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Performing empathy: Using theatrical traditions in teacher professional learning

Alison Grove O'Grady

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# PERFORMING EMPATHY: USING THEATRICAL TRADITIONS IN TEACHER PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

ALISON GROVE O'GRADY

University of Sydney  
Australia

## Abstract

*The challenge of learning to be a teacher in a pandemic stymied world calls for focus and access to pedagogies of critical empathy to ensure the wellbeing of students is paramount in classrooms K to 12. Additional to facilitating the development of skills and competencies in curriculum disciplines, teachers are required to meet the emotional and social needs of their learners and prepare them to be active citizens in an increasingly complex and chaotic world. Making certain all students in their care are nurtured in environments that establish emotional safety and growth is a central tenet in the practice of all good teaching. Empathy, it seems is at the forefront of our western thinking given its prevalence in common parlance and language. Superficially, this is no bad thing. Kindness, being more humane, thinking of others and reflection are all arguably positive attributions or ways to behave to better and create a more humane society. However, empathy needs to be activated conceptually in productive and transformational ways, to be defined, problematised and critiqued. Grounding this work in the affordances of drama rich pedagogies (Ewing, 2019) and by drawing on the work of Greene (1995) and C. Stanislavski (1936), this article argues that creating a coherent and empathic classroom requires a praxis of critical empathy, facilitated by careful attendance to methods and processes steeped in and informed by theatrical traditions. In addition to a theoretical and contextual positioning of the work, this article will elucidate the method of practice undertaken in a research project, developed to inform the practice of teachers and educators.*

## Keywords

Empathy; drama-rich pedagogies; Stanislavski's methods and processes; empathic classroom

## Situative overview

Teachers are practising their craft in increasingly complex times (Sardar, 2010). In concert with developing discipline-rich knowledge, they are required to develop and to demonstrate social and emotional competencies in their practice repertoire to meet the needs of their students in the classroom. In a post-pandemic, addled world, this way of being in the classroom and its subsequent generative knowledge practices (Fiorella & Mayer, 2015) require a nuanced specialism. Teacher education candidates in the Australian context particularly reflect the diaspora of a culturally diverse world, and this is propelled by access to technologies and the proliferation of social media. Multiple languages are heard in tutorials and classrooms across the country, and differing belief systems increasingly challenge the westernised status quo. However, an increasingly connected world has also heightened the differences and perceived limitations of curriculums that neglect perspectives other than westernised ones and can preclude the experiences of teachers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds from being heard and prevent them from teaching "who they are" (Palmer, 1997).

To facilitate and develop empathy-rich pedagogies and practices in teacher education programmes and professional learning spaces, it is necessary to contextualise the work reported on here in relation to the prevalence, for example, of race-based discourses that occurred in Australia during (2013) and subsequently precipitated this research. The Aboriginal footballer Adam Goodes had been racially vilified by a young schoolgirl at a football match, and heightened emotions around the event seemed to

Corresponding author:

Alison Grove O'Grady [alison.ograde@sydney.edu.au](mailto:alison.ograde@sydney.edu.au)

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sanction and give rise to an increase in bigoted behaviour in classrooms (for example, McRae, 2020). Commentators were divided and questioned “what kids were learning” (Crysanthos & Denny, 2019) and teachers were left struggling to facilitate space in the curriculum to address “troubled knowledge” (Zembylas, 2012), such as race and racism.

At the same time as this issue was being wrestled with, Australia’s closest cousin New Zealand suffered the most violent of assaults when a gunman entered two mosques in Christchurch (March, 2019) and opened fire on worshippers, killing over 50 people and injuring many more. The response of the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, was lauded by even the most conservative of commentators, describing her as a “beacon of empathy” (Malik, 2019, n.p.). The responsive and humane way Ardern was seen to touch, hold, listen and to then go on at the United Nations General Assembly to describe her country as having “empathy and a strong sense of justice” (Watkins, 28 September 2018, n.p) set the tone for a renewal of ways to be more human and therefore humane in conversations across the sea. This articulation of emotion and affect distinguished this debate and paved the way for the distillation and consequent theorisation of empathy as a pedagogy and practice in this programme of research.

