

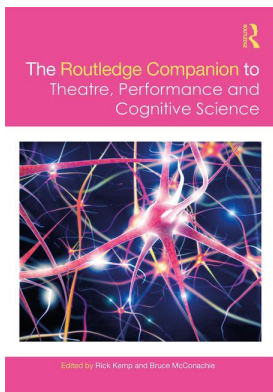
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‘I’M GIVING EVERYBODY NOTES USING HIS BODY’

Framing actors’ observation of performance

Claire Syler

This is for everyone, okay? This is our first time where we’re doing performances and I’m coaching. Now, I’m telling him stuff (*pointing to a student onstage*), but am I only telling him stuff? (*the students in the audience shake their heads no*) Who am I really telling? (*the students murmur ‘me’ and ‘all of us’*) Everybody else! So, I’m giving *everybody* notes using *his* body.

This is how a university-level acting instructor, Professor D,¹ began the first performance coaching session in his basic acting class. And as the college students bobbed their heads in agreement, I leaned forward to scribble in my fieldnotes, *metacomment*. At its most basic, metacommunication concerns ‘communication about communication’ (Bateson 1951, 209), but, in a more nuanced sense, metacommunication can act as a frame to structure attention, relationships and interactions (Goffman 1974, 1981). Anthropologist Gregory Bateson (1951, 1972) was among the first to recognise that metacommunication is also crucial to *play* (and therefore performance), because it can signal the opening of an additional, counterfactual frame of activity. It was for these reasons that I became interested in Professor D’s use of metacomments when observing his acting class as part of a larger ethnographic project. What began as a seemingly casual utterance became a pedagogical tool Professor D routinely used to develop his students’ thinking about performance.

This chapter examines how an experienced acting instructor, Professor D, repeatedly deployed metacomments to frame his students’ observation of performance. Rather than emphasise the *doing* of performance – the action, impulse and spontaneity that so often represent performance participation – I focus on how Professor D framed the students’ *observation* of performance, which, in turn, cultivated their thinking and promoted the transfer of performance knowledge. Applying research from the learning sciences, a field that emerged in part from the cognitive sciences (Sawyer 2014), as well as research from cognitive theatre studies to evidence collected in an ethnographic case study, this chapter characterises metacomments as a cognitively rich instructional practice. I do so with the assumption that if more acting instructors realised the significance of using metacomments to frame their students’ observation of classroom performance, perhaps the discursive tool would be more widely and purposefully used.

Professor D’s basic acting class exemplified the traditional, Stanislavski-based course offered at most colleges and universities across the United States.² Although common, this site

of performance learning is significant because it involves a perennial population of novice actors engaged in foundational training activities, such as solo performance work, dyadic scene study and actor coaching sessions. Although the learning environment and participants I describe are specific, the case study provides a familiar scenario and proposes general issues concerning how acting instructors, like Professor D, can frame actors' observation of performance during classroom activities.

A professional fight choreographer and actor, Professor D has taught university-level acting courses for a decade. His teaching practice is shaped by a regional theatre career, a BFA in Acting from a leading U.S. conservatory, an MFA in Performance Pedagogy and, at the time of the study, two years of doctoral study in theatre and performance studies. Although external researchers are rarely allowed access to systematically study performance training *in situ*, Professor D granted me (and my video camera) entrance to his course. This was because, as a professional practitioner and colleague in the same graduate programme, I was not entirely an outsider. But, Professor D's willingness also stemmed from a general indifference to the privacy and protection so often exerted by acting teachers. Our partnership resulted in a rich opportunity for me to study the multifaceted nature of performance training, one aspect of which concerns the importance of framing young actors' observation of performance during classroom activities.

The cognitive complexities of metacomments

In a post-course interview, I asked Professor D why he began each performance coaching session with a statement to include everyone in the class. His answer was straightforward and pragmatic: 'From the moment I start [teaching], every minute needs to get used up. Every moment needs to be towards learning...; that means that when I'm coaching [one actor], I'm coaching everybody.' Listening to Professor D's thoughtful answer, I suspected his pedagogic practice might be richer than he knew. And this was appropriate, given that his role in the classroom was to teach and not theorise. But, since the 1970s, learning scientists and educational anthropologists have extended the science of learning by venturing into classrooms and informal learning settings with the goal of explaining how learning happens and, when appropriate, explicating the instructional practices that give rise to learning opportunities (Sawyer 2014). Knowing this, it seemed that Professor D's metacomments deserved further attention. In particular, I was interested in the least 'active' participant in the coaching framework — the student spectators. What cognitive opportunities did Professor D's metacomments prompt for the audience?

