

THE ART OF TEACHING: A T.A.'s JOURNEY FROM THE STAGE TO THE  
CLASSROOM AND BACK AGAIN

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## ABSTRACT

This piece documents my journey as a young T.A. in the English department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. I trace the steps I have taken in the pursuit of a better understanding of what my goals should be as a composition teacher. After discovering these goals, I have then discussed some of the difficulties that myself and others have experienced while pursuing goals in the classroom space. My journey eventually leads me to the world of Art for an answer to how I can become more comfortable and effective in my classroom space. I discover that my love for Art and English complement each other as I pose the theory that teachers should consider themselves artists. As such, we can use techniques that artists use in order to become more effective at their jobs. In particular, I explore the idea of using the Stanislavski Method actor training techniques to help me gain a more solid foundation in my classroom.

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## INTRODUCTION: *Find Your Seats!*

Humans have always asked questions about our own existence; it appears that it is our nature to do so. Joe Sachs, in his Introduction to Aristotle's Poetics, states that “‘What is it?’ And ‘Why?’ are not just modes of speaking and thinking; they are living ways of standing in and toward the world. In the face of our most powerful experiences, those questions may not get fully answered, but it is intolerable for them to go entirely unanswered either, and impossible for them to go unasked” (1). It is, then, part of our mission as humans, to not only engage in experience, but to also seek out the causes and effects of that experience; otherwise, “Life would pass through us without being lived by us” (Sachs 1).

In order to adequately question our experiences, we must learn to define, communicate, and discuss our queries with each other effectively. This learning process often starts in the home and on playgrounds but we gain most of our understanding of how to communicate and function in our society in the classroom space. So, for this discussion, I will focus in particular on the post secondary basic studies composition classroom because it tends to be a class that is devoted to teaching students the communication and exploration skills noted above. As a young Teaching Assistant in a university English department, I have found that composition pedagogy is an often debated topic, and I will dive into the debate here by addressing one of the main concerns of the young teachers and teacher assistants, like myself, who tend to populate composition teaching positions in American universities.

A main concern for many young instructors of composition is simply how to walk into the classroom and establish a dialogue with students. Paul Freire points out in his article “The Banking Concept of Education” that classroom spaces are a vital part of our culture because they give our children the communication skills needed to survive in our society, but he argues that the classroom space is suffering from what he terms a “narration sickness” (92). According to Freire the teacher-student relationship “involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students)” (92). Freire also explains that there has been a breakdown in this system on all levels, elementary through post secondary, due to the lifelessness of the narrations being given by teachers in modern classroom spaces (92). Freire argues that university instructors in particular are no longer telling narratives that their students identify with in real ways; instead that classroom space has become a dungeon where “words are emptied of their concreteness and become a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (92). If we acknowledge the validity of this view, it follows that young university instructors, who are used to speaking to our peer groups, must establish a way to speak “student,” so that our narratives connect with the audience. The struggle to achieve this has been the subject of debate and contemplation among instructors, and it is clear that the issues involved should be addressed as part of the instruction young teachers get before and during their first semesters teaching.

Peter Kugel, author of “How Professors Develop as Teachers,” states that the problem with our “narrative” comes from the training that university instructors receive. He states that instructors have “[...] seldom been taught much about the skill they are about to perform. They have been taught a lot about the subject they are about to teach,

but little about how to teach it” (Kugel). For example, most university teachers start as teaching assistants or are thrown headfirst into teaching during graduate school because it is the easiest way to pay the bills. In both instances the young instructors are immediately on unstable and confusing ground. For example, Brian Bly, a part time composition instructor and MA candidate at James Madison University, explains that young instructors and teaching assistants are caught between the authority that they are supposed to wield in the classroom and the lack of respect and power that they are given as graduate students (2). This tenuous situation leads many young teachers to be confused and unstable authority figures in their classrooms. Kugel describes the situation aptly when he states that when new composition instructors “first step up to the front of a classroom as its teacher, most of them share a common feeling--abject terror. The question uppermost in their minds is ‘Will I survive?’”(Kugel).

In order to survive, the established practice for young post secondary instructors is to turn to guidebooks, teaching instruction classes, and mentors for advice. Guidebooks provide information on lesson plans, rubrics, plagiarism, creating assignments, and writing syllabi. The Bedford/St. Martin’s TA’s Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines includes chapters on all of these topics, but it can do little in the way of helping avoid “narration sickness.” For example, the guidebook provides advice on how to give students praise for their work and how to question students who may be plagiarizing; it even gives the sound advice that instructors should

Be sensitive to the needs of [their] students. Listen and watch your students to recognize what their needs are. Follow their cues. [...]

Meeting the needs of the students at the place they are is more important than “covering” everything you had planned. (82)

While this instruction is sound, it does still leave young instructors with a dilemma. Not everyone is a “people person”; in fact, most of us stick to communing with small groups of friends, family, and coworkers because we are comfortable in their presence. We know how to read their body language and tone of voice, and we are familiar with their dialogue and diction choices. Thus, many of us never take the time to analyze the skills we are using when we observe and communicate with the people around us because we take the skills for granted. As a result, we are not equipped to consciously adapt these skills to people outside our intimate group of friends and family. More especially, when confronted with anywhere from twelve to a hundred *new* faces in a classroom every semester, young instructors are flummoxed as to how we are supposed to “follow the cues” and become dynamic instructors that our students will listen to. It’s a skill that requires practice.

While many of us do take the advice given by guidebooks, we also base our assumptions about the classroom space and how we should act in it on our previous experience as students. As students we observed the methods that our teachers used to communicate with us and we now try to mimic those methods in our classrooms because they worked on us. In fact, most young teachers quickly find that mimicking past instructors’ and current mentors’ classroom tactics and lesson plans tends to make the process easier and more bearable. However, the problem with this tactic is that it does not encourage young teachers to find methods that necessarily connect with our personalities; so the “narration” that we have copied from another teacher falls flat.



Beyond that, the classroom tactics that are learned from fellow teachers often do not match the theories that these instructors say their work is based on. This means that, without proper guidance, young teachers are not establishing their own personal connection with teaching, and they are given mixed signals by their mentors.

For example, according to Kate Murray and Randal MacDonald, authors of the article “The Disjunction between Lecturers' Conceptions of Teaching and Their Claimed Educational Practice,” “The literature on [instructors'] conceptions of teaching shows a very mixed set of findings” (336). After performing an exhaustive study of what instructors believe about teaching versus how they apply that in their classroom space, Murray and MacDonald discovered that most teachers do not practice what they preach—meaning that experienced instructors who mentor and teach T.A.s may instruct us in the classroom ideologies that they believe in, but they may not be putting these ideologies to work in their classes. So, T.A.s may be getting mixed signals from their mentors when they preach one theory or method during a training class, but then use a different method in class when we observe them teaching. Quoting two other key scholars, Murray and MacDonald further explain that even “Samuelowicz and Bain (1992) allude to this problem as one of the 'mysteries of higher education' -the disjunction between stated aims and claimed educational practice. This phenomenon has been referred to since the 1970s” and it cycles its way through generations of teachers (343).

