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Teaching Is Performance: 
Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor

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Analogies between teaching and performance have recently emerged in educational literature, but with a reductive, actor-centered perspective that diminishes the complexity of both performative and instructional phenomena. This article reconceptualizes performance as a generative metaphor for educational research based on theoretical and methodological points of contact between instructional communication and performance studies. It asks which aspects of educational experience open themselves up to performance-centered research and explores issues around which new research agendas can be developed in both disciplines.

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The claim that teaching is a performance is at once self-evident and oxymoronic. In casual conversation, the statement inevitably brings smiles of amused, if rueful, recognition from colleagues who have struggled to script the “well-wrought lecture,” hold the attention of a critical audience, improvise a participatory exercise, or dramatically land on a key point during the last seconds of a 50-minute period. As a colloquial expression, the performance metaphor is readily acknowledged by seasoned educators who recognize that effective teaching often relies upon “theatrical” techniques of rehearsal, scripting, improvisation, characterization, timing, stage presence, and critical reviews.

As a theoretical claim, however, it is highly problematic, if not overtly polemical to institutionalized assumptions about the purpose of education and one’s function as an educator. The ideology of American formal education has been constructed largely on models of technology, industry, and corporate bureaucracy (Doyle, 1986; McLaren, 1989a; Reitman, 1986; Wise, 1979). Several compelling studies have credited the prevalence of workplace metaphors in curriculum design and teacher education with an increasingly dehumanized educational experience and the progressive devaluing of teachers (Egan, 1988; Marshall, 1988). The analogy between educational and technocorporate contexts situates teachers as semiskilled technicians held accountable for their productivity solely on the basis of students’ standardized test scores. Such utilitarianism grossly impoverishes the educational experience for both teachers and learners, argues McLaren (1989a), and contributes to the development of a marginally skilled worker class set against the liberally educated executive class.

In general, the new efficiency-smart and conservative-minded discourse encourages schools to define themselves essentially as service institutions charged with the task of providing students with the requisite technical expertise to enable them to find a place within the corporate hierarchy. (p. 5)

Such populist critiques as Sykes’s Profscam (1988), Kimball’s Tenured Radicals (1990), and D’ Souza’s Illiberal Education (1991) powerfully reinscribe this conservative, technocratic view of education.

Performance, on the other hand, still holds a largely pejorative meaning for the cultural psyche. By its very nature it is suspect, associated with pretense, artifice, deception, affectation, and entertainment. In The Antitheatrical Prejudice (1981), Jonas Barish explains how the western philosophical tradition presupposes distinct epistemological claims, theoretical traditions and social functions for rational and aesthetic experience, that persistently have situated performance at the margins of everyday life and academic discourse. It is no wonder that a metaphor that joins such seemingly antithetical concepts would find uneasy acceptance among the educational community. “The majority of Americans, including most educators,” observes Reitman (1986), “believe that teaching is too functionally utilitarian an activity, hence too ‘important’ to be an art” (p. 137). Colloquialisms that discount a theatrical teaching style as “a song and dance,” or a popular course as “just a dog and pony show,” attest
Teaching Is Performance

to how deeply ingrained and fiercely maintained our antitheatrical prejudice becomes when performance impinges, in any significant manner, on the very serious business of education. As long as education remains "utilitarian" and performance "entertainment," the claim that teaching is performance will evoke nothing beyond the facile acknowledgment that a certain theatricality can help hold the attention of drowsy undergraduates in early morning or late afternoon classes.

In the boundary-blurring wake of postmodernism, however, the lines separating aesthetic experience from daily experience have become increasingly indeterminate. One result is that performance concepts and terminology have begun to emerge throughout the humanistic disciplines, including pedagogical theory and practice. In "Between Experience and Meaning: Performance as a Paradigm for Meaningful Action" (1986), performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood describes a paradigmatic shift from "positivism to performance" that has enabled "the most radical and unifying ways of thinking about human realities" (p. 28). Regardless of whether one wishes to grant paradigmatic status to performance, a quick glance across academe supports the emergence of performance as both explanatory metaphor and qualitative research method. Anthropologists and folklorists speak of social dramas (Turner, 1982), verbal artistry (Bauman, 1984, 1986), and cultural performance (Schechner, 1985), whereas sociologists continue to investigate the performance of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959, 1981). Interpersonal communication theorists studying naturally occurring talk have turned to performance as a method of conversation analysis, including structuring public performances around conversation transcripts (Crow, 1988; Pelias & Glenn, 1991). Phenomenologists have found performance to be a rich analogy for discussing identity construction (Wilshire, 1982) and the creation/enactment of gender (Butler, 1990). And finally, educators have begun to articulate performance as both an instructional metaphor (McLaren, 1986, 1989b) and a pedagogical method (Fuoss & Hill, 1992; Harrison-Pepper, 1991).

It is a critical moment for performance scholar-practitioners to bring their theoretical and practical knowledge to bear upon this emergent research in education. Such interdisciplinary exchange would offer the educational researcher a new paradigm for conceptualizing educational culture, the dynamics of instructional communication, and methods of teacher training. Performance scholars would gain a new context for exploring the value of performance as a metaphor and method for humanistic research. Classroom teachers in both disciplines would find theoretical justification and methodological procedures for participatory, kinesthetic learning strategies. The purpose of this article is twofold. It will first evaluate the ways in which the performance metaphor is currently being played out in educational literature, suggesting that much of this research diminishes the complexity of both instructional and performative phenomena. Secondly, it will propose an alternative conception of performance that offers a more theoretically sophisticated and methodologically innovative ground for developing new research agendas in educational performance. Based on this reconceptualization, points of connection can be identified between
performance studies and educational research in such areas as instructional narrative, teacher metaphors, kinesthetic learning, and critical pedagogy. Throughout the article, examples of how performance-centered instruction might be implemented in the classroom will be drawn from a recent graduate seminar on teaching as performance.