To begin, Professor D used metacomments to establish two overlapping frames of performance learning activity. Using Goffman's (1974) classic understanding of a frame as the 'organizational premises' that are 'sustained both in the mind and in activity' (247), Professor D identified one frame in which he would coach the onstage actor, as well as a second frame in which he would imaginatively coach the student spectator. Moving to stand between the actor(s) onstage and the student spectators seated in a loose proscenium orientation, Professor D faced the audience and bracketed each coaching session with a statement like: '[Audience] I'm coaching them, (*pointing to the students onstage*), but you are learning through what my comments are to them.' After this framing move, Professor D took a seat in the audience while the actor(s) onstage made their final adjustments before launching into a rehearsed performance and the audience members shifted in their seats to better view their instructor's imminent coaching.

Actor coaching involves a familiar (if not ritualised) event structure in which an instructor (or coach) contingently intervenes into an actor's performance to clarify intentions, relationships and, in general, improve practice as a means to train the actor.³ Coaching represents a significant instructional event within the broader phenomenon of actor training, but the significance of *observing* coaching is rarely acknowledged as equally important. This is perhaps ironic, given that observation has long been considered a tool of the actor. Performance training, as movement specialist Mark Evans (2015) notes, often guides actors 'to look anew at the world they live in and at the theatre practice that surrounds them' (xxviii). Evans goes on to cite Brecht to emphasise his point: '[o]bservation is a major part of acting. The actor observes his fellow-men (*sic*) with all his nerves and muscles in an act of imitation which is at the same time a process of the mind' (xxviii). Thus, Professor D's choice to frame classroom coaching sessions as significant for the student spectators carved out important learning opportunities dependent upon active observation.

One way Professor D's metacomments did this was to frame the audience members' participatory purpose or, as he called it, 'buy in.' By telling the spectators things like, 'I want you to be in the type of headspace where I'm talking to one person but I'm really talking to *you*,' Professor D assigned the students a role – or 'headspace' – to guide their viewing. More specifically, Professor D's metacomments asked the observing students to project themselves into their peers' performances to receive Professor D's coaching as their own. Cognitive performance theorist Bruce McConachie (2015) reminds us that spectating involves the same kind of psychological projection, or conceptual blending of self and other, which is foundational in performance practice. Yet, in this learning opportunity, the spectator's blending of self and other did not aim to foster empathy or develop a character. Rather, the spectator's self-projection created a kind of performance filter, which one student, Mark, described as a 'mental checklist of dos and don'ts that I pick up from watching other people [perform during coachings].'

Still, Professor D's metacomment could only prove productive if the student spectators agreed to play along and align their frame of learning (while spectating) with Professor D's frame of activity. Acting pedagogue Dick McCaw (2015) notes that a key component of performance training concerns 'accepting the offer to play,' and, in this class, students seemed happy to take up Professor D's framing invitation (176). When I asked students about what it was like to view their peers' coachings in post-course interviews, they replied enthusiastically, as illustrated by these excerpts from three students:

[Professor D] prefaced [coachings] with an 'I'm not just doing this for you, but this is for everyone to take a part in.' So, I liked that because if I see something I like, I log it in my head. I'm like, 'I like the way that he's emoting during this scene'—or 'I really didn't like the way he moved from upstage to downstage.'

[During coachings if] people were doing something that I liked or I didn't like—like some people would shift their weight a lot, which I found like super distracting—I would consciously think in my head 'ok, don't shift your weight onstage.'

[Observing a classmate being coached is] cool because then you get to see what you did, but through like third view.

Of interest, here, is the students' cognitive characterisation of observing their peers' coaching sessions. Phrases like 'log it in my head,' 'consciously think in my head' and 'third view' demonstrate the complex thinking the students experienced while watching their peers' perform.

