Inside the Theatre of Business: Performance and Corporate Presentation Training

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Abstract

How are theatre-techniques used in business training? Do theatre-making skills represent a unique field of knowledge? In this case study, I consider the National Institute of Dramatic Art's (NIDA) 'Executive Presenter' two-day course in Sydney, Australia, and attempt to counter a simplistic notion of theatre as magical practice. Performance techniques are complex, historically and culturally-contingent processes for making and sharing meaning (McAuley 2008). I describe exercises from the course in some detail – including elements of space, voice, body, structure, awareness, spontaneity, and rehearsal – and suggest that we can understand these presentation skills in a relationship of continuity with everyday meaning-making, rather than as a magical art form. On the one hand, NIDA trades off and reinforces the popular mystique surrounding acting. On the other hand, the course introduces simple and effective techniques of verbal and non-verbal communication. Ultimately, my investigation considers the claim made in marketing the course that 'public speaking can come naturally to you.'

Keywords

Performance theory; corporate training; theatre; theatricality; social performance studies

Introduction: The Executive Presenter

In this case study I investigate how theatre techniques are utilised in corporate training at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney, Australia.[1] NIDA explicitly draws upon methods used in its actor-training and adapts them for use in business contexts. However, theatre-making skills used in this context are not based on esoteric acting knowledge, but rather on competencies from 'everyday performance' such as bodily awareness, mental focus, and perhaps mundane rehearsal. Such elements lie within the theoretical framework of 'performance studies,' a field that emphasizes a continuity between performance for efficacy and for entertainment (Schechner 1976; 2002). The argument is intended neither to trivialise the training of professional performers and overlook their talent, nor to propose that corporate presenters are necessarily great actors. While it is beyond the scope of this case to focus on the effect of corporate training and assess its effectiveness in the workplace itself, my investigation stems from NIDA's claim that presenting in public 'can come naturally,' and so focuses on the presentation training itself. In particular, I explore its claim about whether 'naturalness' rests upon the legitimisation of knowledge in this setting and whether or not these skills are 'teachable.'

This case study also contrasts with theories of business and organization studies (Mangham and Overington 1987; Bolman and Deal 1991; Pine and Gilmore 1999) that have developed from the writings of Goffman (1956) and Burke (1945). These theories employ the 'dramaturgical metaphor' or 'dramatism' – the idea that we can analyse social interaction as if from the point of view of a director watching scenes played out on stage. Such an understanding can often draw upon an idealised version of Theatre (with a capital 'T' and implying a set of conventions that derive from proscenium arch, script-based, character-driven drama). This idealised version of Theatre often results in a conceptually thin understanding of performance, based on a popularly-received stereotype or a literary model of drama which fails to take into account theatre-making as a process. This is not to say that the metaphor is not useful in business contexts – witness the work of Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges (1997), who employs drama and narrative as ways of understanding organizations, or of Linda McDowell (1998), who investigates work, performance, and identity. Nevertheless, as theatre scholar Gay McAuley (2001:6-7) argues:

> Theorists utilizing tropes of performance and performativity rarely seem to feel the need to engage seriously with contemporary

theatre and performance practices, and the sad irony is that, as Ian Watson [2000: 33] has pointed out, 'in so doing they have helped weaken the very tool they are using.'

In reality, performance and theatre-making processes are wide ranging and varied; indeed, naturalistic theatre practices are an historical anomaly in relative terms. A surface approach to theatre fails to look past its mystique and so mischaracterises its usefulness in business training. Quoting Bertolt Brecht, McAuley (2008) further contends that theatre-making is 'not magic, but work.' In the field observations of this case, we see such work unfolding. My analysis thus seeks to move beyond theatre as metaphor to consider broader elements of performance at play.