Performance in Educational Literature

Over the last decade, performance has emerged in educational literature as a metaphor for instructional communication, a method of participatory instruction, and a paradigm for educational experience. Educators have been encouraged to conceive of themselves as “actors” engaged in instructional dramas (Timpson & Tobin, 1982; Rubin, 1985), as “artists” operating on intuition and creativity (Dawe, 1984; Hill, 1985; Barrell, 1991), and as “directors” who orchestrate learning experiences (Park-Fuller, 1991). Theories and methods of kinesthetic learning have been collected in a special issue of Educational Forum, and courses that have performance as both the topic and the method of instruction have been published in mainstream education journals (Harrison-Pepper, 1991; Fuoss & Hill, 1992). Reform-minded educators are beginning to use performance to conceptualize educational culture by examining the rules, roles, and rituals that engage its participants (McLaren, 1986, 1988). Despite this burgeoning interest in performance, however, the ways in which educators are playing out the teaching/performance analogy have not recognized the value of performance as a generative metaphor for educational phenomena. To date, most research literature uses performance solely as a method of enhancing instructional communication. These articles, which might be loosely categorized around the “teacher-as-actor” and “teacher-as-artist” metaphors, rely on a reductive, actor-centered model that impoverishes both educational and performative experience. In what follows, I sketch in broad strokes some of the characteristics and limitations of these instructional metaphors.

Teacher as Actor

Ironically, many who ground themselves most explicitly in performance terminology are constructing the weakest cases. The teacher-as-actor metaphor is based on an undifferentiated equation of educational and theatrical experiences, and a wholly “actor-centered” conception of performance phenomena. Performance is reduced to style, and further, to a particular style of enthusiastic theatricality employed to energize one’s communicative behaviors. Timpson and Tobin’s Teaching as Performing: A Guide to Energizing Your Public Presentation is representative of this research. The authors use beginning acting exercises such as physical and vocal warm-ups, emotional recall, and pantomime to enhance paralinguistic and nonverbal communication. In effect, their prescriptive message is that one should strive to “teach like an actor.” Such studies isolate the performer from the performance context, privilege communicative behaviors over communicative interaction or events, and position students as an amorphous and unreflective body who respond best to accelerated energy—in effect, a “song and dance.” Not only does this perspec-
tive rest on an impoverished sense of performance, it likewise diminishes the complexity of educational interactions. To equate instructional communication with presentational style grossly devalues the intellectual work of teaching and, argues Sprague (1992), is analogous to “replacing intellectually trained journalists with attractive news readers who project an appealing media image” (p. 8).

This is not to say that performance training is not a valuable method for enhancing classroom communication. As one who has successfully used dramatic techniques to enhance my own and others’ expressive repertoire, performance exercises can be an efficient and practical aspect of a comprehensive instructional development program. Nor would I discount the importance of measuring the impact of immediacy behaviors on learning, for it is this body of data that holds us accountable for the idiosyncrasies of our own communicative styles. Studies that highlight a particular performative technique such as storytelling (Cooper, Orban, Henry, & Townsend, 1983), or the impact of humor (Powell & Andresen, 1985), can tell us much about specific communicative strategies. It is to say, however, that an exclusively teacher/performer-centered model cannot begin to mine the richness of the performance metaphor, and in fact, can function to close off heuristic interdisciplinary dialogue. It allows critics such as Ralph Smith (1979) to claim that “if the acting analogy were carried to its logical extreme, a teacher who took it seriously would never have to understand anything” (p. 33). Or to paraphrase a former colleague: “I used to perform in the classroom, but now I am more concerned with the students’ experiences.”

Teacher as Artist

Responding to Dewey’s (1927) charge for an aesthetic experience in education that would “educate the imagination,” “improve sensibilities,” and “provide peak experiences” for students, many educational theorists play out the metaphor of teacher as artist. These studies advocate the aesthetic sensibility and spontaneous creativity associated with performing artists. The hallmark of artistic teachers, claims Barrie Barrell (1991), is their willingness to “forego the insistence upon clear-cut behavioral objectives and predictable learning outcomes for the freedom to adjust and to explore new avenues with unpredictable outcomes” (p. 338). Elliot Eisner (1979), a contemporary forerunner of the teacher-artist movement, emphasizes the human contingencies inherent in learning environments. Artistic teachers cultivate their “educational imagination”—balancing craft with creativity, systems with spontaneity—to meet the specificity of learners’ needs and stimulate their capacity for imaginative conceptualization.

Louis Rubin’s Artistry in Teaching (1985) attempts to lay theoretical ground for classroom artistry by making a case for education as theater. He draws parallels between theatrical and instructional contexts along the following definitional, structural, and functional lines: (a) Teaching and theater are ephemeral experiences that exist in a “perpetual present moment”; both are shaped around intellectual ideas illuminated through multiple perspectives, such that aesthetics are used “to vivify . . . to convince by dramatizing”; (b) education and theater
are interactive events that use tension, timing, and counterpoint as organizational principles designed to engage audiences intellectually and emotionally; (c) teachers and actors both function as critical interpreters driven by an "inner vitality" that stimulates an audience to thought and action (pp. 109–118). Although Rubin’s analogy is promising, his experimental study is disappointing. “Putting content and method temporarily aside,” Rubin led 350 teachers through a series of dramatic workshops and then evaluated their classrooms for evidence of enhanced creativity (p. 103). Not surprisingly, the participating teachers agreed that the workshops had enhanced their communicative style and, therefore, augmented their “overall technical repertory,” but most concluded that “artistic teaching requires far more than theatrical devices” (p. 22). Rubin’s assumption that theatricality can promote classroom artistry reiterates the reductive component inherent to both the actor and the artist metaphors. Performance functions as a means of enhancing instructional communication, rather than as a generative metaphor for examining educational experience. Ultimately, this offers no genuine challenge to the marginal position of performance in instructional contexts.