The presence of this gap may also indicate that instructors, especially when we are young, are often unable to put ideas into practice because, early on, we are not comfortable enough in the classroom space to take these theoretical risks. Instead, we follow the lead of our mentors, who have evolved more practical means of survival in the

classroom. This presents a problem that has been noted by Mark C. Long, Jennifer H. Holberg, and Marcy M. Taylor in their article “Beyond Apprenticeship: Graduate Students, Professional Development Programs and the Future(s) of English Studies.” They explain that many training models and guidebooks for T.A.s emphasize that graduate student teachers should try out a variety of roles in the classroom, and that templates for these roles should come from observing mentor teachers or looking at templates in guidebooks (68-69). However, Long, Holberg, and Taylor note that with this idea, “[...] the emphasis is on (presumed) choice among a series of options presented—by textbooks, teaching manuals, and training ‘programs’—as though one can ‘accomplish a role,’ can, in effect, take a stand, by simply ‘trying on’ a strategy or theory without understanding, questioning, and defining it for him-or herself through active, collaborative participation” (69). For example, more experienced teachers have a syllabus that works the same way every semester, and they use similar readings and materials frequently. They are at a point in their careers where they feel that they have found something that works for them and can finally settle in. But, according to Long, Holberg, and Taylor’s theory, encouraging T.A.’s to follow the lead of experienced instructors is problematic because, while it does allow for the daily survival of the younger generation of teachers, T.As are less inclined to seek out new tactics that we can identify with ourselves. It, thus, widens the gap between theory and practice. This habit of mimicking, in turn, takes the young instructor further from gaining a true understanding of our own abilities and how we can apply them in our classes.

For instance, when mentors provide the template for how to act in the classroom space, the results are often extreme. Bly, in his essay “Uneasy Transitions: The Graduate

Teaching Assistant in the Composition Program,” provides examples of teaching assistants from his department who tackle this issue “[...] in a variety of ways from behaving in a ‘strict, robotic, and dogmatic manner’ to a more relaxed approach in which the teacher decides to ‘take a backseat and let the students run the classroom’” (3). Bly concludes that in observing our mentors, teaching assistants often get mixed signals about theory and practice, and thus our classroom personas often become an extreme stereotype because we strive to find solid ground to stand on. But, these approaches often can cause young instructors to choose a generalized role reminiscent of a stereotypical sitcom character with little or no depth. We perform line after line, situation to situation, reacting in the same predictable way each time, and thus Freire’s “narration sickness” rears its ugly head.

The solution to this problem is clear; young teachers require more instruction, not only on subject matter and basic syllabus creation, but also in how to become more self-aware about our own communication skills in relation to others. This will allow us to learn to read and communicate with our students clearly, instead of trying to “fake” the connection by mimicking techniques that we do not really identify with.

In order to successfully put theory into practice in the classroom, the instructor must play around with how the theory will be translated into activities, assignments, and, most importantly, their own classroom persona. Growth, understanding, and comfort using these theories in the classroom all come from this creative process; if young teachers are merely mimicking our older colleagues, then we are involved in very little of this process. We are left with many instructors who are developing in an environment where using tactics which were proven to work by our predecessors is the standard even

if teacher instruction classes, role playing exercises, and guidebooks are provided. This is because mimicry allows a young stressed out teacher to survive in an uncomfortable new environment, and, while it is important for young instructors to learn from the experiences of our mentors, it is also of vital importance that we find our own ways of identifying with these methods.

So, in order to determine the nature of the instruction needed to solve this problem, we will spend some time here exploring the postsecondary composition classroom space—looking at its goals in order to determine how a young instructor can best be encouraged to play around with theory and practice in order to find a comfortable method of communication with students that will not be shallow or ineffective. I invite you to take this journey with me below as I recount how I first learned to determine what my teaching role is within my university and my discipline. I will then proceed by telling you how I found a way in which to tackle my classroom space and create a persona in the classroom that allows me to connect with my students. I will discuss some of the scholarship that I have found useful along my path as well as lessons that I have learned through experience in hopes that my journey might encourage others to look back and find a way to identify with their classroom space on a personal level.

## LIGHTS UP: *The Journey Begins*

As a new teaching assistant in the English department at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I asked my first questions about the topic of why we teach writing. I can not, I thought, have a teaching method until I understand what I am supposed to be teaching and why. *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines* cites Janet Emig, who finds that “[...] writing facilitates effective learning because it uses many senses (sight, touch, hearing), is both analytic and creative, provides a product that is available for both immediate and long-term feedback, uses syntax and paragraphing that force synthesis and analysis, and requires an active engagement with the material” (10). After reading this, I began to think about the role of the teacher, and how a teacher can guide his or her students into learning so many things at once; I had to ask myself, what angle should I come from when attacking this task?

My first stop was at my departmental webpage, which provided me with this description of the composition course that I was to teach my first semester as a T.A.:

Introduction to college-level writing and reading. Extensive practice in analyzing and responding to text and in techniques of invention, development, organization, editing and revision, with emphasis on narrative and expository forms appropriate to academic writing.

(“Departmental Faculty Handbook”)

After sorting through the diction choices here, I came to realize that I would have a lot of free rein with how I teach the course, but that the goal is to teach students how to develop their own communication skills and thinking processes so that they can survive in the

academic world of whatever major they choose, and later, survive in that scariest of all terrains—the dreaded “real world.”

But in order to do this, I recognized that an effective teacher must not simply state knowledge and expect students to make it applicable. Instead, that teacher will have to give students the skills and vocabulary they need to take the path on their own in the future—this seems like a logical start. From this idea, I went further to note that in view of Emig’s words and my department handbook, that the most important of these skills to be learned in a writing classroom is that of how to ask, explore, and analyze questions, which in turn leads to learning how to communicate those answers and choices that have been made in a number of different media from written essays to film projects. Moreover, classroom concepts, whatever the subject matter, can be learned only if the students and teacher are effective communicators, and I found that it is often the job of the English department at universities to provide these skills so that students can survive their other classes before even considering the world outside of academia.

The basic studies composition teacher is placed in a key position fighting off “narration sickness” on the battlefield of the postsecondary education process. But, Tina Good and Leanne Warshauer, in their Introduction to In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teaching, state that, according to the Modern Language Association, seventy-five percent of MA programs and PhD programs use first year teaching assistants to instruct over half of the basic studies composition classes provided by the department (ix). Plus, Kugel has found that there is clearly a problem with the way in which we communicate with our students in these basic studies classes—they are bored, and we do not notice or ignore their boredom. So, the T.A.s, who are primarily in charge of

teaching these courses at universities, are not paying attention to themselves and how their actions and words are coming across to their students, nor do they appear to be getting a lot of training in this area, and that is making them ineffective. This leads me to think that Kugel's "narration sickness" is a disease found mostly in young instructors, like me, who have not been taught an awareness and control over their own communication skills and are being asked to teach those very skills in composition classes across the country—no wonder we are all so confused. I was placed in a difficult position from the beginning, and the numbers tell us that I was not the only one. I was given guidebooks, mentors to follow, and teacher training classes, but none of them seemed to be helping much when it came to gaining self-awareness. Having thought about all this, I now knew that to break the cycle and become more effective I must find my own way to keep my "narratives" fresh; and, in order to do this, I must learn how to become more self aware of how I use my communication skills. This self awareness would provide me with more confidence because it would allow me to better identify with my students' needs. I would be more actively engaged in listening and paying attention to how we communicate with each other. Then, once I was comfortable with my own communication methods, I would be able to help my students gain that confidence and knowledge too, which is my job as a composition teacher.

But, in order to gain this self awareness about communication skills, the next step was to go back and understand how and why humans communicate in the first place. To do this, I turned first to scholarship on art and aesthetics because I spend much of my time working in that discipline when I am not teaching. Having a background in visual, musical, and theatrical arts, I thought it would be easiest and most effective to approach

the problem from this angle. In addition, it seemed to me that art has, from its inception, been an attempt to convey ideas to an audience using various forms of communication such as painting, music, acting, and writing—the same process that I wanted to teach in my composition class.

