

*Teachers as Actors: Lecturing Theory Classes for Students in Vocational Education
and Training Institutes*

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating whether theatre and acting techniques will enhance lectures and study as to engage, inspire and articulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. An empirical study was carried out in a consecutive of two academic years, i.e. 2010/11 and 2011/12 by two researchers which were teachers of a higher diploma programme in one of the Hong Kong's vocational education and training institutes. Questionnaires were used to collect student views and feedback, with findings revealing considerations in terms of the incorporation of acting techniques in theory classes for four cultural studies classes of design students. Using a participatory approach, the two teachers adopted acting techniques such as voice and tone, bodily gestures and questioning techniques to interact with the students during theory classes. Results of this study implicate that teacher's facilitation skills are important while appropriate applications of acting techniques in lectures would facilitate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. This study highlights that using simple, straight forward language and contextualised examples to explain complex theories are most preferable to students. An extended contrastive study that includes students from different disciplines is proposed. Findings from this study will be useful for teachers when they are planning their instructions in lectures.

Keywords: acting, facilitation, lecturing, communication, theory classes

Introduction

When Confucius and Socrates taught, they had one thing in common: they lectured. Using vocal control, body languages and questioning techniques, they performed, improvised and interacted with their disciples. Apparently, their direct and primitive presentations were able to draw their audience's attentions, articulate higher order thinking and reflections for the understandings of their philosophical concepts. Resemblance of drama and performance, the beauty of lecturing lies in the adoption of theatre techniques. Tone, rhythm, pacing of the speech and the bodily gestures are just several of the essential elements for good performances. Using acting techniques in teaching have been suggested by a number of researchers (Eisner, 1968; Tauber, Mester and Buckwald, 1993; Sarason, 1999; Griggs, 2001). Eisner asserts that "teachers, like actors, attempt to communicate to groups of people in an audience-like situation, and while the ends of comedy and instruction differ markedly, both the teachers and actors employ qualities to enhance communication; both must come through to the people with whom they work" (Eisner, 1968, p.362). However, the once prevailing lectures seem subsided and overwhelmed by the overly emphasised learning and teaching activities, audiovisuals, multimedia and the technological enabled learning resources. Various forms of such "edutainment" are encouraged to be incorporated in teaching to facilitate students to learn. The term "edutainment" has been described in many ways. It is defined as "entertainment (as by games, films, or shows) that is designed to be educational" in Merriam-Webster online dictionary. The term was originally used in 1973 and defined by pioneers in the field as entertainment with an educational twist (Jasinski, 2004). In order to engage and inspire the participants while simultaneously transmitting knowledge to the audience or participants, wide-ranging forms of edutainment are incorporated in educational settings. Educators may incorporate two types of forms of edutainment, i.e. intended or unintended to bring about educational purposes, but both of them are useful and appropriate to be elements of teaching materials. It aims at widening and deepening students' learning experience in a more engaging and motivated way so that students could construct their own meaning with peers when they learn. Vygotsky (1934) believes that others play an important role in mediating learning. He states that a student can learn on his/her own to certain extent or, with the help of other s/he can learn more. However, for constructivism, the essence of learning rests on how to learn better instead of a quantitative measurement. To follow a constructivist view of learning whereby students construct their own meaning as they learn, Piaget (cited in Moore, 2000) describes humans as meaning makers, constructing knowledge rather than merely receiving it. He posits that the learner while assimilating new information and accommodating it into the prior knowledge

constructs his/her own knowledge. As such, teachers are urged to design learning and teaching activities to facilitate students to learn, particularly in theory classes. In view of the above, the question remains, will theatre and acting techniques enhance lectures so as to engage, inspire and articulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes? Whether the class is focused and successful or not, it may be dependent on the strong and vital connections between the teacher and students. An empirical study was carried out for four classes of design students in a consecutive of two academic years between 2010/11 and 2011/12 in one of the Hong Kong's vocational education and training institutes.