However, such a demystification of theatre-making processes in this situation has implications. If, as I contend, the main thrust of the presentation training that NIDA offers to corporate clients rests largely upon drawing conscious attention to the existence of everyday performance skills, is this training just an acting school selling proverbial snake oil? Or even worse, is the training blatantly trading off the Institute's brand name and celebrity connotations in a modern day example of 'the emperor's new clothes?' The observations below certainly refute any claim that the training sessions are poorly conducted, or that the trainers themselves are unqualified. The key investigation here concerns the claims about knowledge that are asserted by NIDA, and the way in which that knowledge is legitimised through the theatre world.

The writing that follows is based on fieldwork at the 'Executive Presenter' workshop offered at NIDA in December 2011. It is part of a larger research project examining theatricality in the corporate world with a focus on the use of theatre in business training, product launches as theatrical events, and CEO performance personae. This broader investigation concerns theatricality and 'technologies of the self' in the field of business – the creation and iteration of certain kinds of social subjects in a contemporary global economy (Foucault 1988). In this broader sense, I contend that performance may be an emblem for selfhood in the contemporary corporate world. Training is but part of that world.

In conducting this research, I participated in the course to get a sense of what it felt like rather than to merely observe. I did declare myself to each of the workshop attendees and gained consent from the school before hand, going through procedures of ethical clearance. At the time of research, I was also an employee of NIDA (teaching theatre history), which gave me a certain 'insiderness,' together with a background in and knowledge of theatre training and rehearsal. Nevertheless, by taking part and placing my own presentation skills up for observation, I felt a degree of risk, vulnerability and anxiety. Being involved in the process, my observations were both internal and external; I noted my own actions and reactions, as well as those of others. There is

no reason to think that my own experience was exactly the same as that of other class members, however. In contrast with ethnographers employed by business organisations to understand different aspects of business culture, my research was relatively independent. At the same time, my case study may be of use to different stakeholders in business and scholarship alike, such as found in Cefkin's reflections (2009: 8) on corporate ethnography.

Obviously, further in-depth ethnographic work beyond this two-day course would have expanded this investigation. Follow-up observations of participants in their places of work, for example, could have considered the impact of this training. However, such elements are beyond this initial inquiry.

Performance Studies and 'Performance'

Performance studies, my own academic field of study, take an interdisciplinary approach by considering performance as both 'object' and 'lens' in the study of aesthetic performance and social phenomena. In other words, the field analyses events that are explicitly recognisable as performance, as well as developing and employing the concept of performance as an analytical tool (Schechner 2002:30). Initially the field was largely concerned with marginal, intercultural, and resistant performances, rather than with mainstream Western entertainment (Maxwell 2006). Rather than construct performance theory in relation to theatre, ritual, and radical social practices, some scholars have suggested examining non-marginal practices such as those associated with corporate culture. Jon McKenzie (2001), for example, offered a critique of performance studies scholarship focused solely on 'the liminal-norm.'[2]

Performance theorist Tim Fitzpatrick (1995: 51-64) argues that performances can be located on a continuum between daily social performance and highly marked or framed aesthetic performance.[3] Drawing upon oral communication theory, folklore studies, and socio-linguistics, he develops the work of Richard Bauman (1984:11) who suggests that performance can be understood as the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence. This competence rests on the knowledge to speak in socially appropriate

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[2] 'Liminality' is a term employed by anthropologist Victor Turner (1990) to refer to the 'in-between-ness' of rituals characterised by a flow or 'communitas' in participants. For Turner, theatre is ritual-like or 'liminoid' in so far as it can create a similar feeling, without such universal efficacy. McKenzie (2001) argues that the objects of study in performance studies should not necessarily be limited to events and processes characterised by liminality.

[3] Fitzpatrick writes about the specific example of Italian Renaissance improvised performance practices, though he suggests a broader definition of performance here. His argument is largely focused on the ways in which performers used both written and oral communication to actualise their performance and drew from a range of personal resources overlapping with everyday social competencies.

ways. For instance, the success of a storyteller relies upon his/her ability to meet the expectations of the audience of what good storytelling is in a particular context. Fitzpatrick argues that performance in a broader sense not only has to do with verbal communication, but also with performance success.