Though the teacher-artist conception may be philosophically appealing, it is not methodologically instructive. Indeed, a description of what constitutes artistic pedagogy, or a system for evaluating artistry in the classroom, seems to run counter to the instinctive, nebulous creativity privileged by the model. This theoretical flaw is clearly evident in John Hill’s (1985) “The Teacher as Artist: The Case for Peripheral Supervision.” Hill claims that artistic teachers operate on a level of “unconscious competence” whereby their interactions with students are guided by instinct, intuition, and innate creativity. Drawing a distinction between artists and craftspeople, Hill claims that “the teacher-artist is someone so able and so unselfconscious that he or she is unaware . . . specific skills are lost between reflective moments” (p. 184). Because artistic teachers instinctively respond “correctly” to their students, the rationale for their behavior eludes logical reconstruction. In effect, Hill’s “case for peripheral supervision” is based on the assumption that artists are unreflective visionaries who require an external, critical eye to tell them what they are doing and why. In other words, one can be a performing artist, but not a thinking artist, or a theorizing artist. Teacher-performers can engage in creative classroom interactions, but not in scholarly discourse. As one who claims to be both scholar and practitioner of performance, and who struggles diligently to articulate the sources and structures of performative knowledge, I find Hill’s profile of artists to be both theoretically untenable and dangerously misconceived. He propounds a view of performative pedagogy that can be too easily and too justifiably dismissed.

How then, might one resurrect the teaching-as-performance metaphor, if indeed such resurrection is possible and profitable? Based on my own experiences as a teacher-performer and guided by the disciplinary paradigm of performance studies, I am convinced of the heuristic value of performance as both an explanatory metaphor and a pedagogical method for educational phenomena. In order to explore this potential, however, it is necessary first to identify an
alternative conception of performance, as it has been redefined within the field of performance studies.

The Performance Paradigm

In "A Paradigm for Performance Studies," Ronald Pelias and James VanOosting (1987) survey the "magical re-namings" that have driven a disciplinary evolution from oral interpretation to performance studies. Performance-centered research is charged by redefinitions of performers, texts, audiences, and contexts as the discipline continues to articulate performance as a paradigm for humanistic research. The kinetic metaphor that Pelias and VanOosting use to describe the history of performance studies appropriately captures the professional, pluralistic, and nonhierarchical features of the performance phenomenon itself.

The paradigmatic relationship between oral interpretation and performance studies might display the performance of literature as the central circle in a concentric figure widening outward to include social dramas, rituals, storytelling, jokes, organizational metaphors, everyday conversations, indeed any communication act meeting the criteria of aesthetic discourse. (p. 229)

Performance studies' outward motion encourages interdisciplinary dialogue, embraces noncanonical texts, and privileges indigenous performance as it emerges in the context of daily human interaction. As Pelias and VanOosting observe, the performance perspective frames "all utterances as potentially aesthetic, all events as potentially theatrical and all audiences as potentially active participants who can authorize aesthetic experience" (p. 221). The figure-ground shift from thinking about performance as a context-specific event—a traditional theatrical experience—to understanding performance as an essential agent of human experience, enables the researcher to look through the products of human expression to the performance principles that undergird them. In effect, the heuristic value of the performance perspective lies precisely in its shift from product to process which, according to Conquergood (1989), allows the researcher "to listen over time to the unfolding voices, nuances, and intonations of performed meaning" (p. 83).

The performance paradigm has opened a space to begin thinking and talking constructively about education as a performative experience. The critical question is not whether teaching is or is not a performance. Educational and theatrical stages are not identical, and the aesthetic responsibilities and conventions of the educational performer are not the same as those that govern stage performers. Rather, the inclusionary impulse in performance studies allows us to ask in what ways educational phenomena open themselves up to performance-centered research. How might the disciplinary knowledge of performance studies enrich pedagogical uses of performance as both metaphor and methodology? What features of performance can be translated into educational contexts and what kinds of studies are needed to test the applicability and the limitations of the theatrical metaphor?
In order to frame some of the performance issues, questions, and methods that one might bring to bear upon education, I draw upon an organizational scheme developed by Dwight Conquergood to describe research agendas in the anthropology of performance. In a review essay, “Poetics, Play, Process and Power: The Performative Turn in Anthropology” (1989), Conquergood uses these four key words to anchor the performance perspective and collectively define performance research. Though he is speaking specifically about performance ethnography, his schema translates to educational contexts without serious distortion. Moreover, the essay provides a cogent frame for connecting select concepts in educational literature with analogous concepts in performance studies. By dialectically tacking between Conquergood’s essay and work in such areas as instructional narrative, teacher metaphors, kinesthetic learning, and critical pedagogy, a profile of possible interdisciplinary research emerges. I further articulate these connections with projects developed in a graduate seminar entitled “Teaching as Performance,” which was designed to explore points of connection between education and performance theory. Workshops and microteaching assignments from that seminar are referenced as examples of how performance might be operationalized in the classroom.

Educational Poetics

The “poetics” of performance-centered research, says Conquergood, “features the fabricated, invented, imagined, constructed nature of human realities. Cultures and selves are not given, they are made; even, like fictions, they are ‘made up’... they hold out the promise of reimagining and refashioning the world” (1989, p. 83). The poetics of educational performance likewise privileges the creative and constructed dimensions of pedagogical practice. It recognizes that educators and students engage not in “the pursuit of truths,” but in collaborative fictions—perpetually making and remaking world views and their tenuous positions within them. Educational poetics privileges multiple stories and multiple tellers as the narratives of human experience are shaped and shared by all participants in the performance community. Performative pedagogy supplants “information-dispensing” with the negotiation and enactment of possible knowledge claims. According to McLaren (1988), the performance-centered educator “understands teaching to be an essentially improvised drama that takes place within a curricular narrative” (p. 174). In effect, performance reframes the whole educational enterprise as a mutable and ongoing ensemble of narratives and performances, rather than a linear accumulation of isolated, discipline-specific competencies.

