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Exploring the Actor–Director Relationship in the Drama School Through a Student–Tutor Dialogue

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Introduction

In this chapter, we will discuss a specific project that forms part of a second-year module of the BA Acting training at Guildford School of Acting (GSA). We will be using a dialogue-based research methodology, based on the work of Plamondon, Bottorff, and Cole (2015), to interrogate the student-centred approach to learning, as defined by Neumann (2013), within a drama school. The challenges we encountered when trying to discuss the experience of the particular project from the disparate view of the student/actor and the tutor/director led us to experiment with different forms of dialogue.

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K. Gravett et al. (eds.), *Enhancing Student-Centred Teaching in Higher Education*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-35396-4_4

Background

Actor training in the UK is a process that (in the contemporary era) traces its traditions and methodologies back to the work of Constantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938) and his seminal work *An Actor Prepares* originally published in 1936. There are also many other influences that stretch back through the traceable history of Western drama via the theatres of (amongst many others) Shakespeare, Moliere, the Commedia Del'Arte, and right back to antiquity in both Rome and Athens. Stanislavsky's well-known work on 'emotion memory' (Stanislavsky, 1980), famously reinvented as 'The Method' by Lee Strasberg (Lewis, 1958), can also be traced back to the theatre of ancient Greece, where the actor Polus carried an urn containing the ashes of his own dead son on stage to help him connect with the emotional content of a scene from Sophocles' *Electra* (Cole & Krich Chinoy, 1970).

Until the last hundred or so years, actor training has been a process of apprenticeship. In the UK, the gradual rise of the drama school that started towards the end of the nineteenth century and saw something of an explosion in the post-World War II era, has formalised the training process to the extent that today many of the most prestigious schools offer undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Acting and a whole range of related areas. The processes and approaches, however, still have their roots in the 'on the job' training of the artisan. The formality of contemporary higher educational practice, as it exists in UK universities, has been an important provocation to those approaches in recent years (as summarised by McNamara, 2018).

Acting is a personal art form. There are key concepts in acting, of which the previous example of Polus is just one, that link actors back through the centuries. However, almost no two actors will ever feel quite the same about those concepts. One actor's most important concept will be another's bête noire. In line with other 'new' disciplines, some concepts will mean subtly different things to differing actors, leading to a variety of terminology to describe the same concept(s). An example of this is the Stanislavskian concept of the character's 'objective' (Stanislavsky, 1980, p. 114). This can be described as the character's

'want' or 'intention' or 'need', and so on, almost ad infinitum. A further level of complication for the Anglophone world is that Stanislavsky wrote in his native Russian language, so something is also lost in the translation from source, as acknowledged by (amongst others) Carnicke (2009), Adler (2000), and Whyman (2008). The crucial point is that each actor (and therefore each actor-trainer) will need to find an embodied understanding of a key concept like this; embodied because acting is a practical activity. Having an intellectual understanding of a concept is not even a small fraction of the learning required to actually be an actor. From Trevor's experience of training to be an actor thirty years ago, he struggled with fully understanding the importance of the 'objective', and later realised that this was largely because of the word. To him it sounded too clinical and remote. He could not connect to the concept and, therefore, struggled to come to an embodied understanding. The word 'intention' feels much more useful to him, personally. He is fully aware that the reverse may be true for others. Later in this chapter we will see that Trevor's use of the word 'trust', and Darrell's reception of that word, operated on this project in a similar way.

There are two important questions here for actor training. First, how do we communicate key concepts when language itself is often inadequate and can even create a block? Second, how do we assist student-actors to embody and experience key concepts so that they can build their own full understanding and their personal process? This is, therefore, a necessarily slippery and messy learning environment, in line with other forms of student-centred learning (Neumann, 2013). In any class or rehearsal, the student is really being asked to engage with the personal process of the tutor (as each of us only have our own understanding to work with). The student is asked to experience acting through that lens, and then, via a process of trial and error and reflection over three years (and beyond), move towards their own embodied understanding of acting and their own personal process. All this operates alongside an artisanal way of learning and teaching that sees classroom practice operating through a rehearsal process. It is one particular rehearsal process that forms the object of this study which, in turn, echoes the work of Shulman (2005) into 'signature pedagogies'.