Widely construed, performance is constituted by the interaction of three variables: the performer's personal resources, the role in context of situation, and the programme or outline of the desired outcome (Fitzpatrick 1995:53-4). Fitzpatrick also offers the phrase 'flexible performance' (1997:56-9) to denote performances that shift in emphasis within these elements. For instance, a stand-up comedian might rely heavily on tightly scripted jokes at one point in a set, and then later on spontaneous repartee with the audience to produce humour. An athlete might rely heavily on set plays at certain times in a football match and on freely intuitive responsiveness at other points. Such flexibility in employing personal resources is central to the presentation training I describe. This presentation workshop is about developing flexible performance skills useful in coping with a range of business communication situations from tightly scripted speeches, to improvised presentations and responses.

In similar manner to Fitzpatrick, J. Lowell Lewis makes a distinction between what he calls 'special events' and 'everyday life.' Special events are marked explicitly '(through naming, rule-making, codifying, prescribing) or implicitly (through simple emergence, unspoken practice, or mere attitude)' (Lewis 2013: 4). Lewis argues that there is a continuum between special events and everyday life – Big 'P' / little 'p' performance – that is mediated in different ways. Performance reflects upon and makes sense of everyday life, while everyday life is given meaning by Performance. Special events are often temporally set apart, with moments of transition into and out of them, while nested into the broader ground of human life (ibid. p. 32). Certain situations in everyday life can become 'thematized' (ibid. p. 5-7) and to a certain degree, *transformed* into performance when framed in a certain way. As I argue here, this presentation workshop tends to stand out for the participants as a special event, making the regular, the mundane, and the obvious take on a greater significance. It is an example of 'habit making' or 'habit-changing'– something that can be especially difficult in adult life (ibid. p. 16).

One particular characteristic of performance is this 'heightened awareness' on the part of both performer and audience towards the performance. It is not simply what is *actually* done that matters, but also *the way in which it is done.* Elsewhere I have argued that certain approaches to acting develop a phenomenological awareness of 'being-in-the-world' (Johnston 2011; 2008); here one finds that such awareness and control is not only useful on stage, but also in preparing for performative situations in business. Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski characterised actor training as learning to look, see, and

move again (Stanislavski 2008:77). As I discuss here, many of the techniques introduced in this course are also aimed at seeing everyday behaviours afresh and changing them where necessary.

Corporate Performance at NIDA

> 'Public speaking can come naturally to you,' a sign posted on the exterior wall declares. I enter a set of double glass doors, not unlike a spacecraft airlock, off the busy road and into the vast foyer of the Parade Theatres. The space is strangely empty because the summer break for students has begun. Large portraits of teachers and graduates past and present adorn the walls as if they were looking on, casting judgment. Signs point to the meeting area. Muzak drifts down from speakers far overhead. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1: Promotional sign outside NIDA. (Photograph: Daniel Johnston)

NIDA is one of the most well-known actor training institutions in Australia, comparable to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London or the Julliard School in New York.[4] While its core business is training actors, directors, and creative and technical practitioners of theatre-making, the school received just over half the funding required for its operations from the federal government in 2011 (NIDA, 2013). The remainder is met by the Open Programme (available to members of the public who are offered short courses in a broad range of theatrical

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[4] Graduates include Mel Gibson, Kate Blanchet, Baz Luhrman, Miranda Otto, Hugo Weaving and Sam Worthington, to name a few.

disciplines for a range of ages), revenue gained by hiring out NIDA's venues, and Corporate Performance – which offers training to business employees, executives, and individuals seeking to improve their presentation skills.