Acting and facilitation skills

Adjusting his/her emotion, tone and rhythm of dialogue with a combination of bodily gestures and story-telling techniques, the actor/actress creates tensions to inform, inspire, entertain and persuade the audience to reflect. In a similar way, facilitation skills are close to acting techniques, the use of prompts, questioning techniques and interaction skills to maintain a dynamic learning environment so as to guide and encourage students for critical thinking are similar to the skills being used in theatre. Burrows asserts that effective facilitation generates mutual respect, partnership in learning, dynamic goal-orientated process and most importantly, critical reflection (Burrows, 1997). Harvey, Loftus-Hills, Rycroft- Malone et al., express their view that "facilitators are individuals with the appropriate roles, skills and knowledge to help individual teams and organizations" and "consequently, the facilitator's role is concerned with enabling the development of reflective learning by helping to identify learner needs, guide group process, encourage critical thinking, and access the achievement of learning goals" (Harvey, Loftus-Hills, Rycroft- Malone et al., 2002, p.579, p.581). Interestingly, in an earlier study conducted in the 1970s, Dr. Fox, a professional actor with knowledge supplied from a Reader's Digest article, played the role of a medical professor, was hugely success in several US university medical faculties. With high student rating, Dr. Fox was praised as an inspiring teacher and a master in his subject matter (Habeshaw and Gibbs, 1992). Reflections from Dr. Fox's case revealed that 1) very few teachers are professional actors or have any training in public speaking, 2) majority of academics do not have personal gifts or rhetorical skills to able to perform on stage, inspiring students day after day, 3) a clever presentation can make real deficiencies in substance and 4) lecturers may motivate, and even inspire students. Dr. Fox's performance demonstrated a perfect merge of acting and facilitation skills and his study indicated that with appropriate theatrical elements applied in teaching, students would be inspired.

In order to re-examine Dr. Fox's experiment in contemporary classroom, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether theatre and acting techniques will enhance lectures so as to engage, inspire and articulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. To this, the qualities of a teacher performer are addressed in the study: (1) own knowledge, sensitivity to student's needs and lives; and (3) awareness of the classroom environments.

Research method

To take a closer look into the question, an empirical study using a quantitative approach was carried out in a consecutive of two academic years between 2010/11 and 2011/12 in one of the Hong Kong's vocational education and training institutes. Quantitative data were collected to provide a better understanding of the incorporation of acting techniques in theory classes, as well as reflecting upon and improving teaching effectiveness accordingly.

Participants

In order to examine and assess their practices, two teachers who respectively taught the modules Cultural Studies 2 (CS2) and Cultural Studies 4 (CS4) of a Higher Diploma Programme in Design participated in this study as it involves "the kind of issues and problems, concerns and needs that arose as a routine part of activity in the real world" (Denscombe, 2007, p.122). Each of the study lasted for one semester, and each module consisted of ten classes while each class comprised three hours of class contact. The respondents of this study came from a total number of 87 students, with eleven students studied in CS2 of academic year 2010/11; 25 students studied in CS2 of academic year 2011/12; 29 students studied in CS4 of academic year 2010/11; and 22 students studied in CS4 of academic year 2011/12.

Data collection and procedure

A questionnaire (Appendix I) with 20 close-ended questions in a Likert scale of 6 was used to address class interactions, facilitation skills, acting techniques and perceptions of the theory classes before and after the modules. An additional open-ended question was used to collect students' overall views on the modules. The questions are listed as follows:

- Question 1 Before attending this course, I have bad perceptions of theory classes.
- Question 2 I enjoyed participating in learning activities such as group discussions, presentations, video screening and role plays, etc. when attending

theory classes.

- Question 3 Learning activities often promoted interactions, mutual help and peer supports among the teacher and students.
- Question 4 Most of the learning activities were catering for my learning styles, needs and abilities.
- Question 5 The teacher was able to build rapport with students and create a warm and caring learning environment.
- Question 6 Acting skills of a teacher are important when he/she is teaching lecturing classes.
- Question 7 I prefer interacting with the teacher if he/she uses effective questioning/prompting techniques.
- Question 8 I prefer the teacher explaining culture theories using real life examples.
- Question 9 I prefer the teacher using simple, explicit, down-to-earth language rather than theoretical jargons.
- Question 10 I believe the teacher will develop my critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Question 11 The teacher was able to cater for my learning styles and needs.
- Question 12 I was engaged by the teacher in class most of the time.
- Question 13 I prefer inspiring lectures rather than learning activities.
- Question 14 I have a good understanding of the theories of this course and able to apply them in real-life contexts.
- Question 15 I enjoyed attending the lectures as if I were watching a show.
- Question 16 A good lecture is resemblance to a good show.
- Question 17 The teacher used dramatic elements such as sounds, gestures and costumes to generate emotion and encourage engagement.
- Question 18 The ad hoc acts and responses between the teacher and students are important in theory classes.
- Question 19 The presentation skill of the teacher was good and he/she engaged and inspired me.
- Question 20 After this course, I have good perception to theory classes.