Narrative-based studies in curriculum design along with studies of metaphor in teachers’ talk are particularly well suited for articulating the poetics of educational performance. In Teaching as Storytelling (1986) and “Metaphors in Collision: Objectives, Assembly Lines and Stories” (1988), Kieran Egan counters the “positivistic conception of learning” with “the constructivist nature of sense-making” (1988, p. 64). Proceeding from the assumption that “the narrative form most precisely reflects the predisposition to make sense of the world in affectively engaging ways,” Egan develops a narrative-based model of instructional
Teaching Is Performance

design (1988, p. 79). He moves beyond the practical observation that effective teachers often tell stories in the course of a lesson to the more comprehensive view of education as a holistic narrative project—shifting stories that do not mirror the world, but, rather, attempt to articulate our experience within it. Egan’s five-point procedure restructures the selection, organization, presentation, and evaluation of course content to make material more accessible, relevant, and affectively engaging for the elementary school children with whom he works. Regrettably he assumes only a simple, linear narrative, structured around binary opposites, that ends in unambiguous conflict resolution. Despite the limitations of this narrative form, however, Egan opens up a rich and deeply performative alternative to traditional models of curricular design and instructional communication.

Egan’s narrative model offered my seminar participants a vocabulary and a set of procedures for experimenting with narrative variations appropriate for the college communication classroom. In a series of microteaching assignments they were asked to diagram potential narrative structures—linear, circular, dialogic, and so forth—and demonstrate their use in a simulated classroom context. One successful example featured collaborative storytelling that centered around students’ life experiences. Naturally, the shared anecdotal information created an interactive classroom climate and an experiential common ground between students. More interestingly, it was found that storytelling could be used to frame course content that otherwise might have been “dispensed” through a syllabus or introductory lecture. For example, simulating the first day of a beginning course in interpersonal communication, an instructor asked the class to relate instances in which their familial or romantic relationships had suffered because of a lack of communication. The stories quickly began to overlap in an accelerated, collaborative fashion as students discovered similarities between their experiences. When asked to abstract common themes from the stories, students could immediately identify a list of communicative factors that had contributed to the disruption of their relationships. The instructor then reassumed narrative authority by pairing each item on the list with a specific disciplinary term or theory. These narrative themes, with their companion communicative principles, were then proposed as possible units for the course, thereby serving as a kind of communally generated syllabus. Student response was overwhelmingly favorable. Not only could they immediately recognize the connection between communication theory and their own lived experiences, but furthermore, they assumed responsibility in shaping the content and structure of the course.

Further experiments focused on how specific narrative devices or innovative narrative structures might generate new forms of classroom communication. One student’s narrative diagram of a spiraling helix was proposed as an alternative to linear, cause-effect models for organizing and presenting information. He identified theoretical terminology and everyday experience as the two interlocking strands of the helix, whereas the upward spiral movement represented a series of increasingly complex communication contexts. This narrative structure, he argued, would facilitate a more holistic understanding of
Pineau communication principles than the traditional linear format because it held theory and practice in constant tension while enabling the same basic principle to be examined in multiple contexts. His microteaching demonstration explored the concept of self-disclosure, beginning with two person interactions and culminating in the kind of “public confessions” common on television talk shows. As he worked through this information with the class, it became apparent that once students grasped the basic idea—the relationship between theories of self-disclosure and their experiential application—they were able to discuss its operation across diverse contexts. This form of organizing and presenting material did, indeed, result in a very holistic understanding of communication theory in action. Seminar members went on to ask whether specific narrative strategies might provide a model for critical thinking. For example, could the metafictional device of self-reflexive frame breaking be integrated into classroom discourse such that every knowledge claim would turn back on itself in a radical self-questioning? An experiment in resisting narrative closure instructed class members to “answer” each question with another question, thereby modeling the open-endedness of the critical process.

Understanding classroom discourse as a form of narrative and integrating narrative structures and devices into their teaching freed my seminar students to consider alternative means for organizing and presenting course content. At the very least, these narrative experiments broke open unexamined, sedimented conventions of lesson design and implementation; at best, they stimulated collaborative and innovative classroom communication.

A second connection between performance and educational research can be found in studies of generative metaphors that teachers use in talking about their theory and practice. In her germinal work on teachers’ talk, Freema Elbaz (1983) adopted the term “personal practical knowledge” for the experiential understanding that teachers acquire throughout their personal and educational history, and which becomes the basis of their praxis. Similar studies by Clandinin (1986), Mattingly (1991), and Munby (1986) used participant observation and interviews to “capture the thinking of teachers in teachers’ own language,” and observe how their experiential insight informs daily classroom interactions (Munby, 1986, p. 198). Clandinin found that verbal imagery often clustered around metaphors such as “planting a seed” or “making a home” and, further, that these metaphors reveal the complex coalescence of personal and professional experience and of theory and practice. Munby attempted a concordance of related imagery in order to see how teachers use metaphor to construct their professional world, and conversely, how studies of metaphor might aid understanding of teachers’ professional knowledge in general.

