Pausing to (Re)Frame: Using Actioning and Positive Reflection in Performative Learning and Teaching

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1 Introduction

This chapter describes a performative approach to learning and teaching developed from actor training, playwrighting and drama. It evolved organically following years of teaching performing arts subjects like acting, movement, devising, directing and scene analysis. Thus, it uses discipline-specific vocabulary such as given circumstance, through-line of action, objective, super-objective, action and actioning, inciting events, plot and story. These terms describe this approach to learning and teaching appropriately. The inherent performativity of the discipline is not subject-specific but creates a powerful pedagogy that applies to a variety of disciplines. It is particularly applicable to students of art and design as it encourages the reflection of the specific techniques of artistic practice and enables students to identify actions to develop them as artists.

This approach was researched and developed by teaching production modules where a substantial part of the assessment is a creative artefact. In these cases, the tutor, an artist, is working alongside the students to create the final artefact. This approach advocates that the tutors, as practitioners, also reflect on their work and their ability to guide the project. The cycles of reflection overlap, meaning that both students and tutors support each other through this process. Tutors may lead the process, asking the probing questions and encouraging others to do the same. In turn, students are encouraged to ask detailed questions of their tutor, to ascertain their perceptions of the process and approaches to development.

The approach is dynamic, heuristic, and is helically structured. It is dynamic in that it continually responds to the participants’ energy and interactions, heuristic in that everyone is discovering something about themselves and their learning, and spiral in nature as the process moves the students further up the spiral with greater understanding and knowledge, rather than cyclically which returns them to the same place.

The narrative encourages students to write about their experiences by identifying events and ordering them to form a plot that structures their account of events. Scheduled into the process are times for reflection, where the classes or workshops pause and students review their narrative. Working to create a transformative narrative, they look at the role of the individual, the group, and the role the individual plays within the group. Through discussion, they set milestones for achievement and then assign actions to achieve them. The Zulu word *indaba,* meaning discussion, is used to describe this part of the process.Following the *indaba*, students continue withcreative work until the next interruption.

From time to time, the scholars use the terms reflection and reflexive interchangeably (Bassot, 2016, p. 2). This chapter proposes using the words in the following contexts: Reflection is the first part of the process and involves students’ reviewing something, asking what happened and why this happened, and applying theory to professional practice (Bassot, 2016, p. 1; Bolton, 2014, p. 7).

Reflexivity, or being reflexive relates to a deeper level of reflection (Moon, 2006, p. 40) and is a substantial part of the students’ learning. Reflexivity encourages students to think within their experiences questioning their artistic values and practice and the limits of their knowledge. Reflexivity also allows students to become aware of how their actions are culturally determined and are influenced by others and in turn influence others (Bolton, 2014, p. 7). In this chapter, the word is (re)framing as it defines how the students view their learning and then alter this view through reflexive practice.

2 Narrative and Text

Artists and storytelling are often considered *sine qua non.* Many students enrol in creative arts courses to develop their skills as storytellers working through a variety of media. These storytelling skills could be illustrated, text-based or spoken word. Taking this primary skill and applying it to the critical function of (re)framing their learning is core to this approach. It uses the same vocabulary with remarkably similar functions, providing clarity of purpose to all students.

This approach crucially encourages students to create narratives with a positive outlook. The idea is for the narratives to clarify the experiences of the individual. The narrative is dynamic and forms the basis for the performative (re)framing of their learning experience. Theatrically, this has two parts; the first is the playwright’s choosing words to tell a story; the second is an actor’s using those words to make the story come to life. Equally applicable is the concept of the artist as both the maker and the viewer of the artefact, sometimes consecutively and other times concurrently. This viewpoint reinforces artistic practice where artists continually make judgements about their art during its creation.

With performativity as the goal, the function of the narratives is essential. Students use these narratives to organise and share with others the experiences that are authentic to them (Brophy, 2009, p. 33). These narratives organise their understanding of what has happened in the past as a form of backwards-looking meaning-making (Brophy, 2009, pp. 38 - 39) that constructs meaning by working with experience (Moon, 2006, p. 21). The emphasis is on the retelling of the experience through narration and re-narration of the event, and the sharing of meaning associated with the retelling and not the event itself. Individual experiences are thus open to questioning and reformulation (Bolton, 2014, pp. 66, 73).