My research into the world of aesthetics is an ongoing process, involving years spent wandering around the bookshelves and web pages of university libraries. Here I found scholars in various fields like Aristotle, Carl Jung, John Dewey, Wendy Bishop, Erving Goffman, Bertolt Brecht, and many more that have spent their lives looking at the intersections between artistic creation and human existence. But, perhaps the most pivotal for me is modern performance scholar Richard Courtney, who explores the creative impulse by introducing the term, “creative imagination” (7). Courtney explains that “the essential characteristic of man is his *creative imagination*. It is this which enables him to master his environment in such a way that he overcomes the limitations of his brain, his body, and the material universe” (7). So, basically, the creative imagination is that human characteristic which, when utilized, is able to inspire man to seek out answers to the questions that populate our daily lives. Self awareness is created when, in the course of this creative process, we begin to question and observe ourselves in order to have more control over how we communicate our ideas to others. For instance, Joe Sachs writes that Aristotle says, “An action is stretched out in time, so that even in life, we can comprehend it nowhere but in the imagination. And its origin, in the act of choice, is interior, and never available to us in another person except by an act of interpretation” (3). Here, Aristotle makes the point that all of our choices are made internally and many of them are so complex that it takes an act of the creative imagination to account for them



and give them shape for ourselves and for those that we communicate with. The ability to choose one idea over another in order to progress is a key part of the human experience. But in order to communicate the questions, answers, and choices involved in this internal process, we must use our imagination to interpret our inner thoughts for each other through a medium such as language, pictures, or music.

So, at last I have arrived at my own definition of the job of the composition instructor. In my eyes, composition teachers must first learn and harness the creative imagination for themselves, and then pass on that knowledge to their students. This definition gave me the foundation I needed to start exploring how I will fulfill this mission. I continued on my journey by thinking about the fact that imagination is not typically a trait that can be taught in a textbook or from memorization; it must come from experience and immersion. From my perspective, our job as composition teachers is to guide students into an understanding of how their creative imagination manifests itself, and then to encourage them join more effectively into these dialogues that are happening to and around them every day. This skill, once learned, should provide the foundation that students need in order to learn to communicate their thoughts effectively when writing or speaking in other classes or outside of the university environment. Hence, I have now found my way into the composition pedagogy dialogue by turning to art and creativity for guidance—now I must take this string of logic and fill in the gaps by further reading, research, and observation of my own classroom space in order to create my own personal pedagogy theory. Without this background it will be hard for me to discover the practical applications of my ideas.

## ACT 1: *Staging the Scene*

I start with considering that painting, music, theatre, dance, and any number of other art forms appear to have been put in place as mediators that seek to take our inner thoughts and explain them to us in terms that we can relate to in the physical world. Artists use brushes, instruments, their bodies, and other media to relay this information, which is what all of us attempt to do when we turn our thoughts into spoken words during conversation. However, Joe Sachs, in his introduction to Aristotle's Poetics, explains that ancient scholars note, "[...] it does not follow that the poet [artist] has taught us anything. His impact is on our feelings, and we can recover our usual habits of judging as soon as those feelings wear off. We might begin to think more deeply [...]. [But, understanding] is not necessarily a final result at all but an opportunity, and it doesn't bring home any one kind of lesson or improvement" (17). Thus art does not fully explain every concept to us completely or clearly; instead art creates a vocabulary that allows for ideas to be communicated—the understanding is left to the creator and observer. The same scenario occurs when people have a conversation. Both parties attempt to translate what they have to say and then, in turn, must translate what they get back from their conversation partner. Without this skill, effectual communication is impossible. So, just as artists must exhibit agency in creating, experiencing, and discussing art effectively, composition students must be guided to become agents in creating their own understanding of how their creative imagination works when they communicate with others so that they can successfully act as speakers and receivers in a conversation.

According to this theory, every conversation we have or word we utter is, in essence, the result of an act of “creative imagination.” Like a painter who translates the pictures in his mind to canvas, we all use creative imagination when we translate our thoughts into spoken and written words. However, the fact that every human has a little artist in them does not mean that they know how to utilize it. Humans have formed structures, vocabularies, and rules for our modes of translation between our inner and the outer world so that we can communicate with each other more easily. These rules dictate our grammar, diction, and body language to a point where we often are taught to memorize the rules but we regurgitate them without asking why we are doing it—we have very little personal connection to these social rules other than the fact that we are doing what we were taught to do. People who enact this regurgitation cause communication between themselves and others (like the teacher-student scenario) to be unfulfilling for both parties because the speakers often are not self aware enough to discuss issues that they care about in constructive ways.

I have experienced this scenario frequently in classes that I was enrolled in as a student. I have often gotten so bored with a teacher’s standard method of lecturing that I stop being able to listen and learn. I take notes, and later look back at them and realize that I do not remember enough of the content of the lecture to decode the notes I took. I had a basic studies history teacher one time who was notorious among students giving the same assignments, tests, and monotone lectures (almost word for word) each semester. Needless to say, most students passed the class, not by listening to the teacher, but by cheating with the help of friends who had the class in a previous semester; there was no incentive to listen to the boring lectures. If the teacher had exhibited a better awareness

of his own modes of communication with his students, then maybe he could have adjusted how he addressed us so that the classroom space would have been used more effectively.

By contrast you have the individuals who fill the role of cynic, who speak from a position of self awareness, but have no concern for their audience. Sociologist Erving Goffman explains that “[...] when [an] individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. [...] A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good [...]” (18). A cynic, according to Goffman, possesses a great deal of self awareness, but they do not use it to communicate with anyone else. The cynic turns on an audience and makes up a set of “fake” ideas, which they do not necessarily stand behind. But, because the cynic is self aware, he or she learns the skill of manipulating their audience into effectively believing the ideas that the cynic communicates. This tactic is effective, but only because it gives the speaker a sense of superiority over their audience. However, the audience and the speaker are deprived of an honest connection in the conversation (18-19). This also happens in the classroom. I have often become burnt out because my students do not comprehend assignments or concepts that I think are very easy and logical; so, instead of finding a different way explain things by trying to put myself in their shoes, I chalk it up to the fact that they are just not listening in class, and I give them speeches about paying attention to assignments and reading carefully. As the teacher, I should work out this communication error instead of fueling the flame by making my students feel inadequate. Kugel says that often “[...] when professors [are]

thinking about the work they [have] to do to teach, they tend to ignore the work their students had to do to learn.” I have found in my own classroom and in observing others that this mind set causes the teacher to become combative or sarcastic to students who do not seem to follow instructions or concepts. I have realized that on a few occasions with individual “problem students” instead of trying to work out the communication problem by honestly approaching the students, I made matters worse by either ignoring the problem, which resulted in the students’ failure in my class due to lack of guidance, or by becoming too strict, which pushed the student away from me. This perpetuates the problem because students become used to this behavior in their teachers over time and become equally combative or inattentive because they feel that the teachers do not understand or care about their struggle.

I have seen this problem occur often between teacher and student. I have students who come to my office hours, or to tutoring sessions at the writing center where I work, and spend the entire session venting about another teacher who gave them a bad grade because they did not follow an assignment that they did not understand in the first place. My first reaction is to ask if they talked to the “offending” teacher about the assignment ahead of time. Many tell me that they tried, but came out more confused than when they started because the teacher was unable to identify with the troubles that the student was having, and thus was not able to clearly communicate a solution. The student, because they now feel inadequate, lies to the teacher, tells them that they understand, and then gets angry when the assignment comes back with a bad grade on it because they did not follow directions. Other students are resigned to telling me that there is no point in talking to the professor at all because the professor is “mean” and will not be helpful

anyway. This lack of communication between the teacher and student is the foundation of Kugel's "narration sickness."

