

## Owning the Stage: Using Dramatic Theory to Improve Teaching

Lindsey Rae, Champlain College

William Shakespeare said “All the world’s a stage...And one man in his time plays many parts.” That statement rings true in the classroom, and as librarians teaching one-shot sessions, we have many parts to play. We are “guest lecturers,” traveling minstrels who consistently have the toughest crowds of students to please. We are constantly looking for ways to make our sessions with students more engaging. One way to accomplish this is by stepping out of our comfort zones and borrowing principles from other disciplines, specifically acting.

These proceedings focus on the use of various elements of dramatic theory to improve three interconnected principles of acting and teaching: connection, communication, and confidence. These principles weave together to form a tapestry that can help us better connect with ourselves as teachers and, therefore, our students.

### Overview: Where Teaching Meets Acting

Being a teaching librarian comes with its unique set of challenges. For starters, most of us haven’t been trained as teachers or educators while pursuing a degree or working in librarianship. Even in the teaching world, the performance aspect of teaching is often neglected during the training process (Schwartz, 2013). Yet, the parallels between these disciplines are fairly apparent. Both teaching and acting ask a person to:

1. capture the attention of an audience—connect
2. deliver content in a memorable way—communicate,
3. and establish a presence in a room full of people—confidence.

In addition, we are constantly up against the challenge of being the perpetual substitute teacher. No matter how integrated our library teaching curriculum might be at our institutions, we typically see our students in a “one-shot” format. We don’t have the luxury of building a rapport with our students the way that full-time teachers and faculty get to do over the course of a semester. As a result, we are asked to construct and reconstruct the connection, communication, and confidence that make learning possible every time we are in the classroom.

### Defining Your Teaching-Character with GOTE

Creating a character goes beyond establishing an understanding of who the character is. In order to be convincing to an audience, an actor must fully embody the character that has been created. Perhaps nothing is more important to this process than understanding a character’s motivations, the hidden desires that serve as the impetus for everything that the character does. GOTE is a technique developed by Robert Cohen that is often used by actors in order to do just this (Cohen, 1992). Finding a character’s GOTE by thinking about and responding to a series of questions can help an actor better understand the character that they are trying to portray; they can also help a

teacher better understand their role in the classroom.

The G in GOTE stands for “Goal.” This can also be referred to as a character’s objective or intention, and is the driver that propels a character’s actions. To determine the character’s goal, fill in the blank: “I want \_\_\_\_\_.” When it comes to teaching, our Goals may take on the shape of personal goals for our classes or of learning objectives for particular lessons. For example, “I want to get my students to engage in meaningful discussion,” or “I want students to be able to find an article in a library database.” These goals are specific and ongoing, something that a teacher is pursuing, just as a character, such as the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, might vigorously pursue revenge on another character, such as Dorothy.

In front of any goal is an “Obstacle” or series of obstacles, the O in GOTE. What stands in the way of what the character wants? More often, this is a person, or an “Other,” who has conflicting goals and thereby acts in direct opposition to the character. For example, as teaching librarians, we have many Obstacles to contend with in the classroom. Some of these are Others, such as students who check-out during the lesson, or resident faculty who don’t participate in a supportive way. Other obstacles may be more personal or circumstantial, such as a fear of public speaking, or just plain not liking the room in which you’ve been asked to teach. Obstacles are anything that make the character’s Goal difficult to achieve, the hurdles that the character must leap over in order to find success.

“Tactics,” the T in GOTE, are the strategies that the character employs to navigate around Obstacles and ultimately achieve their Goals. Trying to achieve goals by employing tactics is what makes acting “real,” both for the actor and from the perspective of the audience (Cohen, 1992). Barton (2012) explicitly outlines two different types of Tactics: charm tactics and threat tactics. Charm tactics may include things like inspiring, seducing, or garnering sympathy from an Other. Threat tactics may include intimidating, physically threatening, or yelling at an Other. We use appropriate versions of these tactics to conduct and manage our classes all of the time. What the concept of Tactics does is it asks us to approach these strategies in a more cognizant and thoughtful way. Characters substitute one tactic for another when trying to reach their goal; if one tactic, or type of tactic, doesn’t result in the desired conclusion, the character will opt for another one. Similarly, a skilled teaching librarian wants to come to class prepared with an array of Tactics to address any Obstacles that may arise (without physically or verbally abusing their students, of course; while that might work for characters to surmount Obstacles in *Breaking Bad* or *Game of Thrones*, it wouldn’t fly in an academic setting!).

The E in GOTE stands for “Expectation,” the confidence that the character will achieve their Goal, under the assertion

that a character would not pursue a goal that they did not think they could achieve. As Cohen (1992) describes,

The truest theatrical energy comes...from an actor's eager portrayal of the character's expectations and his or her consequent efforts to bring these expectations to fulfillment. Positive expectation, on the actor's part, lends his or her portrayal a necessary excitement and energy. Not all characters succeed, of course, but they must be shown to expect success and even to be enthusiastic about their prospects. (p. 49)

The above quote illustrates the importance of the Expectation in GOTE, namely that the character must always act with the expectation of success, even if the goal isn't ultimately realized in the script. This is, in my opinion, critical when it comes to teaching. As teaching librarians playing the role of "perpetual substitute teacher," it's easy to assume that students won't listen to us or want to engage during our lessons. This thought process, by Cohen's (1992) reasoning, interrupts the perception that we are trying to create when we set out to teach. To be more effective performers—and, arguably, therefore more effective teachers—we need to come into the classroom with the positive expectation that we will deliver a successful class, even if that isn't how things end up going.

