

Applying Theatre Principles to SoTL Research: Deepening the Inquiry

Kit Simmons and Nicola Simmons, Brock University, Canada

ABSTRACT

The same principles of engagement that actors use to engage deeply with the script and their roles can also be used to more engage deeply SoTL scholars in their lines of inquiry. In this paper, we draw parallels between actors' approaches to theatre performance and deep engagement with SoTL inquiry. We build on a relational perspective to help others generate SoTL questions about interactions between instructor and students. We describe activities that draw on dramatic arts theory and through a process of "defining the issue, agitating the inquiry, and discerning the questions" (Simmons & Simmons, in press), we outline sample activities to help support others in honing SoTL questions and transforming the questions into successful SoTL project implementation.

Keywords: theatre, performance, creativity, SoTL, relational perspective

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In previous work we have examined the performativity of teaching and how it parallels theatre performance as a craft (Simmons & Simmons, in press). A traditional notion of acting, wherein the actor delivers their lines and the audience receptively watches, can be characterized as relying on a transmission-based or superficial approach, much like Friere's (1970/2006) "banking model of education." A more engaged actor, however, would focus on a more dialogic approach, attempting to encourage the audience to invest just as fully as the performer has. This invites the audience to engage at a deeper level, in the same way we hope to engage students more deeply in our teaching. We find that these same principles of engagement can be used to more deeply engage SoTL scholars in their lines of inquiry.

At the 2019 Symposium for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, held in Banff, Alberta, we offered a workshop that used approaches taken from theatre practice to invite SoTL scholars to engage deeply with their SoTL questions. In this paper, we outline our use of theatre-based activities in the workshop as an example to illustrate how these techniques can be used by SoTL scholars and those supporting them. As with every SoTL inquiry, improving student learning is the intended outcome (Poole & Simmons, 2013; Trigwell, 2013); deepening SoTL scholar engagement with SoTL questions and projects becomes the vehicle to get there.

Using a combination of theatre techniques and actors' tools, we reflect on a series of theatre-based activities that can benefit SoTL researchers and those supporting them in deepening SoTL inquiry. We begin by outlining how theatre techniques can be translated to prepare SoTL scholars for engagement. Then, we look at actors' tools and their potential use for turning SoTL questions into SoTL projects, providing enough detail so that others can implement these techniques. We propose that the techniques employed in theatre to deepen artistic engagement can be used by educators and SoTL scholars alike to move into a deeper relationship with their SoTL inquiry.

SETTING THE STAGE: DEEPENING THE SoTL INQUIRY

Trigwell and Prosser (1996) use the term relational perspective to show that students choose their approach to learning (deep or surface) according to the instructor's approach to teaching. A student's approach to learning thus depends on the teaching context in which they find themselves. Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse (1999) note that "the results complete a chain of relations from teacher thinking to the outcomes of student learning" (p. 57). Transmission teaching is more likely, the authors find, to result in surface learning approaches, while conceptual change/student-focused teaching is more likely to encourage students to

adopt more deeply engaged approaches to learning. We argue that, similarly, skilled actors know fundamentally that there is a relational perspective in acting. The energy they bring to a performance is directly responsible for the level of engagement the audience will experience with the narrative. Drawing on this acting insight, we demonstrate that this relational perspective can also invite SoTL scholars into deeper engagement with SoTL questions.

In other work (see Simmons & Simmons, in press), we draw on three principles of theatre engagement and outline how they can be used to break down the *fourth wall* (Pavis, 1998, p. 154) between the professor as performer and the students as audience. The three principles we apply are *complicité*, *le jeu*, and *lightness* (Murray, 2010). *Complicité* refers to the relationship established with the audience when the actor is playful and responsive (Murray, 2003, p. 72). *Le jeu* refers to the playfulness crucial for *complicité* (Murray, 2010). According to Murray (2003/2010), *lightness* is the feeling of ease and repeatability with the material. In this paper, and in the case of our workshop, we apply these principles to engaging more deeply with SoTL questions, where the workshop participants, who include SoTL scholars and people who work with SoTL scholars, are, in effect, students in this process. In the next section, we describe how we did this in order that others might use similar activities to set the stage for creating and refining SoTL questions.