Lad Tobin in his essay "Reading Students, Reading Ourselves: Revising the Teacher's Role in the Writing Class," specifically addresses this issue when discussing how to address student writing. He argues that "[...] most of our current views fail because they ignore the role and uses of the teacher's unconscious. Until we have a clearer and more realistic notion of how we shape and influence student writing and how, in return, that writing shapes and influences us, we will continue to limit our student's potential development" (78). He goes on to explain that "[...] most writing teachers know that therapeutic models can help us explain and explore the teacher-student relationship, but because they find this comparison threatening they publicly deny it" (78). It is alarming to consider that student-teacher relations involve such taboo issues as "role-modeling, sexual tension, even transference" (Tobin 79). But, the fact that these issues make us uncomfortable should not cause us to completely ignore the reality that we have to deal with our students on a personal level in the classroom and in conferences, and that we must develop the communication skills needed in order to do this. We cannot expect our students to understand what we are trying to tell them, if we do not acknowledge that there are other factors involved in our communication with each other which may be affecting their ability to hear us clearly. We give them information based on our own definition of what a clear explanation is supposed to be. But, the classroom narrative breaks down here because instead of teaching students how to harness and use their own creative imaginations dynamically, we are just feeding them the results of someone else's act of creation (our own) and we are distancing ourselves from them by

not empathizing with their position enough to talk so that they can understand us, thus making it impossible for them to trust or learn from us. It is clear that we must eliminate, not only a lack of self awareness in the teacher, but must also make sure that the teacher learns to empathize and use the information gained through that empathy to help communicate with students in more effective ways.

In fact, scholars have noted the results of these communication issues in classrooms across the country and have addressed the problem in various ways. One example can be found in the fact that many modern university teachers are woefully behind when it comes to knowing the new technological lingo of their students. Students are living and communicating with each other in cyberspace every day, while their supposed guides are still teaching from paper based text books. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe, co-founders of Computers and Composition, state that

[...] the ability to read, compose, and communicate in computer environments—called variously technological, digital, or electronic literacy—has acquired increased importance not only as a basic job skill but also, every bit as significant, as an essential component of literate activity. Today, if students cannot write to the screen [...] interpret material on the Web and in other digital environments—they may be incapable of functioning effectively as literate citizens. (642)

Selfe and Hawisher thus argue that teachers need to get more comfortable with the technology that their students are accustomed to. For instance, many students now communicate through YouTube, My Space, Instant Messenger, and text messaging, but

many of their teachers are stuck in the analog world, thus forcing students to learn the old “analog language,” or they will be unable to survive at school. Unfortunately, most of the outside world speaks the “digital language,” which leaves students in an awkward position. On the surface this particular problem that Selfe and Hawisher have noted seems to merely be a result of a generation gap between teacher and student. However, it is conditions like these that cause “narration sickness” in the classroom, which leads me to believe that the teacher’s unwillingness to embrace new technology in this situation stems from a lack of understanding on the part of the teacher. We are taught that it is important to communicate clearly with our students, but, during our training, we are often not given the tools necessary to recognize and create solutions to these gaps. The obvious solution to this problem is not only to encourage teachers to embrace technology, but, more importantly, to teach them that in doing so they will be catering to the needs of their students more effectively so that the classroom space can be more dynamic. The same subject matter that is taught in text books can also be taught in cyberspace, or the teacher can use the cyberspace “language” to talk to their students while instructing them on how to understand the subject matter in the textbook. This example shows us that being an effective teacher requires versatility. We cannot find one instructional method and stick to it our entire career because our students are ever-changing and require us to do the same. So, as in the above example, we can learn to avoid “narration sickness” by teaching the same subject matter, but the communication obstruction between student and teacher can become unblocked because we have found an instructional method based on what we have observed from our students so that they listen to us effectively.



Hawisher and Selfe seem to be on the right track here, so my way of approaching this problem follows in their footsteps. But, I have taken their concept of getting teachers to pay attention to the trends in student behavior and have applied it, again, towards art and the creative process in order to come up with a solution that I can relate to. So, looking back to Sachs, I find that he says that there is no way for humans to communicate their experiences and understanding without the use of imitation (2). Sachs explains that humans must translate their thoughts into words in order to communicate with each other. Thoughts, however, are not so easily translated into concrete terms. Sachs explains that we thus must communicate by performing an imitation of our inner thoughts (2). Each of us has our own inner dialogue which must be translated into language, and we each develop our own tactics for going about this task. As teachers, then, we need to become proficient, like many artists, in reading, interpreting, and then performing the imitations that our students provide us with so that we can guide each student in a language that they can understand. Once the initial understanding has been accomplished, we can then help students to translate their language into one that others can hear. For help with this, we can look at actors, for example, who are trained to acknowledge that life is imitation, and so they are taught how to control the ways in which they imitate and communicate what is on their minds based on who they are portraying and where they are doing the communicating. In fact, Stanley Fuller, in his article “Teaching as Acting: Conclusions of a Graduate Assistant,” says that

[...] after twenty-one years as a student, and four as a teacher, I can say categorically that I don't simply want the facts. [...] I want something that gives the facts some urgency and reality, and gives

me some reason to care, and I want to give this to my own students.[...] to do this involves theatricality: teaching is, in fact, a variation on the art of acting; the teacher who is unaware of this is likely to be a well-meaning bore. (314)

So approaching the classroom space by acknowledging that teachers are artists—pioneer experts in communication and creation, who walk the line between the inner and outer worlds in order to help others cross back and forth over it—is the path I have chosen.

## ACT II: *Approaching the Stage*

Every human uses creative imagination at some point in their lives to ask questions, but, as artists, teachers can gain an objective view of the entire process so that teaching composition becomes an active struggle to become an artist of communication skills—an expert at listening and speaking effectively to each individual that we are presented with. This artistry will give the teacher insight into how to present information in the classroom in such a way that our students will not only be able to hear and understand us, but that also guides instead of dictates. Fuller explains that “you may have superior abilities as a scholar, and insights that would make Brooks, Warren, and Trilling all quake, but if your voice grates in the student’s nerves, you’re dead. Your movements and gestures also play a part. [...] Like the actor, the teacher must create an effect from materials resistant to great alteration—the human body and voice” (314-15). So, becoming more adept in the ways of the human body and voice should liven up the narrative between students and teacher to a point where the composition classroom space is more effective than ever before.

After looking at Fuller’s comments and thinking about my own background in theatre, I thought that performance theory in particular must be a place to look when examining how to practically instruct teachers to have the skills they need. Ancient Greek playwrights and performance scholars used the theatre as their venue and the actors as their medium for discussing, considering, and guiding audiences through socio-political, cultural, and metaphysical debates in their culture. Marvin Carlson, author of Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present,

observes that many ancient Greek philosophers, though they held slightly different notions about the exact role of theatre, all agreed that theatre's ultimate goal is to teach us something about ourselves and the world that we inhabit. Carlson states that "Aeschylus takes the traditional Greek position that the poet is a moral teacher and that his work must fulfill a moral purpose. Euripides takes the more modern position that art's function is the revelation of reality, aside from moral and ethical questions" (15). Aristotle, he claims, found that theatre, tragedy in particular, functions "[...] in the manner of homeopathic medicine" (18) by allowing the audience to purge their own fears by watching the drama presented on stage by the actors. This means that the job of an actor is to dedicate their life to observing and learning to mimic their fellow humans. Actors observe, analyze, and then mimic the forms of communication that we use to get through our days. In this way, actors put a mirror up to their audience and compel them to ask questions about the image they see. Composition teachers are also in this position of observing, analyzing, and guiding students in how to use their imagination, interpretation, and communication skills to function in society. We are teaching the communication rules that will allow our students to effectively understand and contribute to the human interaction going on around them everyday.

This is why it is not difficult for Fuller and many others to see modern teaching as an act of theatre. Fuller even goes so far as to say that "the goals of the two professions are closely allied. [The actor has] two specific objectives when he enters the Booth Theatre in New York City each night: to give each member of the audience an understanding of the character he plays, and to win the audience's interest in that character." (315) Teachers do much the same because they are "[...] attempting to

communicate intellectually, and to present an emotional justification for that communication” ( Fuller 315). So in the quest to better understand how to harness my “creative imagination” so that I can accomplish this goal, I turn now to actor training, to see if it can provide some practical ways of becoming more aware of my own processes of communicating with the world.

