

Risks of Performance as a Method for Opening Minds in Social Justice Education

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While there may be a consensus that educators should cultivate the virtue of open-mindedness in their students, just how they might do so is open for debate. Negotiating the difficult dynamics that can arise in classrooms where students are strongly invested in beliefs that conflict with those of their peers (or the teacher's) can be tricky. How do we create an engaging learning environment, treat all students fairly, and cultivate in them (and practice ourselves) "(1) genuine openness to new ideas, (2) critical assessment of these new ideas, and (3) a willingness and eagerness to revise one's beliefs in the face of evidence"?"¹

Susan Verducci explores the role the "dramatic" imagination could play in cultivating the disposition of open-mindedness in schools and I appreciate her approach for the following reasons. I agree with Verducci that imagination is a form of play, and play is extremely important and extremely scarce in schools and lives these days. Play is crucial to the development of our capacities for creativity, empathy, and critical thinking, and like dreaming, it is crucial for rejuvenating us. Play provides us with a way of working through unconscious desires, inner conflicts, and our defenses against difficult knowledge. I (drawing from feminist philosophers and others) do believe that tapping into the literary imagination can be a promising antidote to the delusionary solipsism that comes from speaking in the "universal voice" that much philosophy and philosophy of education has suffered from for too long. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, "the novel is capable of inducing imaginary experiences as complex and disquieting as lived experience ... and provides an enrichment that no doctrinal teaching could replace."² But, as I will show, there are some significant challenges to consider as we link open-mindedness to imagination and performance.

Verducci suggests that there are techniques in method acting that can be useful in helping students open perception, for "unlike those engaged in debate or argumentation, actors do not ... want to persuade others to adopt their beliefs," and are not attempting to bolster or defend or attack or judge the position of others. They do so, she says, "to further their search for understanding, coherence, meaning, and connection to a character's beliefs and actions." Actors negotiate the "paradox of fiction," without losing sight of their own beliefs but are invited to view them from a different perspective. She argues that "Through method acting, students practice making beliefs that they do not hold understandable, coherent, and meaningful" and that in so doing skills and abilities necessary for opening minds can be cultivated, including "the ability to explore the beliefs of others in a non-judgmental way; the ability to search effectively for the internal logic of these beliefs; the ability to empathically adopt distinct and complex cognitive standpoints; and the ability to see one's own beliefs from an observer's position."

I find her argument innovative and compelling but I have questions. How does the dramatic imagination differ from the literary imagination? How do the motivations of students differ from actors? If identity is a performance anyway, can attempting to perform another's really help to shift strong belief in conditions of conflict? Are there risks involved? Is there a way it might even serve to bolster the strong belief one is being asked to become more open about? Three examples come to mind, where students were provided with an opportunity to perform identities other than their own, that might help to tease out some of these complex epistemological and ethical dimensions and highlight why I have some concerns about this approach.

In the first case, eighth-grade students exposed to a critical media literacy curriculum about gender discrimination were invited to challenge gender stereotypes in their own video advertisement creations.³ While their ads and their performances of gender had virtually all students performing identities not their own, it seemed they did so in a way that reinforced the notion of gender as a natural binary, and their creations seemed to reaffirm (hetero)sexism rather than dismantle it. They took on exaggerated feminine and masculine roles and designed products that reinforced representations of femininity as weakness, incompetence, and coquetry; they reinforced and took as natural the very categories they were asked to think critically about; strong belief here seemed to be reaffirmed despite performing a gender other than one's own. While the lesson was designed to encourage criticality, it reproduced the norm — were students too immersed in those norms to challenge their beliefs about gender even by performing them critically? Are there limits to seemingly “outside” performances?