APPLYING THEATRE PRINCIPLES TO SoTL RESEARCH: REFLECTING ON WORKSHOP EXAMPLES

In our workshop, we got everyone on their feet immediately. We had planned two group activities to illustrate *complicité*, *lightness*, and *le jeu*. The first activity was a gentle ball toss around the room with everyone standing in a circle. This demanded silent connection and participation and allowed participants to get some of the shyness out of their systems and engage more readily with unjuried creative responses. We set the tone by asking that participants take a deep and respectful approach. We also asked participants to note their bodily tension, connect to their breathing, and adopt *immediate forgiveness*—an approach in theatre where the practitioners do not allow mistakes to let them lose presence in the activity. The group concluded that the *complicité* in the room was palpable, noticing what it meant to silently work towards a goal, keep their attention on each other, and laugh together.

The second activity was a game called “Red Hands,” taken from clown training. In this game, two participants stand facing each other. The first one puts their hands out flat at elbow level, palms facing down. The second person puts their hands out to sit just below, palms facing up, so each participant’s palms are facing each other. The second participant’s goal is to be fast enough to lightly smack the knuckles of

the first participant, whose goal is to react quickly enough to avoid the smack. We once again asked participants to note bodily tension and emphasized “no red hands,” meaning “don’t make your partner’s hands red; it’s a gentle tap.” Demonstrating establishing consent and permitting an option to “pass” helps participants feel safe to engage playfully. After a few rounds of the game, we asked participants which of *complicité*, *le jeu*, or *lightness* may have been in play. The participants identified the necessary play and release that happened. We noted that many were laughing before they started. We summarized the importance of *lightness* in the play, saying, “It’s not meant to be taxing. It’s not meant to be competitive. It’s playful.” We led a brief metacognitive discussion about how the activity can help make a space where people feel safe to engage and invited participants to consider how they might use the activity.

Refining SoTL Questions

With a more relaxed atmosphere in the workshop and participants now having some understanding of how theatre activities might support the teaching process, we moved to the main focus of our session: refining SoTL questions. We introduced this focus as a guided writing activity using questions drawn from a play workshopping context (Badian, 2017). Actors reading through a play use prompts to provide feedback to the playwright about what they can best connect with. The playwright may then use that feedback to make changes. Actors giving their own experience of the work help theatre-makers understand how an audience might engage. Drawing on this process, our guided writing activity assisted participants to write, critique, and edit their own SoTL question. We asked participants to consider the following responses, typical of those a playwright might request from actors, as a way to indicate their feedback to the SoTL question author:



“I Love”: Any moment that speaks to me that makes my heart soar or brings a tear to my eye—something with which I really connect



“I Wonder”: Something that was not fully fleshed out or something that I did not fully understand



“I’m Hungry For”: Something to deepen my engagement with the narrative; for example, a backstory, more exposition, understanding of the purpose

We asked the participants to draw on their experience with SoTL to write a SoTL-specific question they wanted to work on. We asked them to then pass their written question to the next participant (in a group of four), who read the initial question and wrote their version of “I Love,” the first thing that resonated with them about the question. The papers were passed again to the next participant who wrote a response for “I Wonder,” anything that might not have been clear in the question.

The last participant wrote about “I’m Hungry For,” any additional exposition to elevate their understanding of and engagement with the question.

Drawing on a theatre approach called *exquisite pressure* (Bogart, 2004, p. 33), we asked participants to provide a response in under a minute to encourage an immediate, unjudged, creative response. Exquisite pressure leaves no room for practitioners to judge an answer before they give it. Instead, it reflects the underlying belief that creativity is inherent and will be available when judgement and inhibition are lifted (Johnstone, 1981).

We then encouraged participants to talk to a partner about the insights that arose from getting their question back with immediate peer feedback. The room immediately erupted into conversation. It took some time to get participants’ attention back: a sure sign of engagement with the activity. Several participants commented on the depth of feedback they had received and expressed surprise at how little time it took.