I have found that an effective teacher, like an effective actor, does not simply state knowledge; instead the teacher should be attempting to give their students an example and guidance in how to acquire the skills and vocabulary they need to take the path on their own; and, just as the actor understands that it is not enough to just know the lines and blocking of a play, the teacher too must recognize that knowledge of subject matter is not always enough. In order to use knowledge to guide, the teacher must be an effective communicator of that knowledge that they possess; this skill is taught to actors all over the world everyday.

One of Fuller’s fellow graduate assistants argues that acting is fake and teaching is real, but Fuller replies, “Is acting fake? If ‘fake’ is something prearranged, then it is. But something devoid of meaning, all pretense and no substance? Not when it’s good. And the same with teaching. The teacher who realized mere knowledge is not enough, that it is the dynamic uses to which this knowledge is put that determines its ultimate value is not a fake” (316). I am not advocating a system where teachers feel as if they are ‘putting on an act’ because that would defeat the purpose of our becoming closer and more in tune with our students; instead, I think much like Goffman, who states that “[...] one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. When his audience is also

convinced in this way about the show he puts on [...] then only the sociologist or the socially disgruntled will have doubts about the “realness” of what is presented” (17). That is not to say that the actor is completely delusional—to the contrary, I believe that the actor, in an act of creative imagination, forms their own reality around the pretense that they must create a place where their audience wants to join in and understand the conversation and themes occurring. This idea is important in the classroom space according to Christine Sheppard and J. Gilbert, authors of “Course Design, Teaching Method and Student Epistemology.” Sheppard and Gilbert draw “[...] attention to the view that it is the student's perception of the academic environment, rather than the environment per se, which most directly influences learning” (231). Just like actors, teachers must become able to mold what we call “reality”—the world outside the classroom—in such a way that lessons, which would appear “boring” or “confusing” outside of this new space, can be taught and understood because the language used by teacher and student in the new space creates a comfort zone for all to work within. But, this requires, as Goffman shows us, that the actor, or in this case teacher, fully believe in the reality that they are creating in the classroom so that students will believe and then will be encouraged to act as agents in molding the space themselves along with their teacher. In order to do this, the teacher needs training in using the communication skills required to create this environment so that we can pass those skills on to our students—this is where actor training comes in to play.

First, before an actor gets on stage, they must ask themselves what a performance entails. I started to think about what a good “performance” actually requires because it struck me that I did not want to be “fake,” as Fuller’s colleague put it; instead, I wanted

to fully embrace this performance and make it a reality for my students so that we could better communicate with each other. Looking to sociology first, I found that Goffman argues,

A 'performance' may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants. [...] we may refer to those who contribute the other performance as the audience, observer, or co-participants. [...] When an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise. (15-16)

I believe that perfecting this social relationship, which occurs in all classrooms, will help solve Kugel's "narration sickness" and will help me and my students comfortably communicate and exchange ideas. The key to perfecting this relationship is to acknowledge from the start that students and teachers both have preconceived notions about what their role is in the classroom space, and thus it is hard to break through that mold and get "real." According to Goffman, for instance, "[...] the 'true' or 'real' attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. [...] The individual will have to act so that he intentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him" (2) in order for a productive interaction to occur wherein both the participants begin to see the "real" characteristics of the other, and thus begin to trust. So, this means that the teacher must learn a form of self expression that allows students to see them in a "real" way instead of as a role defined by the term "teacher." At the same time, the teacher must also learn how to interpret the "expressive

behaviors” of their students in order to see their students’ “real” personality and way of communicating outside of the role of “student.”

Goffman tells us that

The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity. [...] The first involves verbal symbols or their substitute which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the traditional and narrow sense [...] The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed. (2)

This means that teachers must learn, like the actor, how to interpret these two types of sign activities and then must take this information and apply it to observations of their own personalities first. Then, once they understand their own modes of communication, they can observe their students and use this information to create a “performance” of sign activities that will help the student relate to their performance. This will allow for more easy communication to occur between the two parties and thus we teachers will be acting as role models for effective communication skills, and will also be able to pass information more easily to students who now feel that we are really talking to them instead of at them.



### ACT III: *Now ACT!*

I next turn to the most influential acting teacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Constantin Stanislavski, in order to learn these sign activities, which are required in any performance, including my performance in the classroom. W.B. Worthen in his article, “Stanislavsky and the Ethos of Acting,” states that

As a theorist of the stage, Stanislavski has pervasively influenced the modern

Theatre. We can see Stanislavski influencing the Group Theatre and Actors' Studio productions (and their offspring on the American stage, in film, and television), as well as providing a point of departure for students like Vakhtangov and Chekhov, and defining a guiding antithesis for Meyerhold, Brecht, and perhaps Artaud. (32)

In addition to being well respected, Stanislavski also follows a philosophy with his training techniques which complements my above goals as a teacher. Worthen explains that Stanislavski requires “[...] the actor's spontaneous self-expression in performance [...] by forcing the actor to avoid both the habitual mannerisms of the stage and the expectations of his audience” (32-33). In this way, “Stanislavski anticipates an ‘existential’ regard for the artist's authentic autonomy, his need to define his art by defining himself” (Worthen 32-33). So, Stanislavski promotes the idea of learning how to be truly candid and spontaneous on stage by teaching the actor to find the character within them and then build off of that. In this way, the actor will be more connected to the character and will

be able to “act” and make spontaneous decisions because the actions will come from the actor’s own instincts instead of scripted actions.

Also, we have discussed the issue of the ineffective way in which young composition teachers try to act the role of “teacher,” which they have learned from their mentors, past instructors, and guidebooks, instead of learning to be the teacher themselves. Stanislavski, according to Worthen, solves this issue with his actors because “Stanislavski sees authentic acting, much as Sartre does, to be threatened and often compromised by the roles that society and the theatre audience require the actor to play. Although he plays dramatic roles, the actor's task is not simply to represent. The Stanislavski actor is principally committed to self discovery [...]” (33). So, more specifically, Worthen explains that “Stanislavski's goal is to teach the actor to experience both himself and his role simultaneously during performance” (34), and this is the skill that composition teachers must master in order to remedy “narration sickness.” If we do not define our role as teachers for ourselves by exploring our own communication skills so that we can then pass this on to our students, then we fall victim to scripted actions instead of the spontaneous instinctual actions that will resonate more with our students.

For example, those of us that teach composition know that it is important to teach students the writing process. Often we use examples from textbooks or internet resources to show our students how to brainstorm, outline, draft, and edit. But I have found that these examples do not always resonate with students mostly due to the fact that the examples are lifeless without the insight and energy of the writer’s first hand experiences with their process. In order to remedy this in my classroom space I show examples of my own writing; draft work, brainstorming, highlighted messy paragraphs with notes and

edits. This way I can talk candidly about the process with my students and they take comfort in knowing that I also go through the same process as them when I write.

Bringing my work into the classroom environment like this gives my narrative a sense of authenticity and allows for spontaneous actions on my part because I do not have to imagine what the other author is experiencing in order to pass that along to my students.

The Stanislavski actor works much the same way because he or she is encouraged to find authenticity on stage in order to draw the audience into the performance.

However, because Stanislavski wrote his ideas on acting in the form of journal entries, his methodology is occasionally difficult to decipher. For this reason, I will now turn to Sonia Moore, author of The First Simplified Guide to Stanislavski's Teachings: The Stanislavski System-Professional Training for Actors, for help. Moore translates Stanislavski's journaling into a solid set of principles and exercises that will aid us in approaching his methods more practically.