The questionnaires were distributed to the students by the two teachers at the last class of the respective modules. The questionnaires were then collected right after the students finished the questionnaires to ensure return rate. Other than regular design studies modules emphasised on hands-on design techniques, the cultural studies modules are considered as the liberal studies in design discipline; they cover topics of social, psychological and cultural theories of which the majority of design students are reluctant to learn. It was interesting to find out students' perceptions on the

incorporation of acting techniques in theory classes, and whether these techniques could engage, inspire and articulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. With an aim to achieve the intended learning outcomes, preparations were done discreetly before each class. The two teachers discussed the lesson plans, forms of edutainment such as TV programmes, documentaries and films, etc., teaching contents and materials and agreed on what strategies of presentations and acting techniques to be used in each class. In addition to the presentations of the contents using visuals and contextualised materials, acting techniques such as voice and tone, bodily gestures and questioning techniques were being used to facilitate and interact with the students during the classes. It was observed that the interactions between teachers and students were exceptionally well during the classes. The students' eagerness to respond to questions and their willingness to participate in the discussions indicated that acting and facilitation skills to a large extent contributed to the class dynamics.

Findings

The average ratings for all of the questions are on the upper scales (all over 70%) except question one resulted with a low average rating of 46.6%. The assumption of students' negative perceptions of theory classes was found simply not true. The high ratings of questions five and eight revealed that students would like to build rapport with teachers and learn under a warm and caring environment. Over 80% of the students agreed that teaching skills of a teacher are important when teaching theory classes and preferred the teacher using simple, explicit, down-to-earth language and contextualised examples to explain culture theories. 76% of the students believed teachers would be able to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. It is also learnt that more than 81.4% of the students enjoyed good lectures as if they were watching good performances and they regarded a good lecture to resemble a good show. Findings further indicated that a large number of the students (more than 80%) agreed that their engagements were results of teachers' good presentation skills. Responses to question 20 showed that 74.2% of the students had significantly changed their perceptions to theory classes after they finished the modules. A summary of the responses to the close-ended questions is listed in table 1.

Table 1: Summary of the responses to the close-ended questions

Question	CS2 AY10/11	CS2 AY11/12	CS4 AY10/11	CS4 AY11/12	Average	Average (%)
1.	2.64	3.00	2.72	2.82	2.80	46.6
2.	4.09	4.40	4.90	4.73	4.53	75.5
3.	3.73	4.52	5.00	4.41	4.42	73.6
4.	3.73	4.52	4.69	4.18	4.28	71.3
5.	5.09	4.64	4.86	4.64	4.81	80.1
6.	4.73	4.84	4.86	4.86	4.82	80.4
7.	3.82	4.60	4.93	4.55	4.48	74.6
8.	4.73	4.76	5.14	5.05	4.92	82.0
9.	5.73	5.40	5.39	5.18	5.43	90.4
10.	4.00	4.64	5.00	4.59	4.56	76.0
11.	3.36	4.52	4.93	4.32	4.28	71.4
12.	3.36	4.56	4.62	4.14	4.17	69.5
13.	4.18	4.68	5.00	4.77	4.66	77.6
14.	3.09	4.60	4.72	4.36	4.19	69.9
15.	4.82	4.48	4.76	5.23	4.82	80.4
16.	4.55	5.00	5.03	4.95	4.88	81.4
17.	4.18	4.60	2.76	4.82	4.09	68.2
18.	3.73	4.60	4.83	3.82	4.25	70.8
19.	4.91	4.64	5.00	4.91	4.87	81.1
20.	3.64	4.72	4.90	4.55	4.45	74.2

Comments from the open-ended question indicated that students praised the interactions between teachers and students and they particularly preferred the real-life examples for reflections. Other than the acting and facilitation skills, students expressed that they were impressed by the teachers' expertise and their extensive subject knowledge. A noteworthy point showed that students also appreciated the teachers' understanding of youth culture so as to raise interesting examples for better understanding of the cultural theories. Regarding the in-class learning and teaching activities, students on one hand preferred multimedia such as video screening and online resources but on the other would like to know the aims, objectives and meanings of the resources before the activities for better reflections.