The Rehearsal Project

The first rehearsal project of the second year of the BA (Hons) Acting programme at GSA is to work on a scene from a play by Shakespeare. Taught in a cohort of 15, each student will (typically) work on one scene with a partner. On this project, Darrell was working on Act II Scene iv of *Measure for Measure*, playing the role of Angelo. The scene follows Angelo (the temporary proxy ruler of Vienna) gradually explaining to Isabella, a Nun, that although he has sentenced her brother to death for having a sexual relationship outside marriage, if she agrees to sleep with him, Angelo will lift the sentence on her brother. Trevor was the tutor/director.

The approach we took in rehearsal/class was fundamentally Stanislavskian. Trevor's approach has been influenced most by the theatre director and teacher Mike Alfreds. A major figure in actor training in his own right, Alfreds' book *Different Every Night* (2007) has become a staple on the reading lists of many Acting programmes. The way we approached the scenes was focused on the Stanislavskian principles of 'action' and 'objective', but using ways of working developed by Alfreds (2007). The main principle behind these concepts is that by focusing on what the character does (the 'action') in pursuit of what the character wants (the 'objective'), the actor can be present in the moment and deliver the scene in the most immediate and lively way possible.

By employing a dialogue-based methodology in our approach, we hope to bring the differing perspectives of student and tutor together:

> Dialogue-based research methods bring people together to engage in purposeful, guided conversations in a systematic way. These purposeful conversations focus on a particular topic and often involve using some synthesis of evidence. (Plamondon et al., 2015)

We started this process with Darrell writing a reflection on the process from his point of view. For Trevor, that suggested two distinct themes that Darrell seemed to find important. Those themes were 'vulnerability' and 'trust'. Both could be expected to be key issues for any actor (or student/actor) in any rehearsal process. Trevor was also aware that in

his teaching, he had made trust a theme himself. Trevor's intention is to encourage student/actors to trust themselves, within a planned process, to see what they can learn from that process in its entirety. On reading Darrell's reflection, it seemed to Trevor that Darrell had a slightly different view of the nature of 'trust' and that had led Darrell into a discussion of 'vulnerability'. There was then an exchange of written pieces between both writers in an attempt to understand and interpret their differing views, which became increasingly unproductive. We found we were going around in circles, rather than moving towards a joint understanding of what we thought the process had meant, and of what the learning experience was. We then decided to take a step back from a written dialogue and sit together to talk through the key issues that had been raised. This seemed to be a clearer and more productive response to Plamondon et al.'s (2015) description of dialogue-based research methods. That second, more direct dialogue is what follows.

Dialogue

Trevor: Darrell, at the stage of the dialogue we have now reached, what is your attitude to the nature of 'trust' in a rehearsal process where the tutor is also the director, and the student is also the actor?

Darrell: My attitude is such that I feel a level of trust in the tutor/director is important for the student/actor, even when it is the case that a student/actor is being asked to trust themselves more. In order that a student/actor trust themselves more, they must trust in the judgement of the person asking them to do so, for them to know that to do so is useful.

Trevor: The process I asked you to follow is challenging and the material we were working on was technically difficult. What issues did that suggest for you that may have led you to question whether you could have that trust in me?

Darrell: The material certainly was difficult, and I found this early on. I took the decision to share the difficulties I was encountering with the class, and felt that this was met with an indifference towards how I could look to access the material more readily, aside from sitting in the confusion that I was finding unhelpful. Subsequently, in the absence of

a readiness to discuss how this process could work for me, my level of trust in your judgement declined.

Trevor: This is where it gets interesting. I remember this moment in rehearsals well. What I was trying to say was that the time to step back and critically reflect on the process would be after having experienced it. That in order to have the tools to try and understand it, one needs to actually do it for an extended period. That is why I stress trusting yourself within that process. It is, at times, scary and difficult, and I know that. I would certainly never want to appear indifferent. But I actually cannot advise an actor how they can better engage with a process until I have worked with them practically on it, because we are all different. Until we have worked practically together, I could only advise in a generalised way as I simply do not yet know what your response to the process will be.

Darrell: I would argue that a great portion of the process I was set to learn about concerned the interpretation and translation of Shakespeare's text. At the stage we are talking about, the whole class had looked closely at how the text might be interpreted, and it was from my observation of people working practically that my own personal difficulties came to emerge. The difficulties I was facing were to do with this precise moment in the process, and I did not consider them previous to anything I had yet to explore with you. They were to do with what had already been done, rather than in anticipation of what was to come. I agree with you in that there is great value in reflecting on a process in its entirety, but in the case that one feels they cannot access it at all, from the off, I question how efficient it is to submit to this notion, in place of asking 'why is this not working for you?', and looking to see how a process can grow/change for a particular individual.