In encouraging creativity and expression, students should structure their narratives in a way that has meaning for them, and therefore they do not need to arrange these events chronologically (Moon, 2004, p. 23). Although traditionally, experts have encouraged students to use narratives as a way of organizing information into a cause-and-effect chain of events with a beginning, middle, and end, students may find it useful to structure events according to themes or interactions. During the *indaba,* they will discuss the ordering of these events, giving insight into their perceptions and experiences. The narrative will express a judgment about the nature of the events, and the lesson learned (Brophy, 2009, p. 35; Brannigan, 1992, p. 3). For this reason, (re)framing prefers to work with the concept of the theatrical plot rather than the story.

In a play or musical, the story is the entirety of all narrative facts that occur in the text. The story includes all the events that occur on and off the stage, including past events discussed or implied during the play. The plot is the playwright’s arrangement of events for portrayal on stage. A story is chronological; in contrast, the plot follows the playwright’s logic for the drama: how he or she wishes to see events unfold (Knopf, 2017, p. 21) creating a “causality of events whereas story considers the same events according to their temporal succession” (Pavis, 1998, p. 271).

Playwrights structure a play around a significant happening that is referred to as the inciting event or the inciting action. This action sparks the story by changing the dynamics of the main character’s world, setting the central conflict in motion (Thomas, 2014, p. 148; Dunne, 2017a, Kindle Location 4930; Dunne, 2017b, p. 59). In some cases, playwrights write an additional inciting action, which is related to the main conflict, into each scene, with each inciting action adding to the overall conflict. The main characteristic of these events is a change in dynamics caused by someone or something else. These changes may result from an intentional action, an accident, or a coincidence, and they take the form of a decision, discovery, opportunity, or some other event (Dunne, 2017a, Kindle Locations 4933–4938; Dunne, 2017b, p. 59). While performing arts relates predominantly to a student’s interaction with another student, it also applies to a student’s interaction with their artistic medium or to any part of their practice. As the narratives require descriptive detail, students record at least one positive and one challenging action at the end of each session and view these as the inciting events.

(Re)Framing encourages students to work with positive events, as this enables them to learn from their successes. This positive outlook is a source of motivation (Ghaye, 2011, p. 141) as it emphasises students’ abilities and strengths. These actions may be significant or small, but over time, students will have a series of them. Students will then return to contextualise these initial actions later in the process.

Drama uses the term ‘conflict’ to describe anything that challenges the characters and provides obstacles to them achieving their objective (Dunne, 2017a). Plays are driven by the characters’ journeys (an individual or philosophical fight) to overcoming these obstacles (Pavis, 1998, p. 76). The playwright will choose a style or genre to resolve these conflicts within the play. As (re)framing advocates working positively, ‘conflicts’ are referred to as interactions.

This approach instructs students to name an inciting event or action from their practice and to elaborate on the interactions resulting from it. It encourages students to name barriers to their achievement as well as stressing accomplishments with equal importance. Creating a meaningful structure for the narrative and documenting it increases the opportunity to share individual experiences with others (Hargreaves & Page, 2013, p. 13). A student’s initial experience of an event may change: something initially documented as a negative experience may change once the student writes the descriptive detail and the given circumstances or the essential context of the event are explained (Hargreaves & Page, 2013, p. 42). The narrative is not a product but a stimulus text used for insight and exploration (Bolton, 2014, p. 115) that would enable discussion of the students’ experiences.

When preparing for the *indaba*, the participants should reflect on their series of inciting events or actions, adding exposition to each one of these before structuring them to form a plot that forms the basis of their narrative. In the description of these events, students frame the event by contextualising it with as much pertinent information as possible. This blend of openness and detail encourages and enables in-depth interpretation, just as an actor would investigate the ‘given circumstances’ surrounding a character and establishing the facts that will help to shape the actions to create the scene. In theatre, the ‘given circumstances’ are the dramatic situations created by the playwright and all the circumstances of the production for each scene which the actor has to accept as real (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 683; Gillet, 2007, p. 305).