### ***Contextual literature***

The literature that abounds in the empathy space ranges from the popular (Rifkin, 2010) to the deeply theoretical (Zembylas, 2012). In the teacher education and professional learning space it is useful to consider the spectrum, particularly as discussions and literature regarding emotions and affect are a completely 21st century phenomenon. Discussions of feelings and emotions were absent from classrooms before the current millennial generations called for ways to explore and explain what social and emotional awareness is. Popular authors such as Rifkin (2010) argued that we are living in an “age of empathy” (p. 1). His argument is largely anthropological but is useful in contextualising the acknowledgment of human beings and their humanity, as distinguished from artificial intelligences, which cannot be imbued with emotional responses, such as those in the human psyche.

The original theorisation of the term “empathy” is attributed to the late Edith Stein (1964), a remarkable woman who, as a pupil of the philosopher Husserl (1938), went on to write about empathy as an embodied construct, that faces could not be construed as emotionless, that they articulated sadness or wonder—that faces were a manifestation of affect and, indeed, empathy.

### ***The dramatic empathy initiative***

Research and literature about empathy is prolific, with many texts extolling virtues absent of criticality, but rather, riven with a popularism that belies much of the critical work (Boler, 1997) and is more aligned with a “feel good” popularism or as (Krzanic, 2014) says, a sugared drink. Previous generations, certainly in western contexts, were not encouraged to delve into or to articulate their feelings, least of all to situate them at the heart of curriculum and learning. As teachers we seek to grapple with the way our students think to meet their learning needs and to create harmonious and thoughtful classrooms. Scholars such as Ewing (2019) noted that while the common trope of empathy is “to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes” (p. 23), this does not provide teachers with sufficient pedagogic practices to embed habits of empathy in their daily work. Empathy and compassion, she notes, “requires embodiment and enactment for rich dialogue and substantive conversations to take place” (p. 23). Teachers and teacher educators are recognising in more formal ways that empathy needs to be distilled into a tangible and teachable pedagogy, thus habituating empathy as a pedagogy and practice.

Theatrical traditions have historically been used to explore the human condition at the same time as providing entertainment. Assuming another person’s identity, understanding what motivates them in a particularised set of circumstances, are essences of performing in the theatrical tradition. C. Stanislavski’s (1949) method acting techniques intend for actors to imbue a character with a sense of

the actor's self, whilst remaining true to the integrity of the text. He writes: “[a]ll action in the theatre must have an inner justification, be logical, coherent and real ... and as a final result we have a truly productive activity” (C. Stanislavski, 1963, p. 81). This resonates with teachers' work, every day, in performing pedagogy.

### **The performance**

Working and researching in a pandemic (2020) gave our project a particular resonance as we were gifted the use of the Everest theatre, Sydney, Australia, in recognition of the dearth of work available to performers during COVID and in acknowledgment of the criticality of our work as it was perceived by the director of the theatre. As the theatre was laid fallow during successive lockdowns, our ensemble walked the boards, dusting off the real and metaphorical cobwebs. We then began our work in earnest.

The research and performance work built upon a research project (Freebody & Grove O'Grady, 2019) funded by the University of Sydney in 2016. The project responded to calls by the then Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Professor Gillian Triggs, to develop pedagogies and ways to ameliorate race-based encounters in schools and communities in response to a disturbing frequency of prejudicial behaviour, some of it directed by students to teachers. The broad objective of the project in its infancy was to share practices and performed pedagogies for pre-service teachers to use in their work. These pedagogies were critical and reflexive (Grove O'Grady & De Angelis, 2021), paying homage to the everyday work performed by teachers in their classrooms across the country. Our applied practices using theatrical traditions (Grove O'Grady, 2020) focused on issues of race, identity, gender and the environment.