The key premise of the workshop is that each participant has expertise in recognising and interpreting elements of performance presentations, but not necessarily practiced in successful public communication. Rehearsal is thus central to the programme's structure – not just abstract knowing, but rather tacking between doing and reflecting. Throughout the two days, each participant has the opportunity to practise elements of five-minute presentations with a different focus at each stage: entering and beginning, developing an engagement with the audience, relaxation and posture, structuring presentations, using the space, and receiving feedback. All of the elements involve a 'bodily' knowing through experience, rather than abstract propositional knowledge. The question lingers as to whether this training simply involves what comes 'naturally' or whether NIDA teaches a completely unique skill set at all.

First Impressions

Before attending the first day, participants were asked to prepare a topic that would form the content for development and reflection throughout the course. As the six members of the class arrived, we ascended the stairs to the Reception Room at the top of the large, open foyer (See Figure 2). The participants came from a range of occupations – including a lawyer from Bankwest, an investment adviser at Media Super, a biomedical company employee, and a salesperson who owned two retail stores and a distribution business that services regional Australian areas and the online market. Class members also came from such geographically-disparate places as Perth, the Southern Highlands (south of Sydney), the Central Coast (north of Sydney), and the Inner West (of Sydney). Participants' reasons for coming to the course varied. One had come 'to aid in confidence,' another 'to be more persuasive,' another 'to gain structure to their presentation,' and still another 'to present scientific data more effectively and to present in a way that is more interesting.' The attendee in the fashion retail industry was interested in gaining new ideas for her business: her online store had just been launched that day.

Figure 2: The staircase inside the main foyer at NIDA. (Photograph: Daniel Johnston)

The room was set up with six chairs in the middle of the space, a paper flip chart in the front centre, and a table for personal item storage on one side at the back. At the start of each session, the up-tempo music of Aretha Franklin's *Think* played through speakers to the side, filling the mostly-empty room. After brief introductions, the tutor explained that there would be a second teacher, who later arrived for the next session. (For the purposes of this paper, I will call them Tutor A and Tutor B.) Sometimes both would be in the room for sessions and at other times, only one would be there. Tutor A explained that there might be disagreements and contradictions between the instructors, but that this was a positive thing. In this early stage, it was evident that the content was not 'objective truth,' but subjective interpretation which might shift from context to context.

In an early brainstorming session, participants suggested that the elements of performance important in presentation included: use of voice, body language, the ability to engage the audience and energy. In anthropological terms, the class was making explicit the 'matrix of sensibility' of presenting in an executive environment (Geertz 1984). We talked about matching the behaviour of presentation to the people listening. In a later session we focused on 'qualities of great presenters.' The group composed the following list: commanding voice, crisp, believable, passionate, engaging, storyteller, relaxed, knowledgeable, emphasis, theatrical, colourful, interesting. Part of the point was to make

the implicit criteria of spectators explicit. The workshop extracted tacit cultural knowledge that each of the participants already possessed.

The first practical element we learned was not theatrical, but rather based on a pilot-training concentration exercise developed at NASA. The alphabet was written on the flip chart in front of us. Underneath each letter was R, L or T standing for Right, Left or Together. The idea was that we would say each letter of the alphabet and hold up a hand according to the instruction immediately beneath it. It was a bit like reading music, in that participants were required to speak and move – like combining two hands together on the piano. Tutor A mentioned that the exercise aided in developing the peripheral vision because as you read the letter, you needed to be aware of the instruction beneath it. My grey cells and motor neurons were certainly a little rusty. The added pressure was knowing that others in the room could see if you were performing the wrong action, or hear you say the wrong letter. We repeated the exercise, this time saying the alphabet backwards. Tutor A explained that you could only use this for up to ten minutes, because after that the brain starts remembering the pattern. The whole point was to overcome mental resistance by focusing awareness and concentration.

Each of the sessions was framed by storytelling and anecdotes from the tutors' past experiences. For example, Tutor A recalled a previous two-day course in which she received no physical response from participants. However, at the end of the sessions, one participant pulled her aside and talked about how useful the course had been. The tutor's point was that you can never be sure when an audience is truly engaged. And in another way, the story was a subtle invitation for us to participate here and now. Some anecdotes over the two days were drawn from conference presentations, previous classes, and broader life experiences – all containing metaphors and analogies from popular culture, technology, sport, and theatre.