In playwrighting, placing the character at the centre and allowing the plot to evolve from the character keeps the focus on the truths that enlighten the human condition (Dunne, 2017a). The character is not something added to the scene; the character is the scene. Students should create their narratives from this perspective, placing themselves at the centre and allowing the plot to evolve from their experiences. This focus on the student at the centre of the process ensures that they (re)frame their learning.

In developing their plots, students may find a through-line, which establishes a definite set of actions. Alternatively, these actions may not be very obvious, so the participants need to discover connections and a through-line. The through-line may be a series of similar activities or the discovery of a tacit technique. This questioning moves from a reflective to reflexive practice based on narratives of experience. The key to dealing with these happenings is what students do with them (Bolton, 2014, p. 67), so actions will be created later in the process.

(Re)Framing advocates the use of a strengths-based approach to help students build a favourable view of themselves in terms of three key elements: self-awareness, self-motivation and self-affirmation. It is too easy for them to talk about what went wrong and to highlight their perceived failings than to talk with confidence about their successes. Advocating positivity when interpreting their current circumstances will help students to identify success and understand the root causes of this successful action. Perspective is essential as students need to see that they can overcome any setback through considered reviewing of the problem. They achieve this by setting out an alternative approach drawn from their experience and using their successes to chart a way forward. Students need to believe that setbacks are not permanent roadblocks to development (Ghaye, 2011, pp. 77, 81).

(Re)Framing is a strengths-based approach that has its roots in positivity and allows people to be more receptive and more creative. An open mind changes the way people think and act in a wide range of circumstances. When people see more, more ideas come to mind, and more actions become possible. (Fredrickson, 2010, pp. 21, 59).

3. Interruption

Interrupting teaching creates moments and spaces for reflection. This reflection on knowledge encourages empowerment and transformational learning (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p. 106; Thorpe, 1993, p. 111). The interruptions create a change in pace and focus, and encourage contemplation and dialogue. There are two types of interruptions. The first is a random short break within a session lasting ten to twenty minutes in which students can reflect on their practice. The second is a session-long interruption where students and tutors come together as reflexive practitioners to discuss and share their experiences. It is these acts of pausing, or interruption, which allow students to act with purpose, taking time for deliberation, reflexion and dialogue, improving emotional and intellectual resilience (Berg & Seeber, 2016, p. 11). The interruptions create a new awareness, allowing students to see events through an alternate perspective (Ganly, 2018), and provide an opportunity to (re)frame their learning. Constant action can sometimes reinforce problems or mindsets, by not creating opportunities to reflect and challenge misunderstandings, presuppositions, and the assumptions that create them. Interrupting the regular studio activities and undertaking alternative kinds of activities or exposing students to other experiences can help to give clarity to the process and see if the events are productive for learning.

The interruption needs to happen in an ideal "space" -- a physical, emotional, and sociopolitical environment (Ghaye, 2011, p. 44) that encourages deep thinking. In this space, students can take time independently and as a group to reflect and analyse situations, build confidence and feel more secure in their ideas and practice (Bassot, 2016, p. 2). This ideal space is the *indaba,* which allows for dialogue on their reflection and action, giving students enough time and ability to do this in a meaningful manner. Through these conversations, students can discuss if the learning was worthwhile and meaningful. They can highlight barriers and limitations, appreciate their achievements and list what achievements are still needed (Boud & Walker, 1993, pp. 81-82; Ghaye, 2011, p. 45).

4. Dialogical Interaction – The *Indaba*

The *indaba* occurs within the interruption and encourages students to have a dialogue between themselves and their tutor. If this discourse is to be effective, students should strive to make it clear, appropriate, satisfying, effective, efficient and ethical (Solomon & Theiss, 2013, pp. 17 - 18). The *indaba* facilitates in-depth questioning of their and others’ experiences or interpretations, mainly if they are vague or confusing. Some students may fear this critical questioning, and it will require courage to take part in it fully (Bolton, 2014, p. 79). Hence, students should strive for clarity, considering their word choice carefully, when discussing their experiences.