Applying GOTE to your role as a teaching librarian can help you realize your classroom intentions, goals, and motivations, which will ultimately help you be confident and connected when communicating with your students. To do this, spend some time thinking about your personal goals as a teaching librarian and how they mesh together with the varying intentions you have set for different lesson plans. Are there particular classroom obstacles that routinely give you pause or make you "break character"? Think about the tactics that you might use to tackle those and other obstacles while you're teaching. For the best experience in the classroom, always remember to set positive expectations for your intention of reaching your classroom goals.

## Defining Your Teaching-Character with Stanislavski

Constantin Stanislavski is arguably one of the most influential figures in theater. His system for acting preparation and character realization changed the way actors worked forever. The fundamentals of his system are echoed in GOTE, Stanislavski's theory being that in life, and in theater, the character "has something she wants, something in the way, and an ever-changing plan to get what she wants" (Barton, 2012, p. 98).

Stanislavski, however, digs deeper into the human aspect of the character; just as we have implied meanings and unspoken dialogues happening in our own minds as we interact with students in the classroom, so too do characters when they are on stage. Because this is true of both persons and characters, and because we are "only human," these personal inner thoughts can creep into any performance. Stanislavski (1989) explains:

[The actor] will not give himself up wholly to his part unless it carries him away. When it does so, he becomes

completely identified with it and is transformed. But the moment he becomes distracted and falls under the sway of his own personal life, he will be transported across the footlights into the audience or beyond the walls of the theatre, wherever the object is that maintains a bond of relationship with him. (p. 196)

In other words, an actor being distracted by negative expectations, personal thoughts, or even where to put his hands, damages the integrity of the character. The actor is not connected to the situation or to the audience, but to his own thoughts, and remains outside of what's happening. This is equally true for the teacher in the classroom.

Strengthening connection to the character, and thereby connection to the audience, is the aim of Stanislavski's system, something that we can apply while performing in the classroom. Though this may outwardly seem like a tall order, there are simple exercises that you can do in order to be in the right frame of mind and increase your presence, connection, and confidence in the classroom. To do this, practice "Acting As If" (Burgess, 2012). We've all heard the phrase "fake it 'til you make it," but as Stanislavski points out, faking it won't cut it if you genuinely want to connect to your audience. "Faking it" takes you out of the moment; your mind is somewhere else while your body is performing on stage or in the classroom. Instead, connect to the intention—the Goal—you set for your class and what you might do—your Tactics—in order to reach it. If you want to feel confident, think about what a confident person looks like (or, better yet, about what *you* look like when *you* feel confident), and start acting it out. Rather than faking excitement in the classroom, pretend that you are already excited, maybe about the material you're teaching or about responses that students in the class are giving you. The magic of this exercise is that, once you begin, because of your altered breath pattern and the way you are now holding your body, you'll just start doing it (Burgess, 2012). Pretty soon, you won't even be pretending; you will have successfully connected to the intentions of your "teaching-self," as well as the students who are in your classroom.

## Improving Your Performance in the Classroom with Improv

Although we come to class ready with a "script," or prepared content, the classroom is an unpredictable place for performing. Appropriately, improvisational techniques are some of the best suited for teaching. Improvisational actors are forced to "dare to decide quickly and dive in, without wasting time speculating or reflecting unnecessarily" (Barton, 2012, pp. 194-5). In improv, it's important to think on your feet and respond quickly while also staying true to the scene. While anything goes when it comes to improv, principles outlined to make for the most successful and engaging improvisational scenes can help you, as a teacher, to make better decisions more quickly in the classroom.

One of the first principles of improv is "Always say, 'YES!'" This means accepting whatever another brings into the scene. For example, if one actor enters and looks at the other actor shouting, "Brother!" with open arms, it would kill the

scene if the other actor said something like, “I’ve never seen you before in my life” (Barton, 2012). In improv, the other actor would embrace the first with open arms, and call him brother in return. Taking this a step further is the principle of “Yes, and...!” Not only should an actor accept any new information they are given, but also consider what they can add to the scene. In teaching, think of this as how you can keep the conversation going in class. How can you build upon what a student has said, or use it as fodder for further conversation?

Accepting the improv principle, “Everything works!” can be applied to embracing the uncertainty of the classroom. In improv, anything is fair game; there is no such thing as a “mistake,” only an interesting turn of events (Barton, 2012). This can be a helpful mantra in the classroom when things don’t go as planned, either because you’ve gone “off script” or because a student has done something unexpected. Instead of thinking about these situations as mishaps, treat them as twists or turns, nothing more than new Obstacles you need your Tactics to out-manuever. In this way, we can feel more comfortable giving up control, going with our instincts, and allowing things to happen more organically while we’re teaching.

Adopting improvisational techniques like these can help you let go in the classroom and teach in a more carefree, authentic way (Tewell, 2014). This translates to not only greater confidence in the classroom, but also the ability to leave more space for your students to communicate and interact with you as you teach.

(Smart Board...Continued from page 11)

### Not Sharing

As previously mentioned, IWBs have been a part of K-12 education for some time and as a result there is a large collection of teacher-generated lesson plans available both online and through IWB software. While there are some options for school media specialists, there is very little available for academic librarians. As you develop lessons utilizing IWB features, be sure to share these to help build a collection of activities specifically designed for librarians working to build information literacy skills at the post-secondary level.

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### Conclusion

For many of us, our roles as librarian and teacher have become intrinsically linked. Taking the time to consider and conceptualize our goals and intentions as teachers have a positive impact on the connections we make when we’re in the classroom. These theoretical, yet practical, examples from theater demonstrate how learning to be better performers can help us be better teachers, no matter which part we’ve been asked to play.

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