Discussion

To answer the research question “To what extent will theatre and acting techniques enhance lecture so as to engage, inspire and articulate students’ critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes?”, the findings revealed that students in general enjoyed a good lecture as if they were watching a good performance. This suggests the importance of using acting and facilitation skills in theory classes to inform, inspire, and convey ideas to students in order to arouse interest and engagement. An essential element that contributes to good lectures is to educate while entertaining using forms of edutainment. This is comparable to actors who use persuasive presentations and performance to inspire and draw the audience’s reflections. This finding also coincides with the reflections from Dr. Fox’s study that using rhetorical skills, teachers are able to engage, motivate and inspire students so as to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It is not surprisingly to realise that students like teachers to use simple, explicit, down-to-earth language and contextualised examples to explain theories of culture studies. Contextualisation and jargon-free language have long been adopted for ease of understanding of complex and philosophical concepts. Knowledge has to be applied to real life to make it into practice; the saying of “theory is a theory until it has been tested in the real world” seems to be a perpetual truth. A value-added point lays in the teachers’ understanding of youth culture. Students were impressive with it. The extensive knowledge of teachers in youth culture serves a powerful tool for rapport building. Contradicting to one of the reflections from Dr. Fox’s study, instead of a clever presentation can make real deficiencies in substance, students expressed that they were impressed by the teachers’ expertise and their extensive subject knowledge. This in turn confirmed that a good lecture needs the best of the two worlds, a good performance and a well-structured knowledge base. Regarding the use of learning and teaching activities and the technological enabled learning resources in theory classes, students’ comments showed that the activities and resources are effective only when the aims, intended learning outcomes and meanings are clearly stated up front to allow reflections. They were also aware if the aims, objectives and intended learning outcomes except the class delivery. It is also delighted to find the students’ perceptions to theory class have changed significantly after attending the two teachers’ classes. This particular point reinforced the effectiveness of embedding acting skills in lecturing theory classes. In sum, a good lecture should include teachers’ own knowledge, sensitivity to their students’ needs and lives, awareness of the classroom environment, and good performance including physical control, verbal control, emotional control, confidence, listening and reacting.

Implications and conclusion

Implications of this study assures that teacher's facilitation skills are important while appropriate applications of acting skills in lectures would facilitate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. For the efficacy of discovering the audience needs, teachers may utilise acting skills in their teaching practices with three stages on preparing stories (content), performance (delivery) and audience (students). How do teachers prepare for playing the role as an internal and external character in front of a group of audience? How do teachers ensure interactions between themselves and the character, between themselves and the audience and among audience? How do teachers develop students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills? These questions are critical for teachers to reflect upon while preparing for the instructions of lectures.

The results of this study also implied that teacher's solid subject knowledge is equally important as good presentation skill while preparation, practice and passion are the 3P's for an influential presentation. Therefore, discreet lesson planning, carefully selected visuals and contextualised materials, strategies of presentation and eagerness to teachers are the foundations to success teaching. Although the effectiveness of the learning and teaching activities and the technological enabled learning resources have not been well-addressed and compared to lecturing with acting skills, the students' comments shed the light on the need for better preparations and instructional design if any learning resources are to be used. In order to better inform the instructional design of lectures using this study, other than considering the number of classes, class size, methods and tools, as well as the duration of the study, an extended contrastive study that includes students from different disciplines is proposed. Other than students from design discipline, the population of the study could include students from other disciplines such as Engineering and Business Administration from the same institute.

