. They are the ones upon the stage; they inhabit the front of the classroom that now serves as the proscenium. The students who remain in their seats have also been transformed from passive students to active audience members. Their role is also critical, and they own it. Suddenly, a gray classroom is transformed. Slouching students straighten up. Phones disappear. All eyes are fixed on the actor at stage center. For those seventy-five minutes, it is no longer static lines in a textbook but an impassioned plea for justice or mercy or love.

The professor—normally the sole person all semester ‘acting’ upon the stage of the class—has disappeared to the back. It is not about the professor because the class cannot rely on the professor for this experience. The professor, in fact, is irrelevant. This is their learning; this is their performance, and, once the play begins, they sense it. Their collective reaction to the scene is what drives the pace, creating moments to pause for laughter to quiet or for a character to storm out after a heightened exchange. Rooting for their peers, there is a unified sense of purpose. They are all in this together; they sense that risks are being taken and those risks are
appreciated. When the student who is playing Walter Younger in *Raisin in the Sun* falls to his knees as the brutal stereotype of a repressed, uneducated Black man, there is a tangible collective discomfort and appreciation. They hear the cadence of Hansberry’s dramatic prose in new ways; they now hear the student capturing the rhythms, the pauses, the stammering, and it works to reveal the raw, emotional truth of the play. It is magical and transformative. The air is thick with anticipation of the line to come.

Besides the lines of dialogue, the stage directions also yield literary insights. While the stage directions would have been simply skimmed or skipped if the play had been assigned as a piece of homework, in performance, they provide the play with the richness that comes from elements of stage craft. Knocking on doors, entrances and exits, appearances and disappearances, touches and shoves, all add to the visual and auditory realm of the experience. It is the seeing and doing of theatre that creates dramatic impact and emotional significance. For the students in the audience and those performing, it is an occasion to focus on the relationship between the verbal and the nonverbal. As an audience member in a theatre, often the first and final impressions are visual and aural. All of this asks students to imagine a performance and thereby they are forced to pay close attention to the text.

**Conclusion**

Some students will stumble on lines, some will miss their queues, some will stiffly shuffle about the stage, but it is real and it is theirs, and the impact is genuine. As part of the assignment, I have both the students who acted and those who served as audience write about their experience. Every single semester, without fail, for five years, students affirm that they have a better understanding of the play. They discover the main conflicts are clearer to them; they describe the strong emotions they felt in the work; they remark how they appreciate the
differences in the characters by seeing how they interact with each other. It never fails to produce results. Based on years of having my students write about their experiences, I have found that for students in the English 152 class, the in-class performance is a consistent ‘highlight’ for students across the board—from those who excelled in the course as well as those who struggled.

This powerful phenomenon is one in which ‘student engagement’ manifests itself in a tangible, physical form. It sweeps students out of the complacency of viewing a text as a vague and archaic sentiment and propels them into the center of the text where all distance between character and reader disappears, leaving only the sublime expression of art. It is tangible and profound. It is a live, unified and shared experience—like theatre itself—that simply cannot be replicated any other way.

For the educator facing the postmodern predicament of how to educate at a time where distrust and impatience of a liberal arts education seems to be at an all-time high, and students tend to have a more engaged relationship with their electronic monitor than their human professor, the strategy of employing live, academic performance of texts may be the only way to uniformly create a seismic educational impact in the classroom. The importance of allowing pretend, the imaginary, into the classroom is a practical and useful too, especially for the full-time, adjunct, or graduate teaching assistant assigned what, at times feels like a near-impossibility—to teach those who do not want to learn.

Through performance, the classroom itself becomes a revolving proscenium---one that is in constant motion (Felman, 2001). Then, the once static boundary between students and the text is erased. At this moment, intellectual activism by way of theatrical performances challenges the reluctant and even hostile learner, as the classroom is magnificently transformed into an artistic
site and center of community. Learning then becomes intentionally dynamic and fully alive, as it was always meant to be. Not a single student is left bored, disinterested, or disengaged.

**References**