As this work and research gained traction, the emergence of “empathy” (Stein, 1964) as a term used in everyday parlance provided us with a way to use language and to distil everyday language in conjunction with an increasing understanding of praxis, the blended relationship between theory and practice. As a precursor to the performed project, we held an “empathy huddle” (University of Sydney, Australia, November 2018), bringing together leaders in the Arts and academia, each of whom travelled distances to attend.

In 2020 a performed workshop led by Australian playwright Thomas de Angelis aimed to find ways to explore practices of empathy. An interrogation of a version of C. Stanislavski's (1949) acting exercises or *étude* conceived by the group as “etudinal exploration” (Dramatic personae, unpublished) activated an exercise for the purposes of teaching with, for and about empathy. Summative conclusions were made on the day to develop holistic pedagogic and participatory approaches that could be further developed as methods. Some conclusions reflected the fact that actors' work is necessarily concerned with the development of character, the pursuit of objectives (often within the frame of text but not always) and the application of effort towards understanding “given circumstances” (C. Stanislavski, 1949): Who am I? What do I want? How do I get it? Who is in my way? Why are they here? Who is touching my foot? Much of this work has antecedence in the authentic way actors practically approach the task of “walking in another's shoes” (Ewing & Simons with Hertzberg & Campbell, 2016, p. 7).

### **The in-between spaces**

Metaxis is a word that often resists definition in an applied practice but enables us to be both aware of oneself and in role as another at the same time. This condition of humanness and humanity is crucial in the development of empathic habits or habituated empathy. Plato (Fine, 2019 is credited with inventing the word when designing his Utopian society in *The Republic*. Plato conscientiously left the artist out of his conception of Utopia, as artists and their inherent practices would be articulated in every citizen! In this research and performance, Savin-Baden's (2015) expanded notion of metaxis, that humans are suspended by webs of polarity, between the one and the many, was used by the ensemble (workshop and performance participants) to describe and activate the liminal space between the performance of

teachers' work and performance. A hopeful uncovering of similarities, knowledges and understandings emerged from teachable moments, embodied by both teachers and performers alike.

### ***A shared language of empathy***

The performance began with a collaborative development of the shared language and discourse of terms and concepts used in both education-specific contexts and in the acting and performance space. Acknowledging the work of Gee (1996) and his argument regarding equitable access to discourses, specifically as they relate to specialist activities or professions, proved useful. Access, he argued, is a key piece in developing an equitable way to join any meaningful conversation about a concept or practice through discourse and language. The ensemble curated a glossary of key terminology for performance purposes and acknowledged this list as not exhaustive. The shared language of empathy glossary provided procedural knowledge (Markauskaite & Goodyear 2017) for all the participants to work from.

### ***The method: Part 1***

#### *Circumstances and scenarios—examples from practice. Using the side coaching method.*

We began by contextualising and defining empathy for our purposes. The ensemble considered the many-faceted nature of empathy through conversation and began playing in the space beginning with offers as first actions. These were both non-verbal and verbal and their continuation as positive suggestions, movements and physical shapes began to give form to the language. Our ensemble agreed that the development of a working definition of empathy was critical in the creation of performance and as “actionable knowledge” (Markauskaite & Goodyear, 2017).

We moved into conversations and learnings that Boler (1997) describes as pedagogies of discomfort. These were positioned and offered as authentic conversations that dealt with everyday human concerns. The ensemble explored the conceptual knowledge of safety in space and how this is afforded in classrooms and in theatre performances. The process again acknowledged the complexity and controversy of these encounters in classrooms, and these were then mapped physically against our understanding of empathy. These were used to construct and interrogate scenarios that require deeply empathic responses. In keeping with the ensemble's directive, that all materials and encounters needed to be genuinely relational and authentic, case studies in classroom encounters were provided to the ensemble by Professor Emerita Robyn Ewing AM (as a member of the ensemble). The following case study examples were provided:

A teacher must inform a student that the breakfast club has been cancelled due to COVID-19. The student is disappointed as this is their only source of food during the day.