The playful space from which the students observed coaching sessions can be described as 'liminal, inter-subjective' or, as Nicola Shaughnessy (2012) has noted, 'the ludic third' (38). Play is a phenomenon that has been rigorously researched by scholars from varying fields and, while resistant to firm definition, it is generally considered cognitive in nature.⁴ This is because, to exist within a zone of play, individuals must uphold multiple (sometimes contradictory and counterfactual) viewpoints simultaneously. In this class, Professor D's metacomment encouraged the spectators to intentionally foreground their peer's stage performance as a means to better understand their own practice. Observing from this 'third view' can provide a significant opportunity to learn because, as one student, Ava, noted, 'it's always easier to catch other people's flaws than to catch your own.' When pressed to explain what she meant, Ava stated, 'if you see that a person could have done [something] a little bit better [during a coaching], it makes me question, "Oh, do I do that, too? Yeah, I guess I kinda do." So, it kind of makes me reflect on my own flaws and try to, the next time, improve on that specific thing.'

Ava's comment points towards two cognitive characteristics of performance learning that are significant. First, Ava acknowledges the mostly tacit nature of performance practice when she states, 'it's always easier to catch other people's flaws than to catch your own.' Actor training tends to develop performance knowledge through activity-based experiences, which, scholar of acting Ian Watson (2015) notes, are often 'absorbed and applied tacitly rather than as an explicit conscious process' (11). Indeed, McConachie (2015) notes that performance activity typically transpires in a form of 'primary consciousness,' which is bound to the present moment (33). Yet, it is often the practical activity experienced in primary consciousness, which sets the stage for higher-order thinking. In other words, Ava's ability to recognise her own performance flaw (via observation of a peer's performance) is possible, in part, because of her own foundation in performance practice. Yet, Ava's self-awareness of this fact (or flaw) may not have been possible if Professor D had not framed Ava's viewing experience from the outset.

The second cognitive characteristic embedded in Ava's comments concerns her growing ability to think *across* coaching contexts to plan her future performances ('next time [I'll] improve on that specific thing'). The ability to transfer knowledge across contexts is arguably the end goal of most instruction. Learning scientist, Randi Engle (2006), contends that metacomments can be used to foster knowledge transfer by creating *intercontextuality*, which occurs 'when two or more contexts become linked with one another...[so that] the content established during learning is considered relevant to the transfer context' (456). By using metacomments to frame the audience's observation of coaching sessions, Professor D increased the likelihood that the student spectators might understand the relevance between their peers' coachings and the coachings they would take part in as actors. Thus, one reason the young actors were able to successfully harness particular concepts of performance knowledge (e.g., 'don't shift your weight') and transfer it to their own upcoming coaching sessions was because Professor D framed their viewing as relevant to their own future performance work.

A final cognitive complexity Professor D's metacomments set in motion relates to his decision to repeatedly use them. Before *every* coaching session Professor D stood up and positioned himself, once again, between the young actors onstage and the student audience to bracket the coaching session: 'Okay, remember. I'm coaching them, but you are learning through what my comments are to them.' The accumulation of these statements encouraged the audience members to learn from particular moments of performance (i.e., 'flaws'), but it also invited them to notice their peers' improved practice over time. Angie, a student in

the class, stated ‘seeing [my peers] make improvements was really fun,’ because their performances became ‘better than [what] I had seen the day before or the week before.’ Angie’s comment indicates that observing a peer’s developing performance can provide an opportunity to build a shared sense of what improvement looks like.

Cognitive scientists Colleen Seifert and Edwin Hutchins (1992) might refer to Angie’s ability to identify a peer’s improved practice, alongside an awareness of her own performance work, as a ‘horizon of observation’ (427). The authors note, ‘[t]he utility of shared knowledge can be enhanced by providing access to other’s performances. This *horizon of observation* is the functional workspace that each participant can monitor in addition to his own task’ (427). Although Angie was not directly engaged in her own performance task while observing her peers’ performances, her own upcoming coaching session remained close at hand due to Professor D’s metacomment. Moreover, Angie’s horizon of observation was focused on a *peer’s* improvement, which allowed her to view improvement at a level of skill comparable to her own. In this regard, Seifert and Hutchins note ‘an unlimited horizon of observation might prove too distracting’ (428). Here, it seems significant for young performers, like Angie, to view their peers’ practice to establish an observational frame that resides at, or just beyond, their own performance ability.