Assuming that these metaphors link personal and professional knowledge and may serve to translate theory to practice, seminar participants were asked to articulate their personal/educational philosophies through a metaphoric “character” of their design. A dramatic character analysis then became the basis of a microteaching assignment that focused on the educational philosophy undergirding the metaphor and the specific classroom strategies enacted by that character. Predictably, we found that “gardeners and midwives” viewed learning
Teaching Is Performance

as a natural process of maturation in which teachers primarily facilitated the inherent curiosity of their students. Lessons were loosely constructed, relying heavily on open discussion, and students were given much freedom in determining the focus, pace, and style of instruction. Because emphasis was on personal development rather than content mastery, evaluation was highly subjective and individualized. In contrast, “tour guides, conductors, and authors” acknowledged students’ natural curiosity but maintained a measure of authority based on their content and instructional expertise. These teachers followed the lecture-discussion model, structured their classroom environment, and relied on more traditional evaluation methods. “Executives,” of course, favored strict classroom management, time-on-task, content knowledge, objective exams, and grading curves. The information we gained through this exercise was not new. Different educational philosophies play themselves out in distinct classroom behaviors, and effective/reflective teachers show consistency between their theory and their practice. The speed, however, with which students grasped these ideas, the depth to which they internalized them, and the consistency with which they could hold themselves and others accountable for their actions was a significantly “new” experience for the class. One day of metaphoric performance revealed in crystalline, experiential, and immediate ways what a week of lecture/discussion on educational theory had failed to achieve. Moreover, students were confronted with the performative fact that actors construct audiences, and no performance occurs in a social vacuum. In other words, while performance empowered students to imaginatively construct their teaching personae, it also forced them to reflect critically upon the implications of their enactments.

The poetics of educational performance highlight the aesthetic dimensions of teaching and learning. The examples I have cited make a strong case that performative pedagogy—exemplified here in the use of narrative and metaphor—results in creative classroom practices. In addition to enhancing instructional effectiveness, however, this aspect of the performance paradigm also generates provocative research questions. Which narrators are privileged within current educational practices, and what are the consequences of casting students as “characters” in the instructor’s story rather than as full narrative agents in their own learning processes? How might the performative competence with which students tell stories in social interactions be used to facilitate their articulation of theoretical “stories” in classroom contexts? What conventions govern classroom performance? How might these behavioral cues be used to predict student response and thereby facilitate learning? What constitutes artistry in teaching, and what measures might be developed for assessing and rewarding such excellence?

Educational Play

The “playful” nature of performance, Conquergood continues, “is linked to improvisation, innovation, experimentation, frame, reflection, agitation, irony, parody, jest, clowning and carnival” (1989, p. 83). The nature, significance, and functions of human play have been well detailed in such works as Johannes Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1955) and,
in educational contexts, in Virginia Koste’s *Dramatic Play in Childhood: Rehearsal for Life* (1987). As a performative act, play enables the kinetic and kinesthetic understanding of real and imagined lived experiences, set apart from the responsibilities and culpabilities that normally attend such experimentation. Conquergood explains: “The metacommunicative signal ‘this is play’ temporarily releases, but does not disconnect, us from workaday realities and responsibilities and opens up a privileged space for sheer deconstruction and reconstruction” (1989, p. 83). As a pedagogical method, performative play privileges full body involvement—literally, learning from the inside—combined with keen self-reflection on the nature and implications of one’s actions. Harrison-Pepper’s (1991) interdisciplinary course on ritual, play, and expressive behavior accessed anthropological theory on cultural performances through workshops designed for reenacting, improvising, and reflecting upon the performative behaviors described in the readings. Based on Huizinga’s theories of gaming, for example, her students playfully engaged in blackjack, arm wrestling, red light/green light, and Pig-Pong. Their improvisational play lent experiential credence to discussions of competition, rules, community, and metacommunication. Her excellent description of this course in “Dramas of Persuasion: Utilizing Performance in the Classroom” (1991) provides convincing documentation of the pedagogical efficacy of performance. “The workshops let us experience by doing rather than experience by being told,” one student remarked; “it’s a demonstration of theory” (p. 125). In effect, Harrison-Pepper concludes: “students were using themselves and their own behaviors as a primary interdisciplinary tool of the course” (p. 127).

As a theoretical construct, performative play aligns itself with power and politics. Conquergood continues:

> As soon as a worldview has been made, lines drawn, categories defined, hierarchies erected, then the trickster, the archetypal performer, moves in to breach norms, violate taboos, turn everything upside down. By playing with the social order, unsettling certainties, the trickster intensifies awareness of the vulnerability of our institutions. The trickster's playful impulse promotes a radical self-questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step toward transformation. (1989, p. 83)

How deeply this passage resonates with Deborah Britzman’s (1986) critique of teacher-education programs in “Cultural Myths in the Making of a Teacher: Biography and Social Structure in Teacher Education.” Britzman addresses the deeply entrenched “institutional biographies” that prospective teachers bring to their profession. Implicit myths such as “teacher as rugged individualist,” or the separation of educational life from its sociopolitical context, argues Britzman, function as “reproductive mechanisms” that reinscribe utilitarian and hierarchical models of education. When she, like Giroux, calls for “a language of critique and possibility” that could interrogate and transform educational theory and practice, she is, in a sense, calling for the pedagogical trickster who could challenge entrenched patterns, destabilize power relations, and open a space for a truly revolutionary pedagogy.
Britzman spoke in a particularly rich manner to one seminar student who set Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) into dialogue with Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979). Her microteaching presentation centered on multiculturalism in basic communication courses and attempted to dislodge her own authority as both instructor and international student. Adapting one of Boal’s improvisational exercises she asked students collectively, and on their own initiative, to construct a scenario that would bring two people with distinct ethnic identities and ideologies into conflict. Volunteer performers began to construct a scenario, rehearsing under the direction of their classmates while the instructor sat silently in the audience. Following Boal’s model, students could interrupt the action at any point, changing its direction and even taking the place of the original performers. A powerful, theoretically rich discussion of intercultural conflict emerged through this performance, informed by, but not restricted to, concepts addressed in their basic text. Apart from her initial explanation of the exercise, the instructor effectively switched roles with her students, empowering them to investigate, through the immediacy of their own behaviors and responses, the complexity of intercultural communication. Of all the examples of performative pedagogy the seminar offered, students claimed that this experience most clearly demonstrated the decentralized power relations of the educational trickster-performer.