Trevor: Is that what led to feelings of vulnerability for you?

Darrell: I think so, yes. And that is not to say I did not value this vulnerability. As part of my own practice, I recognise that vulnerability is an enormously useful tool in ensuring I remain open to new ideas, and new ways of working, or indeed looking at how my own understandings can grow and change. However, I did not feel that there was the same vulnerability in your way of working, Trevor, which made it hard for me to negotiate this vulnerability myself, and make sure I was able to make value of it. It felt it was difficult to be vulnerable when working with someone who did not appear to submit to it themselves, when their process was being questioned or challenged.

Trevor: I certainly understand that acting, as a process, often makes the actor feel vulnerable, potentially in a whole host of ways. I hope I am never insensitive to that. I try to remain extremely sensitive to the way all actors are responding. It is often a messy and confused set of disparate reactions though. Some actors may find particular material challenging. Some may be surprised by that. Some may not know why they feel vulnerable. Some may be in denial about it. And on we could go. What I find tricky about this particular reflection is where my vulnerability should sit. If I were an actor in the process, then my own vulnerabilities would be there for sure. But I am not in that role. I would also not use the word 'submit' for either student or tutor, actor or director. Could you clarify what kind of vulnerability you felt was lacking?

Darrell: When I talk of vulnerability, what I mean is an openness in relation to the processes we have come to feel are our own. From a director, I would hope to see a sense of this vulnerability in relation to what it is they are teaching; openness that allows us to see where space for change might exist in our methods. Since embarking upon my drama school training, there have been a number of projects where the director/tutor has made it really clear that although they have a plan to deliver something predetermined, they remain open and ready to interpret questions or challenges that the process they represent might come across, as part of an ongoing conversation about how the work they know to be theirs could change and develop and grow.

Trevor: Yes, I see that. What I think I say throughout rehearsal is that this process is mine. It is what I have developed over the years as a way of teaching an approach to acting. I say that it is, therefore, unique. No other tutor/actor will teach exactly the same process because no two tutor/actors can. Acting is a personal process and we all only have our own lens through which it can be reflected. I say that you may find that you reject much of what I cover with you eventually, or you may find you retain a lot of it. But none of us can know how that will work out until we have tried it fully. For me the time for questions on a fundamental level needs to come after the experience, which is why reflection on practice is such an important element of the programme. To start analysing what is not working during the process and look for alternative processes (or elements of processes) at that time risks not actually experiencing the process fully, and (potentially) missing out on the learning experience.

Darrell: I totally concur that individuality between tutors exists, and that that is a good thing. My point concerns less the methods or practices that a tutor may have, and rather, how their relationship with them effects the extent to which they are accessible to the student. From my experiences, the most effective tutors are those who are able to present clearly their own understandings and practices, whilst exposing them to the scrutiny of the students who wish to learn from them, whilst simultaneously integrating an ongoing conversation about how students are coming into contact with their work. For me, it is this step that defines a tutor from a director, the step from protecting a certain way of working, and using it in spite of how students might respond, but opening it up, exposing its many elements, and questioning why some parts work well, and why some parts might not work for the student, and how steps can be taken to move forward, to ensure the learning process is as lucrative as possible.

Trevor: Yes, I think that is right. There is always a tension in this work between the fear of the unknown (the new approach or process that a tutor might bring), and the need for the student to experience the process in order to be able to reflect. I would always tend to resist a conversation that deconstructs a process before it has been fully experienced. That is also an important function of the stage of the training at which this project occurs—the beginning of the second year. In the first year, we will tend to take things more slowly and steadily, discussing much more along the way—in part because the fear factor is likely to be higher. In second year, we will be much more likely to ask students to take a creative risk for themselves, whilst asking them to engage with new processes and ideas. The issue here, it seems to me, is the relationship between the doing and the reflecting. I think the use of the word scrutiny is important here. Students should absolutely not feel that there can be no challenge to a process. Equally, the most valuable time to scrutinise a process is likely to be after it has been experienced. The challenge in these rehearsal/classes is to separate out what is a question of clarification of what is being asked of the student, and a scrutinising of the value of the process. The latter can really only be useful once the process has been explored fully. That may not happen if the student keeps stepping outside to scrutinise the process when they need to engage with it. There is a danger that the student's desire to scrutinise is actually a (subconscious) avoidance strategy. However, in the messy environment

that is student-centred learning, that is an extremely difficult thing to unpack.