The creative disciplines teach the importance of sounds, texts, images, colours, and materials when creating art, paying particular attention to how these can shape meaning. Likewise, in the *indaba*, students need to choose their words when sharing their message carefully. The *indaba* encourages students to talk about their work while clearly and critically articulating their choices. It is through this clarity that they can have a greater understanding of their experiences and feelings as well as others’.

The interruption encourages dialogue, ideally creating a sharing space that students look forward to and in which they participate actively. They need to feel confident that the *indaba* allows them to do this. Establishing an agreed set of social rules for these *indabas* ensures that interaction is appropriate, particularly when students have conflicting perceptions of the same event, for example, when two or more students are working together on an artefact. These social rules may be agreed upon as part of a social contract and link to their values as students and artists. Employing skills such as active listening and giving the sense that people have been heard creates a sense of satisfaction, which in turn will encourage people to continue to take part fully in the process.

Having analysed the experience critically and created clearly defined objectives for the future will give students a sense that the process has been effective. Students must have a feeling that the *Indaba* has been positive and advanced their learning. The time pressures in education today are well documented, and the sense of immediacy is prevalent. Using the time competently gives a sense of efficiency.

Finally, considering their values as practitioners undoubtedly sets out the context in which everyone is prepared to work. These values are interwoven with the set of social rules the group agrees on to frame these discussions, such as trust, self-respect, responsibility, generosity and being genuine, positive regard and empathy (Bolton, 2014, pp. 24 - 25).

Communicational competence (Solomon & Theiss, 2013) ensures that the dialogue is transformative and leads to deep learning. This interruption creates the environment for critical reflexive learning (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, p. 5) in the first instance. It gives students the intellectual and physical space as well as the time to develop and present their narratives. They discuss their educational and artistic values, reflect on their experiences, and articulate their achievements. Students should interrogate, question and re-interpret the artistic values that guide their practice (Ghaye, 2011, p. 42).

The *indabas* foster evolving transformative reflection shaped by reciprocal communication that moves away from the teacher-led didactic dialogue. This dialogue creates a relationship between the tutors and students that encourages transformative learning evolved from a shared experience that questions their assumptions about their sense of reality and knowledge (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, pp. 5, 59). These discussions encourage students to work together and jointly construct meaning, and they help everyone to move beyond assumptions and paradigms in a re-evaluation of the experience by comparing their assessment of events with others’ interpretative realities (Brophy, 2009, p. 134) and integrating it with existing learning and making it their own (Boud & Walker, 1993, p. 75). Through the dialogue, they enable a transformation of their understanding from “what-is to the more effective what-might-be” (Biggs & Tang, 2011, p. 45).

The *indaba* helps to transform the narrative from reflexive to performative by (re)framing the learning experience for all students from both personal and group perspectives.

The performative actioning begins with an analysis of the narrative. Students complete some of this analysis before the *indaba* and the rest during it. Mosely (2016, Kindle Locations 113–125) lists seven questions for the actor; these questions are equally pertinent in this context and help students to frame their experience. These questions help to deconstruct the narratives, giving the students small units of information with which to work. Students can answer some of the questions individually, and others are completed through discussion with fellow students and their tutor. The analysis begins by broadly looking at when and where the events happened before looking at the specifics of the given circumstances, like who else was involved in the event and whether the narrative described the relationship between the author and the other person. It also establishes if this person appears in more than one entry.

The next set of questions relate to the "wants" of the student. They consider whether the narrative lays out what the students wanted to achieve and if anything is preventing them from reaching this. The student names the barrier to find the best way to overcome it. In the cases where students are working in pairs and groups, the tutor needs to facilitate a discussion within the group that identifies if there are complementary or counter objectives. Furthermore, encouraging students to talk about their successes is imperative, particularly deconstructing them and highlighting the reason they were successful. Students should begin by reviewing each event and see what changed the situation, for good or bad, and then move onto the narrative as a whole.