The concept of play, with its attendant implications of experimentation, innovation, critique, and subversion, breaks open conventionalized classroom practices. If performance creates a play space of possibility removed from the culpabilities of everyday life, would it not provide a valuable medium for confronting the “dangerous” topics of contemporary society? Issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia can be explored more candidly within the relative safety of the performance frame than is usually possible outside of the classroom. As a theoretical construct, performative play promotes a critique of instructional norms and traditions. A researcher might ask, “Who are the tricksters within educational culture, and under what conditions are they allowed to breach norms? How do democratic strategies such as workshops, open discussion, and student-generated assignments function within the overall system? Are such practices genuinely revolutionary, or do they function as isolated instances that can be contained and controlled by the overarching institutional hierarchies?”

**Educational Process**

Conquergood’s third key word for performative research is process: the “emergent, temporal, contingent, provisional, indeterminate, dynamic destabilizing . . . shift from product to productivity” (1989, p. 83). Performance privileges the fluid, ongoing, often contradictory features of human experience that resist reification and closure. It acknowledges that identities are always multiple, overlapping ensembles of real and possible selves who enact themselves in direct relation to the context and communities in which they perform. This feature of performance aligns itself with current educational research that examines the multiplicity of roles, both within and without instructional contexts, that teachers assume in the course of their professional lives. Fenstermacher and
Pineau

Soltis (1986), for example, argue for a broad repertoire of teaching personae that instructors can employ to meet the learning needs of specific communities. Heck and Williams (1984) acknowledge how administrative duties demand that teachers act as policymakers, managers, and community liaisons in addition to their instructional roles. A processual approach not only stresses the fluid flexibility with which teachers must shift roles, but also, more importantly, the interdependence and overlap of these personae. Certainly, the tenure expectations for university professors demand that we function simultaneously as teachers and researchers, and further, that our classrooms can provide the richest field for instructional research (Duckworth, 1986).

One of the most cogent and persuasive arguments for the holistic process of education is given in Madeleine Grumet’s *Bitter Milk: Women and Teaching* (1988). Grumet argues that the process of reproducing ourselves—biologically, ideologically, and critically—is the most fundamental human experience, the common thread woven across personal, professional, and cultural identities. Her “reproductive theory” links familial and educational experience as the dialectical basis for critical reflexivity and social transformation.

For reproducing ourselves also brings a critical dimension to biological and ideological reproduction by suggesting the reflexive capacity of parents to reconceive our own childhoods and education as well as our situations as adults and to choose another way for ourselves expressed in the nurture of our progeny. (p. 8)

More specifically, Grumet advocates a feminist pedagogy that uses instructional design to “interrupt the male discourse of [education] with accounts of epistemology and curriculum drawn from the experience of reproduction and domesticity’’ (p. xix). She argues that the interanimating spheres of our personal and professional lives enrich our pedagogy when we allow our embeddedness in multiple worlds to nurture that same multiplicity in the developing selves of our students.

Performance process signals a shift from product to productivity. This move enables researchers to look beyond specific performative events and focus their attention on performance as a research process in itself. The claim that “performance is a way of knowing,” a qualitative research method for examining aesthetic communication, has long been the disciplinary touchstone of performance scholars, practitioners, and educators. We believe that unique insights are gained by engaging information with and through the body—insights that often elude disembodied, intellectual reflection. In disciplinary terms, performance methodology is an intimate, somatic engagement, a means of “feeling on the pulses” the rhythms, nuances, and kinesthetic idiosyncrasies of human communicative behavior. To the performance practitioner, it is a rigorous and systematic exploration-through-enactment of actual and possible lived experiences. The performance method takes a variety of forms, depending upon the text and context of the research. When engaging literary texts, performance
methodology combines literacy criticism with dramatic characterization. In ethnographic contexts, the performance researcher often participates in cultural rituals as a way of kinesthetically exploring the host community. For the performance artist, the rehearsal process is a medium for asking questions of the text, experimenting with possible solutions and shaping a formal presentation of their research into a theatrical production. Although this method bears resemblance to such practices as role-playing or drama therapy, genuine performance means probing beyond the surface of observable behaviors. Performance combines full body engagement with critical reflexivity; information must be engaged somatically as well as intellectually. It is the dialectical process of doing and reflecting, experiencing and interpreting that distinguishes performance methodology from simply "acting out."

Theoretically, performance methodology is aligned with educational research that heralds situated knowing and kinesthetic learning processes (McLaren, 1988; Moore, 1989). Historically, there are strong links between performance methodology and methods of teacher training. "Rehearsing" one's teaching personae is well established in educational literature and practice. Elementary and secondary certification is dependent upon the student teaching experience, education classes regularly employ microteaching, and analyzing videotapes is common practice in faculty development consultations. How, then, would a performance-centered approach to instructional communication differ from current practices, and what advantages might be gained from incorporating performance into teacher education programs? Performance workshops can heighten one's attention to communicative behaviors and provide an immediate, experiential alternative for feedback. Rather than the delayed and kinesthetically disconnected experience of analyzing one's teaching video, or listening/reading postperformance critique, the performance workshop allows the student teacher to experience, adjust, and reexperience him- or herself in the "moment of doing." Moreover, the behavioral specificity demanded by performance, the emphasis on the slightest nuances of voice or gesture, accentuates awareness and reflection on the subtleties of communicative interaction. It was the performance students in my seminar who moved most easily from their background in dramatic characterization to the development of possible teaching personae, bringing the nuances of character refinement to their developing pedagogical repertoires. The following example is instructive.