Darrell: I am in total agreement that reflection post-process is a useful exercise, however, I think there is still space within the rehearsal timeline to check-in with problems that are coming to the surface. Admittedly, I have struggled in the past to allow myself the opportunity to 'sit-in' a process, and (rather) separate myself from it in an attempt to analyse and understand it in order to better support my combating of any fears. I think this may be what you mean by 'avoidance', a tendency to want to analyse why something is difficult, rather than committing to working through it. It is this, perhaps, that sets artistic training aside from more academic streams of education; that the need to understand and analyse (though a useful function of the learning process) can actually, at times, hinder experiential learning that bares equivalent importance. In this instance, I would ask how better could a tutor/director draw awareness to this contradiction in training, so that the student/actor is able to trust themselves more when stepping into those fears; making that jump between first- and second-year training.

This question of Darrell's is something that I am going to be reflecting on with staff and is an example of the benefits of this kind of dialogue. Darrell and I then wrote some concluding thoughts separately so that we could have some space and time to reflect. We wrote in the same room and exchanged those paragraphs so that we remained in dialogue, but in order to reach a conclusion to the dialogue it felt necessary to move away from a direct conversation.

Trevor: Just moving towards some conclusions now, what I have found most useful and interesting about this research project has been the process of moving through a written dialogue that was leading Darrell and I towards conflict, into a more direct dialogue that has led to, I think, a greater mutual understanding. I found that the first reflection that we did separately was tending to not make progress. Although we were in dialogue in the sense that one of us was writing a reflection and the other was reading and responding to what they read, we were not always able to communicate particularly well. The written reflections that we came up with became cyclical and we could not move beyond them to any point of agreement. In the end, we had a meeting during which we both wondered if we could usefully complete the work. The result of that conversation was a decision to effectively reflect on our reflection. We decided to use the initial work as a source, distill it into

a list of key themes that had emerged and then reflect on those themes to try and gain some perspective. This does seem, to both of us, to have been successful.

For my part, this second dialogue—which we wrote in the same room—allowed for a more immediate response that seemed to allow more consensus to build. That, in turn, has allowed me to reflect on the different point of view that Darrell has a student/actor. For me, as tutor/director, I know what learning outcomes I am attempting to guide my students to. Given the nature of Acting as a subject, I know that for most (probably, at some time, all) that will lead to feelings of vulnerability and, sometimes, fear. I certainly try never to lose sight of that. However, it is not possible to know exactly how those feelings will manifest themselves for each individual student/actor, and it is not possible to know (in the messy process of student-centred learning) what connections each student/actor might make with what I am saying or what the work is bringing up. I think an example in this case is the issue of trust. That is a word that I use, but for me I see a clear distinction between the student trusting him/herself as s/he explores the work and the notion that the student needs to trust me as tutor. I want the student to experience the entire process, but once they have I want them to feel free to accept or reject all or part of that process. Making that clear during class/rehearsal is challenging, but it was also challenging in this dialogue.

Darrell: It certainly feels right to move towards a more conclusive part of this dialogue. After the long process that Trevor outlines, explored hitherto, this dialogue has taken a far more productive and considerate form, that has ensured our conversation has been focused, and guided.

At my current stage in training, I am subject to assessing many different ways of working, and (as Trevor explains), rejecting or accepting them in relation to how I want to move forward as an actor, selecting those methods of working that serve me best. I do worry, though, that those decisions I arrive at now and those things that I find value in exploring may sometimes be negated in light of a feeling that, actually, the learning I am yet to undergo may change my current thinking. I would suggest that there is certainly space for this current thinking to change. However, I am not certain that it is necessary to assume that it will. Here, things become confused; what of a student's understanding at a particular time in training is to do with their own personal, long term decisions about their craft, and what might change in line with

new experiences, and new explorations? I would hold that this question can also be applied to those particular positions of the director/tutor.