The second example is about an event that several universities across the nation have been holding called, “The Hijab Challenge,” designed by Muslim students to raise awareness about the discrimination experienced by women who wear the hijab. The event first provides context to different cultural readings and meanings of the hijab and then invites students to wear the headscarf for a day and experience what it's like for Muslim women on campus. The idea behind the event is that participants can better understand that the people that wear the scarves are just like them and see all kinds of different characters and races in a headscarf. The event aims to address the way we initially make judgment on sight, the way that we often “lack diving into someone's character or personality to see who they are.”⁴

After being provided with some context on different readings of the hijab, girls wore them for a day and then participated in a group dialogue.⁵ The hijab wearing non-Muslim young women first discussed the discomfort in donning it and complained about how it was uncomfortable and cumbersome to move around in. They reported being thrown off by the revelation that so much of how they appear in the world is based on their hair and said that they were not as comfortable moving around in their daily life without it, but then they shifted to discussion of how they felt beautiful in it because it was colorful and flowy and made you want to do twirls like when you wear a big flowy skirt; those who posted their picture on Facebook were happy to report that they got lots of likes and even honked at in the street by boys who thought they were cute. Some of the girls reported that they were misrecognized, avoided,

and ignored, and one worried about her job as her boss was usually nice to her but wouldn't even address her with the scarf on. A few of the girls felt empowered, like they were treated with more respect and caution than usual because they were recognized as being profoundly spiritual, or as members of groups to which they wouldn't normally be recognized in. Many were asked by surprised friends and acquaintances why they were wearing a hijab, and when they explained what they were doing, they were then perceived as kind, courageous, righteous, and even heroic.

While it appears that some awareness about discrimination was raised, have students' perceptions about their strong and conflicting beliefs shifted, become more open? This second example gets closer at inviting students to "explore the beliefs of others in a nonjudgmental way," but it seems to me that many of them wound up performing their own strong beliefs about femininity and what it means to be a good and nice girl were not challenged; their performance may have changed for a day but the performance of their femininity and moral goodness doesn't seem to indicate a more critical perspective about their own strong beliefs.

The third example is of a performance ethnography where ethnographic data is written up in the form of a play within which real conflicts are performed by fictional characters in a fictional plot. Tara Goldstein crafted a "true fiction" performance ethnography called "Hong Kong, Canada" to present real multicultural tensions from different student perspectives about linguistic diversity in a school.⁶ Goldstein created characters whose voices were to "mingle in polyphonic conversation," and allow for herself and her students "to imagine and write what could be as well as what is." She sought to unsettle universalistic approaches to ethnography that have enabled stereotypical representations of others. In performance ethnography informed by feminist, postmodern, and poststructuralist theory, the idea is that actors can enhance and enlarge the characters and identities created by the playwright. What she found instead, however, was that the characters she tried to create were performed in troubling ways she had not intended. Stereotypical performances of her characters changed the intended message of the play with damaging consequences.

Would exercises in Method acting of the type Verducci advocates help? I think it is a playful way around norms but wonder how to mitigate the risks of having it only reconfirm what the unimaginative function of norms do to limit connections across difference.

1. Here Susan Verducci is paraphrasing William Hare, "Education for an Unsettled World: Dewey's Conception of Open-Mindedness," *Journal of Thought* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 118.

2. Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944), 34–45, quoted in Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook, "The Absence of Beauvoir," in *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Julien S. Murphy (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 50. All translations are the authors' own.

3. This example comes from Linda Markowitz and Laurel D. Puchner, "Troubling the Gender Binary: How Middle School Students Create and Perform 'Non-Sexist' Advertisements" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA, April 2014).

4. James Ramirez, an organizer of The Hijab Challenge at Fresno State, quoted in Esra Hashem, "Students Take Hijab Challenge," *The Collegian at Fresno State*, November 24, 2013, <http://collegian.csufresno.edu/2013/11/24/students-take-hijab-challenge/>.

5. The following examples are from Sumrah Iqbal's, "Hijab Day Diaries: Islam Awareness Month 2013," YouTube video, 27:13, posted by "Riham Hamed," February 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ph2PJ6CqIRQ>.

6. Tara Goldstein, "Performed Ethnography for Representing Other People's Children in Critical Educational Research," *Applied Theatre Researcher* 3, no. 5 (November 2002): http://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/54975/performed-ethnography.pdf.