Using the Actor’s Inquiry Tools: Moving from SoTL Questions to SoTL Projects

Now that participants had created questions and received feedback on them, we outlined a further set of theatrical tools to help them move from SoTL questions to SoTL project implementation. We described four ways an actor might assess their commitment and engagement with the written material before building a character out of it and applied this to the SoTL scholar engaging more deeply with their question.

The first is the *objective*, a term used in theatre to refer to understanding a character’s motivations (Krasner, 2010, p. 146). In the context of SoTL inquiry, the *objective* asks: “Do I, as a SoTL researcher, deeply want to find out the answer?” Questions about the researcher’s intentions can help establish where the project sits within the researcher’s aims and interests.

The second notion is *blue sky*, a chance for practitioners with limited theatre budgets and big imaginations to dream the most expansive set of possibilities for the project at hand. Like a producer in theatre, a SoTL scholar can visualize these dreams by asking: “Where does this take me once I get to the end of this process? Do I have a clear picture of what that might look like?” We asked the workshop participants to think of a specific positive outcome and what the process would be to get to that outcome. *Blue sky* invites SoTL researchers to establish an ideal goal, allowing the mind to conjure up a creative and uninhibited answer.

The third way is *tactics* (Jory, 2001, p. 16). For actors, *tactics* refer to a character’s methods of achieving their objective. For SoTL researchers, this can relate to establishing whether or not the proposal is actionable: “Can the research

or inquiry that I have in mind be translated into something I can implement?" Understanding barriers in advance can help frame ways of surmounting them.

The fourth is *freshness* (Griffiths, 1998, p. 59), which harkens back to *le jeu* and *lightness*, and refers to an actor's ability to play with and discover the journey their character is on. Similarly, freshness in SoTL involves ensuring that the researcher understands the field they are inquiring into and that they are ready to play around with it, to move laterally. This concept can also be applied to making sure they are not stuck in the rigidity of expecting a certain answer.

Holding their own as individual techniques, the power of *blue sky*, *objective*, *tactics*, and *freshness*, used in sequence, almost always makes a character come alive. We recommend considering the sequence to help researchers bring their ideas to implementation.

STEAL LIKE AN ARTIST

As Kleon (2012) writes, "When we love a piece of work, we're desperate for more. We crave sequels. Why not channel that desire into something productive?" (p. 48). In theatre spaces, individuals come together and help each other tell their own stories. In both theatre and SoTL, commitment to deep thinking, deeper learning, and communication result in deeper engagement with the work in ways that relate back to the individual actor's/researcher's questions. Just as in thorough acting preparation it is important to have *lightness* and *le jeu* and cultivate the feeling of *complicité* in order to move in lateral directions as new avenues of performance suggest themselves, we must also pursue these qualities in our SoTL research projects.

The theme of the 2019 Symposium for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning was student engagement. While we did not focus directly on student engagement per se, we did demonstrate ways of engaging participants that could be used by others doing workshops for SoTL scholars. Indirectly, we believe, SoTL scholars' deeper engagement with their SoTL inquiry will lead to increased student engagement.

For actors, the considerations of *complicité*, *lightness*, and *le jeu* are useful tools to engage deeply with the audience. Attention to *objective*, *blue sky*, *tactics*, and *freshness* help the actor prepare for that engagement. The same is true in SoTL research: considering these concepts can help the SoTL researcher more fully understand their research question and their own relationship to it. We invite you to consider some of these applications in your own work and your work with others. In the spirit of SoTL and the community of theatre performance, do try this at home!

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kit Simmons simmons.kit@gmail.com (she/her) is a creator, performer, and educator. A graduate of Humber College's Theatre Performance, she focuses on devised and physical theatre. She taught drama to children/youth and worked with graduate students on theatre integration in teaching and learning. She has presented this work at STLHE and ISSOTL.

Nicola Simmons nsimmons@brocku.ca is a faculty member in Educational Studies at Brock University. She is founding Chair of SoTL Canada and a past Canadian VP, ISSOTL. Her work focuses on SoTL, online pedagogy, scholar identity and transition, and lifelong learning and meaning-making. Her teaching and research draw on arts-informed approaches.

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