According to Moore, the first lesson that a Stanislavski actor must learn is to truly appreciate the field of work they have chosen. In order to explain, Moore quotes Stanislavski: "Some actors and actresses love stage and art as fish love water [...]. They revive in the atmosphere of art. Others love not art itself but an actor's career, success [...]. The first are beautiful, the others are abominable" (4). As teachers, we too must thrive in the atmosphere of the classroom. The first step in becoming a better teacher is to assess whether teaching is something that gets you up in the morning or not. The Stanislavski System is built fundamentally on the idea that the actor has an ethical responsibility to "breathe life into a written play" (Moore 4) and infect the audience with that life so that they too can share in the experience. I think, as a composition teacher, I

also have this responsibility to my students. As I explained above, students will not follow me if I appear unauthentic in my communication of ideas about writing. One solution to this problem is that the teacher, like Stanislavski's actor, must discipline themselves to not be distracted from their purpose by outside influences such as departmental politics, publishing concerns, or personal issues. I know that when I walk in my classroom with a chip on my shoulder about something, like an argument I had with a friend the night before, my teaching is unfocused and impure.

For example, one day, the first day of the semester actually, I got into a small car accident before arriving on campus to teach. In most cases I would have allowed this bad start to my morning to affect my mood in the classroom negatively, but when I walked into the room and saw the attentive faces of my new students, I received an instant attitude adjustment. The energy in the classroom feeds me, and this in turn molds all of my thoughts in a positive direction if I do not let my outside feelings override my teaching energy. Instead of becoming testy with students who were late or disruptive, I took that negative energy and molded by inventing one of my favorite classroom tactics to date. Three students were late to my class that day, and they were greeted at the door by me telling them in an upbeat voice that they must perform ten jumping jacks, to be counted off out loud by the class, in order to enter. Of course these students were at first flummoxed at this request by their college English teacher, but because I kept a grin on my face and an upbeat and silly tone of voice, they did their jumping jacks, and laughed along with the rest of the class at their strange new English teacher. The tactic has served me well every semester since then because it is just ridiculous enough to make students laugh with each other (not at each other) while also getting the message that being late is

distracting. In addition, this tactic has served as a mechanism to get my students to act as one when they count off and laugh with their fellow classmates as the jumping jacks ensue. This adds energy and a sense of community each morning at the beginning of class. The tactic also works well in a composition classroom specifically because later in the semester, when students start to get tired of the exercise, I can force my students to argue their way out of punishment by providing specific details and examples to back up their claim. The technique now becomes a teaching tool for helping my students form arguments about a situation that they are actually involved in themselves.

Also, according to Moore, the Stanislavski System argues that “When an actor is inspired he is in the same natural and spontaneous state that is ours in life, and he lives the experiences and emotions of the character that he portrays. In such a state, Stanislavski thought, an actor has the greatest power to affect the minds and feelings of his audience” (5). I would have never been in the headspace to create my tardiness rule on the spot if I had not left my bad morning at the door that day; so, I am a believer in this idea. This tactic has even caused some friends of my current students to seek me out as a teacher in the future. I have many students come up or e-mail me and ask if I am the teacher that makes her students do jumping jacks, and when I say “yes,” they ask how they can get into my class next semester because they are interested in a teacher that makes them laugh. All I had to do was disregard any outside influences that would make me unfocused that day and go in that classroom truly excited about the first day and about meeting my new students. In that frame of mind, my brain was free to get mischievous with my late students in an attempt to connect with them, which in turn led to an effective classroom tactic.

Because the actor, like the teacher, must find a way into this frame of mind, Stanislavski encourages actors to treat the play's events each night as if they were happening for the first time in the actor/character's life, which makes each performance fresh and different, and consequently keeps the audience attentive. Once the actor tries to repeat what they did the night before "[...] the theater stops being art because it stops being alive" (Moore 11). We have seen the same situation occur in Freire's "narration sickness" scenario wherein teachers do not keep their classrooms alive with new and interesting ideas, but instead just repeat the same tactics and information over and over again. Stanislavski can guide us in how to put aside the restrictive role of teacher, and instead can teach us how to embody teaching so that it is a part of who we are, and is no longer a scripted role that we have to play. Worthen explains this clearly when he states,

The [Stanislavski] actor can only "be" as the "other"; his authentic realization is necessarily enabled by his pursuit of the inauthentic mask of his role. In performance, the actor risks an inadvertent decline into the inartistic and inauthentic, into mere "acting" instead of creative "being." Failing to freshen "a well-prepared but old role," slipping into "mechanical habits," or the inability to concentrate through "lazy habits, inattention, poor health, or personal worries" all contribute to the actor's failure to realize his personal authenticity on the stage. (37)

This state of personal authenticity is what separates the good teachers from the not so good. Teachers who are uncomfortable with themselves and are unsure of why they are teaching will create an unauthentic mask to hide behind. Students, however, can sense the mask and it drives them away. We should be striving for authenticity in the classroom

and that requires practice and hard work not just in learning our subject matter, but in learning to embody our classroom personas.

In order to do this, Stanislavski found, as I'm sure many teachers will note here, that getting to the proper mind frame mentioned above is not always that easy. Moore explains that Stanislavski "[...] discovered that there are mechanisms in human beings which are not ordinarily subordinate to our control" (9). For example, "[...] we cannot at will slow our heart's palpitation or dilate blood vessels as easily as we can close our eyes or raise a hand, nor can an actor who comes on stage with no personal reason for experiencing emotions of fear, compassion, joy, or grief command them, because emotional reactions also belong to such uncontrolled mechanisms" (Moore 9). These inner mechanisms that seem beyond our control are named "subconscious" by Stanislavski, and his system of actor training focuses on teaching the actor a "conscious means to the subconscious" (10). This is called "The Method of Physical Actions," wherein "action" for Stanislavski is defined as any human behavior. Moore describes this method by stating that "Stanislavski determined the favorable conditions for subconscious activity, or improvisation due to inspiration, which is the goal of an actor's art. We find that it is born through the conscious effort of the actor who has mastered his technique. Inspiration is the result of conscious hard work; it is not a power that stimulates work" (11-12). This indicates to me that Stanislavski can give us a practical method for learning how to build a classroom persona that goes beyond playing the role of teacher. Instead the teacher can learn to embody his or her job by learning to identify those conscious "actions" that define their own personalities. Then, once those "actions," what the composition teacher calls "communication skills," are identified, they can be

harnessed with practice and discipline so that the teacher can use them to tap into the subconscious, thus creating the environment for spontaneous decision making, which allows the teacher to “become the character.” I think that this method will help teachers stay fresh and interesting, and, in the case of composition instruction, the teacher will also be immersed in learning and using the very skills that they will in turn teach their students.

This immersion for the teacher is the key to building a bridge between teacher and student in order to avoid Freire’s “narration sickness”. In fact, Freire states that “Education [...] becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat” (92). This technique obviously does not engage students and it does not help in a composition classroom where we are teaching skills that cannot be learned through a textbook. Freire suggests that “[...] From the outset, his [the teachers’] efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. [...] To achieve this, he must be a partner of the students in his relations with them” (95).

Turning now to theatre, we find the same story, Sir John Gielgud, in his Preface to Sonia Moore’s The Stanislavski System, says that “[...] as the theatre is an imitation of life, it is as ephemeral and intangible as life itself [...] and it changes in every decade and generation” (ix). Teaching communication skills or, as we found above with Aristotle, imitation skills, requires experience, and the teacher must provide that not by dictating, but by communicating effectively with his or her students on a daily basis in order to



encourage and give practice to students. The basic studies composition class is a perfect environment for proving this point. In composition we strive to make our students more effective communicators by teaching them the writing, speaking, and, in modern classrooms, technology skills that they will need in their later classes at the university and in life if they wish to become successful. Gielgud states that “one has to experiment and discover one’s own way of expression for oneself, and one never ceases to be dissatisfied,” (ix) and this is the lesson that composition teachers strive to teach their students. But, it is obviously a lesson that cannot be learned in a textbook, so it must be taught by example. Composition teachers, in this case, should not be actors standing up in front of an audience leading them along the course of the play. Successful composition teachers, like successful actors, know that they are performing in a symbiotic relationship where the audience consists of actors in training, not passive listeners. Actors are supposed to draw the audience in to their performance, but they are also there to inspire action on the part of the audience. Learning this skill, according to Stanislavski, requires discipline and must be discovered through a personal journey on the part of the actor through a number of exercises that Moore has put together based on Stanislavski’s writings.