One prominent feature of the experience was that the content of the workshop was constantly doubled by the teaching situation itself. In thinking about presenting, I had a 'heightened awareness' of the tutors' own presentation of self. The workshop enacted a demonstrative pedagogy: learning through seeing and doing. At various points throughout the sessions, I noticed subtle choices that the tutors had made. For instance, Tutor A wore very neat, simple clothing – grey trousers, a white top and black flats. Tutor B dressed more casually with a long sleeve shirt, jeans and casual black shoes. The tutors were enacting a subtle semiotics of social meaning through dress as a form of nonverbal communication.

They also viewed themselves as performers in teaching the class. Tutor B introduced himself and described his persona as a 'cheeky jokester.' He described his experience as a director, training as an actor, experience as a voice coach, and fifteen years in corporate training. He

talked about working together with Tutor A as 'doing an Abbott and Costello act' – an overtly performative metaphor – that of a comedy / vaudeville act. As I was to find out, the tutors legitimated their exercises and knowledge by reference to their acting and directing experiences, and their connection to NIDA with all of its associated social and cultural capital.

Rehearsal

The first task concerning 'presenting' involved each participant walking into the space, introducing him- or herself, and exiting (See Figure 3). Even such a simple task yielded elements of analysis. The tutor suggested that we enter from the audience's left and exit to the right – following the English text reading direction. 'A lot of stuff we get on an unconscious level,' she commented, adding that an audience yearns for a linear narrative. During the exercise, some participants looked at the ground while others hesitated or walked in an awkward way, finding it difficult to find the right spot. It was surprising and amusing to see how such a simple task could be foiled by self-consciousness and habit.

Figure 3: The doors to the workshop room. (Photograph: Daniel Johnston)

The next stage of the exercise was to walk into the space, introduce another workshop participant (including something 'personal' about them), and exit. There was an added dimension to this task: it was being recorded on a video camera. We were asked to give feedback to each other (true to the idea that 'everyone is an expert viewer of presentations' introduced at the beginning). We were invited first to offer what we thought was done well by each participant. Then we were asked for

suggestions about 'something to do differently next time.' I realised that, in my own attempt, I had a few 'ums' – something I hadn't noticed about myself before. With the benefit of the video recording, we could see our own habits.

The tutor commented on the importance of breathing, use of pauses, and letting go of nervousness from the beginning. With progressive feedback from an instructor, the point was to develop self-awareness. The tutor talked about a 'toolkit of presentation skills' that we would develop throughout the course.

At one stage, the teacher asserted that 'your name is your brand.' In this sense, one's name is a crucial resource in differentiating the speaker in the context of presenting. Later that day, Tutor B said, 'Everybody is selling something' and likened all presentations to a sales pitch. Tutor B suggested that we imagine an off-stage preparation area where we could prepare for entering the space – shake our bodies, breathe, gather our thoughts. I noticed that the presenters used this suggestion for the rest of the course. We then did a 'top-and-tail' of our prepared speech with feedback as before – about pace of step, gait, balance, pauses, smiling at the audience, and making eye contact.

Heightened Embodied Awareness

The subsequent session began with a drama game of 'passing the clap around.' Participants were required to make solid eye contact with the person they were clapping towards. Gradually more complexity was introduced into the game, including a 'double clap' reversing the direction, and other modifications. Afterwards, the tutor explained that this was the type of personal connection that we were aiming at in our presentations, too.