Students begin by looking at the significant "wants." Then the focus moves to the smaller "wants." Breaking each event down means that students can scrutinize the sub-objectives that form part of the overall objective. As part of this scrutiny, students identify counter objectives, particularly when a counter objective is the primary objective of another student. Through dialogue, they can find a way past this problem.

5 Action and Actioning

This section will explain the use of auctioning in theatre so that its relevance to art and design is clear.

Actions are the core of acting, clarifying the objectives and advancing the story as gathered from the text. In a drama, an action is something someone does: it has an end, completed within a set of specific circumstances and is justified (Adler, 1988, p. 35). It is a series of stage events produced through the behaviour of the characters (Pavis, 1998, p. 9). Actors use actions (physically, emotionally, and psychologically) as a way of pursuing an objective (Krasner, 2012, p. 120). Objectives and their associated action run in tandem, with the objective leading to action, as the actor’s desire for something fuels their imagination on how they would achieve it (O'Brien, 2011, p. 21).

The use of actions in the theatre was enhanced with the process of ‘actioning,’ which was devised and developed by the Joint Stock Theatre Company under the direction of Bill Gaskill and Max Stafford-Clark as a tool for the actor (Mosely, 2016, Kindle Location 21). It is a system of textual analysis that splits up the actor's texts into “parcels of motivation” (Caird, 2010, p. 20). It empowers them to make clear and simple, actionable choices on each line of the text directly while developing ways for them to create their characters (Caird, 2010, p. 20; Mosely, 2016, Kindle Location 21; Calderone & Lloyd-Williams, 2017). Advocates of this technique argue that it discourages monotony and automatic mimesis of a tone while encouraging accurate and dramatic communication between characters in a scene (Calderone & Lloyd-Williams, 2017; Mosely, 2016; Merlin, 2010). They further argue that this precision liberates the actor’s performance, ensuring cohesive, integrated characters that create exciting and entirely watchable pieces of theatre (Mosely, 2016, Kindle Location 28; Merlin, 2010, p. 110; Calderone & Lloyd-Williams, 2017).

Actioning requires actors to divide up the lines of their script/text into separate phrases or thoughts. The actor then assigns each thought an ‘action verb’ or ‘transitive verb’, which is something one character can do to another character. The transitive verb articulates the underlying intention of the line, revealing their intention for their onstage actor.

It is this foundation of acting that is particularly relevant to this approach to performative learning and teaching as it sets out personalised actions.

The analysis completed before and during the *indaba* deconstructs the events of the narratives, breaking them into small units. Having reviewed the successes and discussed how they achieved these, students now have some strategies for success. They then examine the areas that were less successful or that they believe need further development and see which of the successful strategies can be used to improve those areas. In some cases, it may be necessary to find an alternative way forward. Students now need to decide on an objective for each of these units.

Having named the objectives, they now assign actions to these objectives, setting out precisely how they wish to achieve them. The actions need to be individual and personalised. Just as with acting, there is a need to use verbs, making this process active and performative. Each of these actions creates a specific way forward that the individual shapes and owns. These ways are personal to them and relate directly to their experience as an artist.

These actions set out what they need to do to achieve the aims of the project; for example, ‘I will scrutinise each line of the text’, ‘I will use more primary colours’, ‘I want to discover the subtext in the image’, or, more generally, ‘I need to embrace a new brush technique’. As discussed above, these barriers may be other students. In this case, the action must relate to what a student wants to do to another student, for example, ‘I will endorse her point of view’ or ‘I will listen to her suggestions’. However, it cannot be something like ‘I will force her to agree with me’ as this relies on an action of another student which is out of the other student’s direct control.

6. Conclusion

This approach advocates interruptions, creating space for students to stop and think. Pausing to (re)frame sets out a process for deep learning by encouraging students to be reflexive practitioners questioning the why and the how of their artistic practice. Through discussion, they can (re)frame their learning in a way that makes sense to them and over which they have total ownership. By (re)framing their learning, they have moved to be active participants in a process which they are continually reviewing and shaping. Students are co-creators and active partners in their learning. They are setting for themselves specific, achievable goals.

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