Working with Fenstermacher and Soltis's (1986) three teaching personae—executive, therapist, and liberationist—a student was asked to give three consecutive introductions using the performative behaviors appropriate to these roles. As "executive," he positioned himself behind the desk in an erect posture with hands planted firmly on the chair back. In a low voice with short, declarative statements, he introduced himself as Professor ______, gave the title of the course, and announced that objectives, assignments, and grading criteria were clearly listed on the syllabus he had prepared. Students responded to this distanced formality with a respectful silence. Moving immediately into a "therapist" persona, he brought the chair in front of the desk, leaned forward, smiling, giving us his first name and asked what had led students to enroll in
Pineau

the course. He spoke in conversational phrases rather than complete sentences, replaced direct eye contact with a more openly invitational scan, and punctuated his talk with idiosyncratic chuckles and exclamations. Students responded to this "performance of personhood" with equally personable responses. The final "liberationist" performance was most interesting. The student-teacher deftly reversed the chair and straddled it, looking silently, but invitingly, at the class for several minutes. Initially, this performance was also met with silence, but one that was markedly different from the first performance. Students signaled their discomfort by fidgeting and refusing to make eye contact with their instructor. Gradually, they began to ask questions about the class and to volunteer their own expectations of him. Having derailed their expectations of classroom demeanor, he had cleared the space for a liberationist critique of embedded classroom practices that gave him sole responsibility for initiating interaction. Interestingly, our summary discussion focused on the manipulation of the chair, which seemed to exemplify the politics of the three positions. The executive's chair reinscribed his power, privilege and expertise, whereas the therapist used it to establish common ground and negotiable space. The liberationist, however, blatantly subverted the symbol by reversing and straddling the chair, signaling the iconoclasm he wished the students to emulate. Again, the performance had brought to fruition, in experiential ways, the content of the course readings.

The processual view of education acknowledges the interconnectedness of diverse roles played out by teachers and students, and furthermore, the necessity of engaging the whole person, rather than disembodied intellects. Performance offers a vocabulary and a methodology for articulating these concerns. How can the notion of interdependent, instructional roles be used to restructure the merit and tenure system such that teaching and service are given equitable value alongside published research? Do current TA training and mentoring programs sufficiently prepare novice educators to negotiate the multiple roles demanded of them? In the pedagogical arena, we might ask, "What curricular areas are most conducive to performance-centered learning? What measures can be developed to assess the benefits of such kinesthetic techniques? If performance does, indeed, access unique insights, do we need to evaluate course objectives in light of their rational bias?"

Educational Power

Performative research is deeply concerned with issues of power and authority, Conquergood concludes; the associative terms he invokes are "politics, history, ideology, domination, resistance, appropriation, struggle, accommodation, subversion, and contestation" (1989, p. 84). Aesthetic, cultural, and everyday performances are always politically and historically situated, such that they may be viewed as ongoing ideological enactments. Moreover, because performances are public events, Conquergood continues, they are "a site of struggle where competing interests intersect, and different viewpoints and voices get articulated" (p. 84). This leads performance researchers to ask the following:
How does performance reproduce, legitimate, uphold or challenge, critique or subvert ideology? . . . How are performances situated between forces of accommodation and resistance? How do they simultaneously reproduce and struggle against hegemony? What are the performative resources for interrupting master scripts? (p. 84)

In an important sense, investigations of power inflect every aspect of performance research, because by its very nature, the performance paradigm is multivocal and counterhegemonic. Embracing indigenous texts, it counters dominant voices with those that speak from the margins. Claiming the body as the locus of subjectivity, it rejects the mind/body dualism and rational empiricism that has dominated Western theory and methodology. Privileging process over product, performance foregrounds epistemology—the means by which we come to know and understand our world. And finally, by recognizing performance as a public, social phenomenon, the paradigm invites investigations of performance as political struggle and resistance. These characteristics reveal the epistemological and methodological alignment between education and performance studies as both have begun to embrace critical theory as a means of social inquiry and transformation. Following a synopsis of the major tenets of critical pedagogy, I will examine how performance theory and practice can participate in this reform.

Jo Sprague (1992) recently targeted critical theory as the most significant means for expanding and enriching research agendas in instructional communication. Critical pedagogy identifies schooling as a form of cultural politics, turning an investigatory eye on the ways in which educational institutions perpetuate the interests of the dominant class while continuing to disenfranchise others on the basis of race, class, and gender (Apple, 1982; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). As the basis of reform, critical educators advocate a language of critique and a language of possibility: interconnected modalities that seek to interrogate and transform the existing social order through democratic education. The language of critique is grounded in the radical social theories of the Frankfurt School, summarized here by McLaren:

It is understood that pedagogical practices stand in relation to a dominant ideology that defines what is accepted as legitimate knowledge, that constructs social relations around specific interests, and which upholds specific structures of inequality and asymmetrical relations of power and privilege. (1988, p. 170)

The language of possibility, which has been increasingly emphasized by critical theorists, takes its mission from Dewey’s (1927) charge that schools should be public arenas for the democratization of its citizenry. The ethical imperative of critical educators, argues McLaren, is creating a “politicized citizenry capable of fighting for various forms of public life and informed by a concern for equality and social justice” (1989a, p. 158). This demands that educators take up positions as “transformative intellectuals,” Giroux’s term for those who link students’
abilities to think and act critically with their ability for social engagement and transformation (1989a, pp. 137–139). These two “languages,” then—one of inquiry and one of action—form the praxis of critical pedagogy.

McLaren, perhaps more than any other educator, has laid the groundwork for a truly performance-centered critical pedagogy aimed at transforming society through emancipatory education. Describing his work as an anthropology of education, he “locates theoretical advances in ritual and performance studies and places them within the practicality of the pedagogical encounter between teacher and student (1989, p. 165). Based on fieldwork in urban classrooms, McLaren brings the social agenda of critical theory together with Victor Turner’s theories of ritual performance as a means to offer the “reform-minded educator a broad construction for unravelling and decoding obstacles faced by working-class students in acquiring an education” (1989, p. 164). More importantly, McLaren grounds his critical vision in a politics of the body, thereby positioning himself as a kind of interdisciplinary linchpin for articulating the shared concerns of critical pedagogy and the politics of performance.

McLaren reframes critical pedagogy as a politics of the body, arguing that most critical educators have ignored the ways in which “ideology is performatively constituted . . . discourse given sentience” (1989b, p. 191). He offers the following corrective: “Ideological hegemony is not realized solely through the discursive mediations of the sociocultural order but through the enfleshment of unequal relationships of power. Hegemony is manifest intercorporeally through the actualization of the flesh and embedded in incarnate experience” (1988, p. 169).