At this point in my expedition I stopped and thought about how these exercises can be translated into training models that I can use as composition teacher. I also recognize that, though I am familiar with theatrical terminology, my fellow T.A.s may not be comfortable working within a new field. Thus, it occurred to me that there is one training tool for young teachers that I have experienced, but have never put to effective use until now. Role-playing exercises have been a small part of my training as a T.A.,

and, while these exercises do have a place in teacher training, I believe that we can make them more effective by adding in some of the principles that Stanislavski teaches to his actor. For example, as a part of my T.A. training, I was required to take a teacher training course. One of the activities in this course asked us to create a lesson plan for a basic studies composition class and then teach it to the other members of the class. This afforded me the opportunity of learning how to write a lesson plan and got me a bit more comfortable standing up and teaching it, but my audience was not the audience that I would be facing in my composition classroom. My peers, who all have the benefit of having been in college for years, reacted to my lesson plan from the perspective of experienced observers. They also were listening and reacting to me with the goal of critiquing my teaching. My students do not have those experiences to back up their reactions to my teaching; thus I am gaining a false sense of the success or failure of my lesson plan and my communication skills. Also, I was more comfortable talking in front of a group of my peers instead of a room full of new faces looking to me to lead them. My classmates were asked to react to me as a young student might, but they were no longer young students, and thus their reactions were contrived and based on stock scenarios of stereotypical student behavior—just like the unhelpful scenarios offered by my guidebooks. In order to really test my communication skills and get better at reading my students and learning how best to react to them, role-playing must not be a contrived activity.

Instead, I think we need to learn how to harness our communication skills by performing the kinds of role-playing that are far more common in the tutoring world. As T.A.s we are often asked or required to become writing tutors on campus, and writing

centers across the country encourage tutor training through role-playing exercises. In his article “Training Tutors to Talk about Writing,” Stephen M. North explains that “tutorials must take their shape from where the writer ‘is’ in the composing process. The tutor’s job is to find that place, then react accordingly” (435). The writing tutor is encouraged to look at each session and tutee as unique. This means that writing centers encourage tutors to sit in on real sessions in order to observe not only techniques that might be useful to them in general, but also communication with another person one on one in any given situation. This is the kind of skill that writing center training focuses on, and I think that composition teachers can learn a lesson from this. Every student is different, and thus has different needs when it comes to how we communicate ideas to them in the classroom. This means that we need to learn a set of skills instead of trying to memorize a set of possible scenarios that, when we use them, make our performances fall flat for our students because we are following a script instead of catering to their personal needs.

Now, the last step is to combine all my ideas. Obviously it would be difficult to perform role-playing exercises with real students prior to the teacher entering the classroom space for the first time so it is especially important that young teachers pay close attention to themselves in their classrooms. I also encourage composition T.A.s to work in writing centers if they are not already required to because one-on-one tutoring sessions are the perfect way to practice communication skills and to get experience in working with the student writer. However, I think that we can add to this classroom and tutoring experience by qualifying some of the human actions that we need to be looking out for when we teach and tutor. Stanislavski method can help do this in such a way that T.A.s can be getting experience through their first weeks of teaching or tutoring while

also observing themselves and the students in order to gain a better idea of how communication lines work between two people.

The first Stanislavski exercise that can be used during tutoring sessions involves learning to concentrate on being “in the moment” on stage at all times so that spontaneity is not lost. According to Stanislavski,

An actor must limit his attention to separate parts of the stage, which he establishes with the help of objects on stage. A *small circle of attention* is a small area that includes the actor and, perhaps, a nearby table with a few things on it. The actor is the center of such a small area and can easily have his attention absorbed by the objects inside it. The medium circle of attention is an area that may include several persons and groups of furniture. The large circle of attention is everything an actor can see on stage. (Moore 31)

The teacher can use this same idea to stay focused in the classroom. I practice this method when I think that I am starting to ramble during a lecture or discussion, and the tutor can practice with this method during a session. Moore explains that “the larger the circle, the more difficult it is to keep the attention from dissipating. When an actor feels that his attention is wandering, he should immediately direct it to a single object and concentrate on it. When he succeeds and surmounts the difficulty, he can redirect his attention—first to a small circle, then to a medium one, then to a large one” (31). In a tutoring session, the tutor can use this method to learn how to focus on the student’s writing and on what exactly they are asking us to help them with. For instance, my first semester of tutoring I had a student that was required to make regular appointments at the

Writing Center for his class. For our purposes here, I will call him James. James was an intelligent freshman who had a strong imaginative writing style of his own. It just needed to be toned down and focused so that it would pass for academic work. James often became distracted during sessions, and it became a battle for me to keep his attention focused, which in turn made me unfocused as well. One day my mind started to wander during a session and I got back on track by listening intently to the tangent that he was on that day. The more I focused on his words and body language, the more I noticed that his interruptions and stories were strategic and were not the result of an attention deficit personality. James liked to add stories and elaborate descriptions and details into his arguments, and he was obviously trying to avoid specifically talking about these more imaginative sections in his writing when I brought them up. Once I perceived this, I was able to address the issue with him head on. Backing out to a larger circle of attention, I started to think back over my sessions with him and realized that he got enjoyment out of talking circles around issues. My solution then was to ask him outright why he was avoiding my help so that he could not talk around the issue. After we had this conversation, James admitted to me that he had always thought his writing was “brilliant” and it made him mad when teachers over the years had criticized him for being too imaginative in his academic essay writing. This is why he avoided talking about those sections of his work. From then on, I was able to gradually get him to let me talk about those sections by explaining to him that they were strengths in his writing, but that they needed to be fine tuned so that his teachers could see that he was trying to make a valid point with his descriptions and stories. Needless to say, our sessions became much more productive after that, and both of us were able to stay more focused. James still

visits my office every once in a while now that he is a senior, and we talk about his writing when he has trouble communicating with his current teachers or tutors. This is a situation that should occur more frequently with composition teachers and their students. Student writers, according to Nancy Sommers in her essay “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” “[...] constantly struggle to bring their essay into congruence with a predefined meaning. The experienced writers do the opposite: they seek to discover (to create) meaning in the engagement with their writing” (175). This indicates that the student needs the help of a teacher or tutor that will guide and inspire them to walk down the path of self discovery with their writing. The only way that students will trust a guide is if that guide is able to focus on the individual needs of each student in front of them in a meeting or session, so that the student feels comfortable and feels like they are being listened to.

Practice with keeping our minds focused on the task at hand and on listening to the student in front of us without letting our minds wander, is an important skill in the classroom as well. For example, in my classes I begin by focusing on the looks on the faces of the students in general, and this gives me an indicator of how well my words are going over with them. This, in turn, refocuses my energy towards getting my message across to them effectively instead of following my own tangent, which may only be of interest to me. If I still feel like I am wandering then I will tighten my circle to include fewer students and will focus more intently on their facial expressions and body language towards me and each other, and this forces me to “be in the moment” and react to my students needs accordingly. After practicing with this technique for some time, I have become calmer and more focused in my classroom.