What has also been interesting is how mine and Trevor's current positions have posed challenges in the coming to this final putting down of a discussion. As an undergraduate student, to express my opinions clearly has been an undoubted challenge, and one that, at times, has left me feeling intimidated by Trevor's experiences of postgraduate study, as well as his understanding of how to write for this medium. Subsequently, the first stage to this writing process felt unbalanced, and I felt ill-equipped to argue my own point. Now, however, having moved forwards from that, I have felt much better prepared to discuss with Trevor the ideas and themes that, together, we recognised as discrepancies in our working processes. I am glad that we found a way to discuss efficiently and productively, and one that has allowed us both time to reflect on our own, and each other's, processes.

Trevor: Finally, for me, that last paragraph of Darrell's is important. There simply is a disparity in our current levels of experience, both in our understanding of Acting and our understanding of academic writing. This does, in many ways, bring us full circle to the personal nature of Acting. My views today are, inevitably, coloured by thirty plus years of acting, directing, writing and teaching. It is those experiences that inform my views of process and of how to try and teach it. Part of the reason that no two actors or teachers have the exact same view is that we are all at different stages of our own development. This dialogue-based approach certainly seems to me to be helpful in contextualising my further understanding of this phenomenon.

Darrell: My final thoughts are in accordance with Trevor's. The disparity in our experiences is something that both sets us apart, and brings us together. It highlights that although we are at different stages of our own personal development (and will likely go on to develop/consolidate relatively different approaches to Acting), it is possible that our personal aims to connect to artistic training (be it through teaching, or learning) can provide space for continued reflection and growth in our positions, respectively. That my years are fewer, and that Trevor's are more, need not breed cause to disparage one person's ideas over the other's. They both belong to different times and stages of two different careers. That they both have found expression through this constructive dialogue is something I find very exciting.

Conclusion

What is in evidence here is the deeply messy learning process. For Darrell this is exemplified as the confusion of trying to unpick a process or way of approaching a piece of acting, and translate that into his own way of working, at a time when his own way of working is still evolving. From Trevor's perspective, that means that some priorities are changed or confused with other issues. Part of the messiness of the learning process is in the way the student responds to the learning. In the case of a piece of acting, that can literally be connected to emotional responses to the material and/or the work, which can easily create confusion.

Although we both initially experienced some trepidation about the approach, we have both found this a useful exercise. Once we became familiar with the dialogic approach, we both found it a useful and positive experience and would be interested to see how, as an approach, it may be possible to incorporate into the way assessment and feedback is perceived in the drama school.

We both feel that we found our way eventually to what Plamondon et al. (2015) term a 'systematic' approach. What has been most useful is to move the personal reflection on practice, that is a central part of the BA Acting programme at GSA, on to a systematic, dialogue-based approach. That was, on this occasion, for research purposes, but there are clear opportunities here for this approach to potentially be part of an assessment and feedback strategy. The tension seems to be in negotiating the messiness of student-centred learning and finding a systematic way of reflecting on that without the one negatively impacting the other.

Reflective Vignette

The initial idea for this chapter was Darrell's, who was interested in exploring the learning and teaching experience within what is simultaneously an artistic enterprise. That led to some conversations about whether what we do in a drama school is, perhaps, unique at all. Further, that led us to explore some literature on 'student-centred learning', where we found a number of similarities to learning and teaching strategies in other disciplines. When it

came to how to explore our source material, we found our way almost instinctively to 'dialogue-based research'. This was the really big area of revelation for Trevor as an actor/trainer.

We spend at least some of any teaching session/rehearsal in some form of plenary session; in a rehearsal this is often called a 'notes' session. In a really open and productive rehearsal room, 'notes' will be a two-way (or more) process. A director will have things that they want actors to change, but often there will be discussion of a moment or an action and the 'notes' will go from director to actor, actor to actor, stage-manager to actor, actor to stage-manager, and then all of them (potentially) back to the director. The whole company will be in dialogue as they attempt to make sense of the piece they are working on, the production taking the place of a research project.

Then, in the drama school context, we have a post-project formal assessment and feedback process. The pressures of time often mean that we never put the two things together in a full and considered way. The dialogue that we have been able to have here has quite definitely helped the learning experience for the student, but has also helped the tutor's thoughts on learning and teaching to develop. What the tutor will be taking from this research project is the need to increase the dialogic approach to reflecting on learning and teaching as part of our assessment and feedback strategies.

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