The notion of the “body politic” takes on new significance when we acknowledge how teachers’ and students’ individual bodies are ideologically inscribed, and further, how the shared space of the classroom brings these competing ideologies into confrontation. Recalling his work with inner-city schoolchildren, McLaren writes: “the bodies of students become sites of struggle in which resistance is a way of gaining power, celebrating pleasure, and fighting oppression in the lived historicity of the moment and the concrete materiality of the classroom” (1989a, p. 170). In his germinal study, School as Ritual Performance (1986), McLaren reads the seemingly “deviant” behavior of urban schoolchildren as an act of cultural resistance and reappropriation—a complex, performative strategy for demythologizing dominant culture by interjecting the symbolic gestures of the students’ lived experience as marginalized, disenfranchised citizens.

Using performance to critique the politics of educational culture became a central theme in my teaching seminar. Our discussion led one student to reflect on her first teaching job at a community college comprised largely of working-class students with whom she shared a bus ride to and from the college. She was struck by how the diversity of her fellow travelers was framed by their shared space and time on the bus. This commonality-within-difference was immediately and palpably revoked when these same bodies came together in a classroom. In that institutionalized space, her body became inscribed with a privilege and authority that marked her separation from the class, even while
Teaching Is Performance

it seemed to erase differences among the students themselves. Despite the humanizing strategies so common in communication classrooms—sitting in a circle, open discussions, and student-generated topics—the hierarchical structure embedded in the instructional enterprise itself perpetuated their embodiment of difference. She found that although the classroom creates an illusion of shared time and space, and although we may struggle to inhabit that space democratically, our performing bodies inevitably carry the inscription of differentiated status. We cannot enter our classrooms as learners, nor can we empower our students to experience themselves as teachers until we more fully understand the ways in which educational institutions have already politicized our bodies.

It has become increasingly apparent to me that a performance-centered approach to education is inherently, and exhilaratingly, countercultural at both the pedagogical and theoretical levels. The common practices of performance studies classrooms are often exemplars of critical pedagogy. Confronting issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality, for example, is an established agenda for performance instructors. Students are urged, often required, to engage nontraditional texts, and to explore crossgender and crosscultural experiences through performance. Indeed, the disciplinary dictum that performance enables a "sense of the other" is ground in the commitment to engage multiple—often contradictory—modes of experience in an intimate, nonjudgemental, and dialogic manner. Certainly the performance method itself, with its commitment to participatory, kinesthetic learning, dismantles the rational bias of traditional instruction. Performance studies is also committed to blurring the arbitrary boundaries between social and educational contexts. Courses in the performance of everyday life, naturally occurring conversation, and bodily experiences of gender, to name just a few, are part of the core curriculum in many performance studies programs. Likewise, the collaborative nature of performance blurs the boundaries between teachers and students. Workshops and rehearsals bring the instructor into the student's space, where they must work together as partners in the learning experience. This democratic partnership extends equally to the research process. Claiming performance as a methodology means acknowledging that a significant part of the researcher's learning occurs in and through the bodies of students, cast members, and informants. Whenever we step out from behind the instructor's lectern or the director's chair, we enter that liminal space where our own identities as "experts" become tenuous. In effect, to be a scholar or teacher of performance means welcoming students to join us in that uncertain, magical space of personal and communal transformation.

At the theoretical level, the intersection of performance and critical pedagogy invites a reevaluation of how academia inscribes imbalances of power. Regarding the hierarchical nature of educational culture, we might ask, "What roles and rules are prescribed for participants at varying levels of the organizational structure? Through what training rituals are young teachers apprenticed to join the educational "company?" How do our bodies perform the differentiated status we carry with us into the classroom? What performative conventions reinscribe differences in power, despite our best attempts to create a democratic and emancipatory classroom environment?
Conclusion

Educational theorists and practitioners stand now at a critical juncture. We are besieged by public condemnation of current educational practices, charged by political conservatives to entrench ourselves even more deeply in a technocratic ideology, while we, ourselves, are becoming increasingly aware of the necessity for educational reform. Concurrently, the emergence of a performance paradigm has enabled a dialogue between performance studies and instructional communication that may, indeed, develop into a "language of possibility" for both disciplines. Basing my work on a more inclusive, theoretically grounded conception of performance than has yet emerged in education journals, I have attempted to sketch some of the points of contact between the two disciplines. The set of questions concluding each section invites interdisciplinary research into the nature of educational performance and the development of performative pedagogy. In the final analysis, the acknowledgment that teaching is performance is less an observation about instructional style than it is a generative metaphor for educational research. Let us come together, then, on the pedagogical stage, sharing the theoretical and practical knowledge unique to our disciplines, as we struggle collectively to educate ourselves and our students.

Notes

1For additional discussions of the disciplinary evolution of performance studies and the emergence of a performance paradigm, see Langellier, 1983; Taft-Kaufman, 1985; Conquergood, 1986; Strine, Long, & Hopkins, 1990.
2I would like to extend special acknowledgment to the participants in the 1991 graduate seminar, "Teaching as Performance," whose work in the course is referenced throughout the article. They are significantly responsible for refining my own understanding of educational performance.
3In all of the microteaching examples cited in the article, a seminar participant portrayed an instructor of our basic communication course while the rest of the class assumed the role of the instructor's students. Within these examples, therefore, the terms "teacher" and "students" refer to class members in their simulated roles as instructors or undergraduates.
4Laila Farah Mohtar later developed this presentation into a paper entitled "Critical pedagogical strategies for the basic communication course," presented at the Central States Communication Association convention, Cleveland, OH, April 1992.
6Mariangela Maguire presented her paper, "Exploring the theory and practice of 'polychronic' authority in the basic course," at the Central States Communication Association convention, Cleveland, OH, April, 1992.

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Teaching Is Performance

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