We did some work on finding a 'neutral' stance by leaning slightly forward, and then backwards, to become aware of what happens to our body. We reached down to the floor and 'rolled' up, vertebra-by-vertebra, using the weight of our heads to focus attention on our spines and posture. The idea was that afterwards we would feel a little 'taller.' Back in our chairs, we did some breathing exercises: first placing our hand on our stomach to notice where we were 'breathing from.' Many of the participants were 'top-breathers:' in other words, they neglected to breathe from the diaphragm in a controlled way. The tutor commented that, 'as babies, we know how to breathe. Statistics show that by the age of three we start to develop shallow breathing. It is as if at that age we start to develop a sense of fright.' She implied that improper breathing represented something parallel to emotional development in children, and the repression or suppression of feeling. This appeal to 'nature' and 'naturalness' reminded me of the billboards advertising the course.

The next day we also practised some vocal exercises building upon breath. One part of the exercises focused on relaxation and preparation by breathing out in a sibilant 'S' sound for a number of beats. Other vocal exercises included tongue twisters and voice warm-ups which aided in focusing one's attention and preparing one's body for the task of speaking.

Tutor A recommended other embodied means of presentation preparation, such as getting to the venue early, rehearsing, and checking out the spatial orientations of the presentation area. She suggested that she would sit in various seats in the auditorium, so that she could get an idea of what it was like to be an audience member and to know what the audience could see. She would shift around to get various perspectives. We then talked about working out the relationship to the audience in the room. In a later session, Tutor B suggested dividing the audience up into sections and alternating attention among them, so as to promote the feeling of personal contact.

External Awareness: Space, Movement, Body Language

The tutor then focused on the use of space. A volunteer was asked to stand in the presentational space and class members were invited to give feedback on what we felt was the most powerful position in this area. In the session we talked about and tested performance proxemics (although this term wasn't used). Tutor B talked about the use of the upstage area by kings and queens on the Elizabethan stage. He mentioned the use of centre stage by experienced actors and the subtle psychological coding of position: coming forward is apparently more 'passionate' and backward more 'logical.' Next, we discussed and experimented with lectern placement in the space. Again the left-right reading direction of the audience came into his explanation, suggesting that it is best to have the lectern stand on the audience's right, so that if the speaker delivers a PowerPoint presentation, the audiences' eyes will come back to the speaker at the end.

Next, Tutor A led a session on movement. She linked this topic to the processes of acting in which the performer works out tasks or actions: 'moving for a purpose.' She suggested that it was the same for presentations. Following on from Tutor B's front/back contrast, Tutor A suggested that the presenter could 'code' certain areas of the stage to content and form. For instance, the audience left could be where you talked about the 'problem,' the centre 'the cause'' and the right 'the solution.' Or on a temporal theme, the left might be 'the past,' the centre 'the present,' and the right 'the future.' Again, she referred to this 'unconscious' communication with the audience and keeping spaces 'clean' so that they didn't get 'muddy.' The 'rule of three' was behind this division as a comfortable pattern for human comprehension. But with this section, the tutor suggested that practice was required by the

participants; it was not something that you could simply comprehend in your mind, since the knowledge needed to be in your body. In a sense, she said, 'it is like pressing play on the internal mp3 player.' She also suggested that we could link certain spaces to types of engagement: for instance, Tutor A always answered questions to the audience right.

Tying these two sessions together, we considered appropriate social distance from speaker to audience, and personal space in presentations. I noticed that Tutor A generally stood a little further back than Tutor B. We talked about possible gender differences here: apparently men generally stand closer to the audience. The tutor made the point that an appropriate distance depends on the audience – different situations will require different distances. 'These are just suggestions, not necessarily rules,' he said. We then went on to analyse stance and posture at the lectern. Even though one's body is covered up by the stand, the tutor demonstrated that what you do with the rest of your body can be 'seen' by your audience in your stance. 'Can you see my foot tapping?' he asked. 'Everything from here down... It's connected.' He suggested that using notes at a lectern is fine, but you need to make sure that you are connecting with the audience and not burying your head to read. The conversation moved towards broader body language, habits and tendencies – from being too formal and stiff to being overfamiliar and careless. The next sections concerned the use of PowerPoint and microphones, including some technical advice.