To conclude, this paper explored whether acting and facilitation skills able to enhance lecture so as to engage, inspire and articulate students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills in theory classes. This study asserted the benefits of adopting acting skills to lecture theory classes and further confirmed that using simple, straight forward language and contextualised examples to explain complex theories are most preferable to students. Last but not least, same as acting, teaching is art, teacher should think different to make a difference, unleash imagination and creativity to make learning and teaching fun.

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Appendix I

Views on Theory Classes of Cultural Studies Course

Thank you for participating in our survey. Your feedback will be collected for writing a paper on “Teachers as Actors? Lecturing Theory Classes in Vocational Education and Training Institutes”.

A. Please provide us your basic information by circling the correct option.

Gender: Male Female

Age: 18 to 23 24 to 29 30 to 35 35 to 40 40+

B. Please indicate your level of agreement from “6” (Strongly Agree) to “1” (Strongly Disagree) with a circle for Questions 1 to 20.

Strongly Disagree _____ Strongly Agree
 十分不同意 1 2 3 4 5 6 十分同意
 意

1.	Before attending this course, I have bad perceptions of theory classes. 修讀本課程前，我對文化理論課感到抗拒。	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I enjoyed participating in learning activities such as group discussions, presentations, video screening and role plays, etc. when attending theory classes. 我在上文化理論課時，喜歡參與學習活動，例如：小組討論、匯報、影片放映或角色扮演等。	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Learning activities often promoted interactions, mutual help and peer supports among the teacher and students. 學習活動普遍能促進師生或同學間之互動或相互幫助。	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Most of the learning activities were catering for my learning styles, needs and abilities. 學習活動普遍能照顧我的學習模式、需要及能力。	1	2	3	4	5
5.	The teacher was able to build rapport with students and create a warm and caring learning environment. 老師能與同學建立親和感，並營造親切及關顧的環境。	1	2	3	4	5
6.	Acting skills of a teacher are important when he/she is lecturing theory classes. 老師的教學技巧在文化理論課尤其重要。	1	2	3	4	5
7.	I prefer interacting with the teacher if he/she uses effective questioning/prompting techniques. 我喜歡老師運用提問方法與我互動。	1	2	3	4	5

8.	I prefer the teacher explaining culture theories using real life examples. 我喜歡老師運用生活實例去解說文化理論。	1	2	3	4	5
9.	I prefer the teacher using simple, explicit, down-to-earth language rather than theoretical jargons. 我喜歡老師運用簡單直接而不深奧的語言。	1	2	3	4	5
10.	I believe the teacher will develop my critical thinking and problem-solving skills. 我相信老師能令我提昇我的批評思維及解難的技巧。	1	2	3	4	5
11.	The teacher was able to cater for my learning styles and needs. 老師能迎合我的學習風格及需要。	1	2	3	4	5
12.	I was engaged by the teacher in class most of the time. 我大部分文化理論課的學習動機來自老師。	1	2	3	4	5
13.	I prefer inspiring lectures rather than learning activities. 我喜歡具啟發性的演說課多於學習活動。	1	2	3	4	5
14.	I have a good understanding of the theories of this course and able to apply them in real-life contexts. 我對這課程的理論有充分理解並能應用於日常生活情境中。	1	2	3	4	5
15.	I enjoyed attending the lectures as if I were watching a show. 我享受上這演說課的過程，正如我享受演藝表演一樣。	1	2	3	4	5
16.	A good lecture is resemblance to a good show. 好的演說課有如好的演藝表演。	1	2	3	4	5
17.	The teacher used dramatic elements such as sounds, gestures and costumes to generate emotion and encourage engagement. 老師運用到演藝的技巧如聲音、肢體動作和服飾等去激勵上課時的情緒及參與感。	1	2	3	4	5
18.	The ad hoc acts and responses between the teacher and students are important in theory classes. 老師與學生間即時行動和回應在文化理論課極其重要。	1	2	3	4	5
19.	The presentation skill of the teacher was good and he/she engaged and inspired me. 老師擁有優秀的演示技巧，並能增加我對課堂的投入感。	1	2	3	4	5
20.	After this course, I have good perception to theory classes. 修讀本課程後，我對文化理論課感到興趣。	1	2	3	4	5

C. Please provide us any additional comments in the box below.

~End~