We're at a staff meeting where assessment is discussed. One teacher wants to change an assignment from a speaking task to a writing task. A second teacher is resistant because their students are EALD students.

A student questions the importance of a lesson in front of the entire class. The teacher, who has planned an entire lesson, tries to carry on.

The ensemble began to explore through improvisation the “given circumstances” (Stanislavski, 1949, 2008). The term given circumstances is a principle of Stanislavski's method; it is applied by the actors against the total set of environmental and situational conditions that influence the actions that a character in a drama undertakes. Although a character may make choices unconsciously, the actor playing the character is aware of the conditions on a conscious level to heighten and deepen the motivation behind the character's actions—or in this case one of the players in the scenarios. K. Stanislavski argued that given circumstances included, “the plot, the facts, the incidents, the period, the

time, the place of the action, the way of life” (2008, pp. 52–53. These were, he argued, products of the imagination and therefore necessary for our re-imagining of troubled and difficult knowledge.

We applied the Stanislavskian technique through the lens of given circumstances and answered the following questions:

Who are you?

Where are you?

What time is it

What do you want?

Why do you want it?

How are you going to achieve it?

Once the ensemble was certain of the scenario, we began to act the scenario out with guidance and side-coaching from an actor. Following the scenario’s end, we returned to our questions above and came to different answers as a result of achieving multiple perspectives. We found ourselves saying things like: “I thought I had to do X to achieve my goal—but I actually think I’ll do Y.”

The first step in this process emphasised the creation of content that can be reviewed, amended, added to and developed. The temptation to solve the central predicament in each scenario was palpable, but the ensemble agreed that this was not our goal. Rather, we intended to sit in the space of conflict or disagreement to understand better, different and difficult perspectives.

After playing the scenario once or twice, the side coach within each group told each educator participant an additional piece of information that sought to add a layer of detail. Crucially, the side coach told one teacher one additional piece of information but withheld that information from the other teacher. The scene was played until such time as the ensemble felt that an extensive amount of information and insight into the scenario and its given circumstances was attained.

## Part 2

*The beats of the scenario. New information. Being true to the given circumstances. The spine of the scene.*

Having thought about the scenario that had just been performed, the ensemble turned their attention towards thinking through the beats of the scenario, taking note to identify where shifts in action or emotion occurred. These beats are moments where the scene changes, new information is presented, or a resolution is arrived at (or not) and should be achieved quickly and spontaneously. The total number of beats settled on can be as many or as few as the ensemble wanted and reflected their conceptions. The ensemble reflected actively, having regard to how the objective changed or surprised performers in the scene. The scenes were crafted using economical language to mimic the beats and ensure attendance to form and clarity.

Through this means of scene analysis, the ensemble could decide that the scenario should change, that someone else should enter the scene at a particular juncture, that the actions in the scene were not quite right for a particular reason. The approach was centred around being true to the given circumstances of the scene and plotting the key moments. The playwright, De Angelis, emphasised that this was not a process that can be equated with scripting, and it would therefore be worthwhile to think about this activity as uncovering the spine of the scene.

### Part 3

#### *Returning to the scenario through étude. Exploring the four parts of the exercise through abstract physicality.*

We returned to the scenario through étude and undertook a four-part exercise. In the first part, performers stood opposite each other and maintained eye contact, imagining that a golden coil joined them both. The side coach read the beats of the scene slowly, and the performers either moved towards or away from their performing partner. The decision to either move towards or away from their opposite performer is based on a physical representation of what each beat is. For example, if the beat is “A tries to leave B”, then the performer playing A might take a step backwards. Crucially, eye contact must be maintained. This part of the exercise concludes when all the beats have been announced.

After the first part of the exercise, a short debrief occurred to discuss any discoveries and consider whether the given circumstances were still resonating. The étude was performed again using the same beats. During this part of the exercise, participants were allowed to move in any direction around the space and add gesture when they felt it was appropriate. Eye contact still had to be maintained. Participants explored physical representations of each beat that used physicality, including status, levels and speed. The aim was to be present with the opposite participant and create a dialogue without using verbal language. Once all the beats had been read out, this part of the exercise concluded.