The Boardroom: Lambs to the Slaughter

Later, we considered different contexts for presenting – the boardroom in particular. A mock boardroom table had been set up in one corner of the space and a conversation ensued about where the most powerful position at the table was. Some of the participants mentioned how the table settings were fixed in their organization, according to the structural hierarchy of the company, with the Chair or the CEO at the end. Tutor B recommended that presenting in the middle was the optimal position because you reduced the distance between you and the majority of the audience.

Before sitting at the table, the tutor made a point of drawing the window curtains closed, citing the difficulty of presenting in front of a window. He explained that audience members have a tendency to be distracted very easily and that presenters should make every effort to focus their attention. 'Of course, you can't control all of the "trivialities" or "trivia." Our brains are attuned to the next piece of information,' he said. (I recalled this comment the next day when, during one of the stop-start rehearsals, an ambulance drove down the busy road outside.)

One challenging situation in the boardroom, according to Tutor B, occurs in what he called 'Lambs to the Slaughter' presentation, where

each presenter is hauled up in front of the Board and placed all the way down the other end of the boardroom table to pitch an idea. It was as if the CEO could usher the presenter in, summon the person to speak, and then dismiss the presenter before s/he had finished. The tutor suggested that to break that feeling and hierarchy, you could walk down to the other end of the table and shake hands with each member of the Board. The key elements to this session were engagement, eye contact, and energy. Different participants seemed to have different numbers of people in their meetings: one had up to 40. The tutor asked, 'How did they ever manage to make decisions?' He continued, 'At about this number, you might consider standing up to address the group. Otherwise, your voice might be lost.' The tutor then asked the question, 'What were chairs invented for?' 'For resting,' he answered himself. The problem was, he explained, that when you are presenting from a chair you are not meant to be resting. We talked again about posture. 'You need to work against the comfort of your chair.' Again, this seemed to be the opposite of what comes naturally.

Towards the end of the session, the tutor reflected on what causes behavioural change in people:

> 'Death and traumatic events can jolt people out of their patterns. These can bring about change often in a short space of time. The key to giving a good presentation is to change one's patterns, to be convincing and engaging. Generally we all have a sphere of skill and the task here is to "play to one's strengths."'

But this did not mean simply relying on current skills and capabilities in presenting: these came with practice. The tutor suggested that one way to bring about change was to go outside of that comfort zone: 'to become uncomfortable until it becomes natural.'

Mastering Content: Improvisation, Language, and Structure

On the second day, we played a game to develop spontaneity and thinking on our feet (quite literally in this case). Tutor A had a bag of objects that we were going to use in the exercise. The point was to pull an object out and talk about it for one minute. Just to demonstrate, the tutor asked for an object readily available in the room (since she knew what was in the bag already). One participant gave her a bottle of water. The tutor made up a story on the spot about how she would put something in the water – an invisible poison – and give it to someone to drink if she didn't like the person. Each of the participants completed the exercise of improvised speech with surprising success. We then talked about how you were just 'you' in this presentation because there wasn't really much time to think about it.

The exercise was significant because it proved by example that each of the speakers was able to adapt and communicate with very minimal

time for preparation. Tutor A connected this exercise to a story about a presenter whose projector broke and suggested that if one set of resources failed, you could draw upon another. Spontaneity was obviously indispensable in dealing with changes in circumstances, even in the middle of your presentation. Again, this scenario was both an example of proving by doing and of flexible performance (Fitzpatrick 1995).

Tutor B also stressed the importance of personal resources in performing when he related how he used to talk to actors. 'Words are your weapons. You can fire blanks or you can work like a modern day machine, shooting effectively and decisively.' He continued, 'I say this to actors when they are rehearsing: that the audience is hearing this for the first time. They easily rehearse their lines more than 50 times in preparation. But it is that preparation which makes the words sound real and believable. It is about pace and articulation. It is the same thing for presenting. It can all be boiled down to two things: louder and slower.' He then went on to point out that confident people speak slower: 'If someone is speaking fast, it is usually because they are nervous, or they don't know what they are talking about.'