Although Professor D’s metacomments were only one part of his broader classroom pedagogy, they did important cognitive work. By structuring his students’ participatory purpose during actor coaching sessions, Professor D opened up a frame of observation that overlapped with his primary activity of coaching actors on their solo and scene work. But, these seemingly simple framing statements pressed the student spectators towards new ways of seeing, which allowed them to identify, trace and re-purpose performance in important ways.

Sustaining an observational frame

After thinking about metacomments for a good while, I wondered about Professor D’s mental focus during his coachings. Who was he really addressing? When I asked him, he told me, ‘I don’t really focus on [just the actors]—I’m thinking about everybody learning this thing that I’m trying to teach.’ Professor D’s statement suggests his attention was on the classroom *system*, just as an actor’s focus must extend beyond a scene partner. Acting teachers, like stage actors, must attend to the broader system of performance learning to monitor the efficacy of its varying frames. In this regard, Professor D’s metacomments initiated a frame of observation, which he nurtured throughout the class.

In addition to bracketing coaching sessions, Professor D repeatedly checked in with the observing students to ensure they were paying attention to his coaching practice or to underscore a particular performance concept. For example, in the midst of one coaching session, Professor D stopped a student’s performance to emphasise the importance of repetition in dramatic language and performance: ‘Alright hold. (*turning to address the entire class*) Now anytime in a monologue that we have the same word said more than once, it’s repetition [and]...we can’t have them sound the same.’ Then, in subsequent coaching sessions, Professor D re-circulated the performance concepts and, at opportune moments, asked students to re-voice their significance (‘So, during the last coaching that you and I had, I talked to you about [repetition]. Explain it to us.’). Known-answer questions, of course, often push learners to memorise certain concepts, but, in this case, they also allowed Professor D to draw attention to particular observations in which he wanted the spectators to engage.

To help the spectators accumulate their performance observations, Professor D frequently directed the students to reflect on their viewing experience. After coaching several actors,

Professor D invited the entire class to discuss what they learnt from coaching sessions: 'So what are the takeaways in terms of how I was coaching everyone?' In response to his query, the students usually called out the varying performance concepts highlighted during coachings, for example, 'repetition,' 'beats' and 'subtext.' In a similar fashion, Professor D frequently asked the students to keep track of their 'takeaways' in writing during in-class journaling. Both efforts pressed students to articulate their observations of coaching sessions, which, in turn, helped to sustain the observational frame of activity launched via his metacommentary.

Like many performance-based courses, Professor D's basic acting class comprised a series of layered activities. Within this dynamic flow of action, Professor D dedicated a good amount of time to working with actors *and* spectators during coaching sessions. By asking everyone in the class to experience a peer's coaching as their own, Professor D invited spectators to engage in cognitively rich learning opportunities dependent upon mental self-projection and play. Metacomments offer acting teachers a way to animate an observational frame of activity that can support students in mindfully observing coaching sessions, which leads students to reify performance concepts and promotes the transfer of performance knowledge.

Notes

- 1 In keeping with the qualitative research paradigm as practiced in the United States, the names in this chapter are pseudonyms. After selecting his pseudonym, Professor D told me his chosen name denotes a character, comprising all his past performance instructors, who he performs while teaching. I have written about Professor D's noteworthy teaching practice elsewhere (Syler 2017).
- 2 Indeed, Patricia Downey's (2013) dissertation, which reviews a data set of 75 course syllabi utilised in introductory acting courses at 61 different U.S. universities between 2001 and 2007, confirms the dominant performance tradition taught is a version of Stanislavski's System.
- 3 In this case, Professor D's emergent evaluation of what constituted improved practice aligned with a Stanislavski-based tradition of realistic performance. As with all modes of performance, what determines improvement aligns with the culturally constructed aesthetics and performance techniques codified in sociohistorical contexts.
- 4 For more on the intersections between play, performance and cognition, see Chapter 1 in McConachie's *Evolution, Cognition, and Performance* (2015) and Chapter 2.1 in Shaughnessy's *Applying Performance* (2012).

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