The third part of the exercise required participants to think of one line or utterance from the scene. It didn't have to be a piece of dialogue that was spoken but could be a confluence of several lines. Then, in the same way as in the previous part of the exercise, participants began the étude and responded to beats read out by the side coach. When they felt the moment was right, the participants uttered their line—but only once for the entire étude. This part of the exercise concluded when all the beats were read out.

In the final part of the exercise, participants recreated the étude in the same way as in the third part, but this time the side coach did not read out the beats, and participants said their lines as many times as they liked. Participants found that they charted a similar course to the one they encountered in the previous part of the exercise, and that they needed to navigate the étude, recalling the beats of the scene. After each part of the exercise, participants deeply noticed (Greene, 1995) what they discovered about the scene and about themselves.

This exercise attempted to use physical bodies rather than language as a mode of movement and emotional experience during the scenario. Actors and teachers were all reminded to take space for the emotionally charged process and to actively reflect and check their status and feelings.

### Part 4

#### *Asking a better question by reframing our given circumstances*

We returned to the original scenario equipped with new insight, information and strategies. It was at this point that we tried to ask a better question (Saxton et al., 2018) in reframing our given circumstances. Instead of asking: “Who are you?” we might ask “Why are you?”

We replayed the scene, careful not to eliminate complications, or even solve the scene's problems to achieve the objective, even if attempting to do so proved futile or unsolvable. What was desirable was that the emotions of each participant changed somewhat, and that insight into the other performer's perspective was clearer to all involved. In short, the ways in which information was communicated and exchanged was informed by the fact that each participant was more intuitively aware of what the other was experiencing.

## Part 5

### Expanding the insight to include motivations and perspectives

Having performed and watched the scenario in its various guises, we expanded our insights into the motivations and perspectives of each character involved. After this point, a structured discussion and feedback session was conducted to examine key differences and realisations. The ensemble collaborated on several other choices and plotlines that could exist within the framework of the scene and considered alternatives. Changes were noted across the spectrum of each part of the performance as works in progress. The opportunity to critically reflect and ask better questions achieved deeper empathy.

### Conclusions and possibilities

This research, performance and method were designed to meet the needs of the no longer new 21st century and the call to engage teachers and learners in social and emotional learning as a response to local calls to ameliorate classroom conflict and disharmony and as a response to international discourse emanating from organisations such as the OECD in *The Future of Education and Skills, 2030* (OECD, 2018). Teacher training and professional learning has relied on a method of transaction as compared with a desirable model of cooperation, collaboration and engagement, that recognises the intellectual and emotional labour of teachers (Mockler & Groundwater Smith, 2017).

This work in explicit teacher professional learning considers change from the perspective of human rights education and theatrical traditions, such as those developed by C. Stanislavski (1949) and utilised in the everyday work of actors and performers. With policy arguments internationally calling for schools to prepare students to live and work in times that challenge the economic disparity seen in and between countries, alongside the fragility of the environment, there is an imperative for students to understand the need to cooperate and collaborate to survive and flourish.

This work articulates an approach that has been developed with the involvement and partnership of practitioners, actors, researchers, teachers, students and the community—to distil and facilitate empathy as a praxis. This work is underpinned by a commitment to practice and the cultivation of theoretical principles as they relate to and inform empathy. The method comprises processes and approaches that might better equip pre-service or practising teachers to face critically the challenges in their future classrooms and the way we relate to each other as human beings in this multifarious and manifest future.

In keeping with the method and project's deference to theatrical traditions, it is fitting that the final words belong to the playwright Chekov. As a teacher of drama, he advised his students to read history, to develop empathy in an effort to “understand them through their way of living and the circumstances of their lives ... try to penetrate the psychology of different nations ... endeavour to penetrate the psychology of persons around you toward whom you feel unsympathetic ... attempt to experience what they experience” (Chekhov, 1953, pp. 4–5).

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