With this calm has come the realization that I need to make sure that every move I make during the class period contributes to whether or not my class is an effective learning environment. This is another area that Stanislavski can help with. I had to learn to make sure that every action or word I utter in the classroom is being put forth with the intention of improving the environment. This is true of writing center sessions as well. Tutors get a limited amount of time with their tutees and must make that time as useful to the student as possible. Stanislavski instructs his actors to practice concentrating on their goals through improvisation work. Moore explains that “in all improvisations the actor must think in three steps: beginning (exposition), development, and end. Think of your actions, not of your feelings. Do not try too hard, but do not be nonchalant or careless. Be concrete in what you do. Do not do anything ‘in general.’ ‘In general,’ said Stanislavski, ‘is the enemy of art.’” (23). This is obviously a skill that will be useful in a tutoring session, especially if the tutor is instructed to work towards this goal by paying attention to themselves while they work in an attempt to become more self-aware. In the case of composition teachers, whose focus is on learning and then teaching communication skills, practice of this sort can occur in everyday conversation too. For example, I have started to pay closer attention to my conversations with some of my close friends recently, and have learned that we each have our own standard ways of making arguments to each other. I analyze my motives for saying what I say, and then eventually work out better ways to get my points across. Now, I can anticipate the structure of a conversation with one of my friends before we even get past the first few sentences. I can steer the conversation so that we avoid conflict and communicate with each other as effectively as possible. I have found that the more practice I have with this is my

everyday life, the more successful I am at directing focused discussions and constructive lectures in my classroom space because it now comes as second nature to me.

For instance, on my first day of class one semester, I was going over the syllabus with my students, and I noticed that one guy in the back of the room was scowling as I read off my attendance policy. When he noticed me looking at him, he raised his hand and said, “Hi, I’m Cory and I think that only giving us three absences is unfair. My other teachers give me four or five. What if I get the flu or something and have to be out of class?” Generally I am not used to this kind of blunt argument on the first day of class, so I was thrown off at first and paused before formulating an answer. Cory jumped on my pause and started rallying the rest of the class to his cause by asking them if they thought it was fair. Clearly this student was going to be a problem that would spread to the rest of the class if I did not refocus his attention. So, I did what he least expected—I applauded him for questioning me, and asked that he give more specific backup for his argument so that we could talk about it. This got his attention because his aim, I noted immediately, was to hijack my authority, and I had just taken it back without giving him a legitimate reason for continuing to be aggressive towards me in front of his new classmates. This time he paused. His next words reflected an entire change in demeanor. He got a mischievous grin on his face and proceeded to take the floor again, but this time he was jovial, and played the role of jester instead of making valid arguments for why I should give them more absences. Cory, being a performer, knew that he would lose his audience if he continued to be pushy with me because I had turned the tables on him by making myself the ‘bigger person’ in our conversation. In this case, it takes one to know one, I suppose, because I immediately picked up on Cory’s game, and was able to



sidetrack him before he became a problem. From that day on we continued to playfully banter with each other in class, but he never approached me aggressively again. This worked out for both of us because he got to perform for his classmates during our mock arguments, and I got to demonstrate a number of argument techniques, which I then explained to my students later. It also kept the rest of the students amused for a few minutes at the beginning of class, and helped get them excited and warmed up for class discussion. In this instance, my ability focus and then recognize and analyze the situation with Cory allowed me to improvise a conversation that smoothly put out the fire. Otherwise, I would have spent the semester battling Cory instead of using the situation as a teaching tool for the rest of the students.

However, along with practicing concentration and communication skills, the Stanislavski actor, must also learn to cultivate their imagination. According to Moore,

Since imagination plays a dominant role in the actor's task of transforming the story of the play into an artistic, scenic reality, an actor must be sure that it functions properly. The imagination must be cultivated and developed; it must be alert, rich, and active. The actor must learn to think on any theme. [...] He must learn to dream and with his inner vision create scenes and take part in them. (27)

This method follows Courtney's idea of the "creative imagination." In order to embody various characters, the actor must have a large range of data to pull from so that the subconscious can create interesting ideas and actions on stage. The same can be said of the teacher and tutor. The more curious we are about the world in general and the more exploring we do on our own, the more information we will have under our belts when it

comes to trying to relate to students. Tutoring writing offers the unique experience of looking at academic work from all disciplines, and the more well rounded a tutor is, then the more helpful we can be when it comes to discussing writing in various subjects.

In order to prepare for these eventualities, I, for example, make it a point to write down all the random questions that I think of in the course of a day, and then spend some time looking them up. Even something as simple as looking up the history of paper clips can give you some interesting data to use spontaneously in the classroom or a tutoring session if you want to make a point about how anything can be the subject of research for example. I also make a point of trying to catch the news, popular television shows, YouTube favorites, and other various venues for information that my students might be more familiar with. I try to embrace different art forms by experimenting with painting, writing, playing music, and dancing any chance I get because not only does this help with my own self improvement, but it also gives me experiences to pull from when I am trying to relate to a student who might be interested in one of these activities. We can use the tutoring sessions to test out our knowledge in different subject areas with one student at a time, so that when we get to the classroom, we have a better handle on how to use our knowledge to connect with larger groups of students. As teachers, our job is to prepare students for the world, and we can only really do this if we continually update our knowledge about the world that we are sending them into.

I think that using these exercises in self-awareness from Stanislavski in concert with a length of time spent tutoring writing, can aid teachers exponentially towards our goal of eliminating ‘narration sickness’ in the classroom.

## LIGHTS OUT: *Curtain Call*

I think that the most important lesson that Stanislavski can teach us is that, like actors, we must embrace our role as teachers, and make that role a part of our everyday lives. As teachers we must remain curious and excited about our lives and the world around us. Otherwise how can we expect our students to actively engage in learning and discussing how and why they should communicate effectively in that world themselves? Actors play a character on stage just as we do in the classroom, but the true actor is crafting that character from within. Each character is just a different extension of our own core personalities. Many of us do not get or pursue the chance to place ourselves in roles that extend our definitions of who we are and who we have the ability to be in our lives, but I think that actors and teachers share this rare opportunity. For teaching to be effective, teachers cannot consider their work just a job; it is a lifestyle choice, and this is why my journey to become a better teacher has taken me to the realm of art.

Of course, aesthetics and composition theory do share one other quality that I would like to note here before pursuing my next journey—Idealism. These theories do not often take into account the struggling actor whose mind and heart cannot be completely “in the moment” all the time, or the young writer who is teaching in graduate school to pay rent so that they can labor over their manuscript in the wee hours of the morning. Stanislavski said that

Theatre [...] is a pulpit which is the most powerful means influence. With the same power with which theatre can ennoble the spectators, it may corrupt them, degrade them, spoil their taste, lower their passions, offend

beauty. My task is to elevate the family of artists from the ignorant, the half-educated, and the profiteer, and to convey to the younger generation that an actor is the priest of beauty and truth. (Moore 3)

You can take the artist away from their art, but you cannot take the art out of the artist, and teachers are artists in our own right, so we must learn from the beginning to focus our energies with that idea in mind. Having said that, it is understandable that many if not most of us will never live up to this standard fully because we have lives and pursuits outside of the classroom space that draw us away from achieving that perfect balance and artistic understanding of our purpose in teaching. That is why Stanislavski, when asked about the applicability of his method, stated, “Create you own method, [...] Don’t depend slavishly on mine. Make up something that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you” (Logan xvi). The same advice holds true for teachers. We must all take our own path and find our own ways of identifying with teaching even if teaching is not what we specifically identify with at first. We must find the narratives that do interest us whether it be our own writing, an obsession with a sports team, or an affinity for fine cooking and take those into the classroom with us in order to show our students passion. Joshua Logan, an actor with the privilege of having studied with Stanislavski in person, states that “When I left him [Stanislavski] that summer he wrote on the photograph he gave me, ‘Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art,’” (xvi) and I think this advice is fitting for teachers as well. If we are going to teach, and want to teach effectively without ‘narration sickness,’ then we have to find the discipline to love ourselves and our individual missions and interests, whatever they may be, because, in

the end, we cannot help others until we know ourselves, and we do not want life, as Joe Sachs explains, “to pass through us without being lived by us” (1).

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