In an earlier session, Tutor B introduced more formal elements of structure for presentations. The first element was 'objective;' for actors, it would be what their characters were trying to *do* in a scene. He explained: 'Your objective is your reason for speaking in the first place. You need to know why you are presenting.' The objective of the speaker was 'to make... such and such happen,' making the audience do something active, rather than merely inducing a cognitive state. For example, a customer might understand that he/she needed a product and yet still not make a purchase. The objective was to 'make the sale.' 'Ignite the passion to achieve this [objective] rather than an intellectual pursuit.' In many ways, all the components of structure connected with the second element: 'audience expectations' and the question 'what is in it for them (WIFT)?' The point was to make it relevant.

The tutor explained the other elements of structure, including 'defining the argument,' 'providing evidence' to support and convince listeners, different types of 'hooks' (such as shocking statistics, silence, questions and performative gestures), coming up with an attention-grabbing first line, and emphasising the most important words in the presentation. Tutor A reinforced this later when she suggested we need to cut to the chase and engage the audience. She summed it up in the line: 'Show me the Mona Lisa; I'm double parked'.

One key element of structure was 'structure' itself. The tutor wrote three T's up on the white board, and then finished each word:

Tell
Tell
Tell

She then recalled the catch-phrase: 'Tell them what you are going to do; tell them; tell them what you've just told them.' The issue here was ensuring that the presenter's message was getting through and reassuring the audience where the presentation was going.

The last point was 'rehearsal.' Again, the tutor stressed the importance of 'actually being up there, standing as if you were presenting to a group.' He talked about focusing on the most important people in the room: the audience. At this point, he said that communication was a sport. 'It has the same result as training. You won't improve as a communicator unless you actually do it. Anything else isn't going to improve your game.' The point of this exercise was to remind us of what we were going to do the next day. Tutor B mentioned something that Tutor A had said in an earlier session: that the word 'play' isn't used much in the corporate world. 'A sense of playfulness helps to find new possibilities,' he explained.

Managing Stage Fright

From the end of the first day onwards, the workshop was devoted to rehearsing and putting together the elements we had learned. We all had to get up in front of the group and say the first line of our presentation as we had the day before. After seeing the other group members, one of the participants was intimidated and said: 'The bar has been set too high.' Earlier in the day, the same participant (from the fashion retail sector) admitted that she didn't like pretending or role-playing and that she preferred just to watch. Each of the other participants performed his/her lines with varying levels of 'over-the-top-ness.' Finally when it came to the reluctant participant, Tutor B really had to coax her. She kept on saying that she couldn't do it. The tutor gave a little speech about seeding failure into one's behaviour in advance. He recalled a conference participant who once gave him the acronym 'FEAR' to explain the phenomenon: 'False Expectations Assumed Real.' Then he challenged her to stop saying 'I can't' and other negative phrases. Reluctantly, she got up in front of the rest of the group and completed the exercise. He noted that she had been a very vocal participant throughout the whole day. The tutor grabbed her cue cards and asked her to say the opening line. She wouldn't. Then he said it for her and got her to repeat it, and then another time, and finally a few more times. And then he tasked her to 'do it bigger.' Finally, she was at a point where she had raised her level of engagement. He asked the class and we agreed that she had 'got there.' She felt that what she did was ''bad.' By noting our positive response, the tutor suggested that she was wrong.

Ironically, at the end of the second day of the course, this participant was able to interest other class members in the clothes that she sells. She was certainly not afraid or inept at communicating as her peers' interest indicated.

In feedback to my own presentation, the class talked about 'being yourself' on stage. It appears that I tend to have my chin slightly raised, which can often be interpreted as slightly arrogant or condescending (which is certainly not my intention). The tutor mentioned that sometimes the angle of your face needs to be adjusted to the spatial layout of the audience – in my case, lecture theatres can be steeply raked; perhaps this behaviour was an adjustment for such circumstances. The tutor suggested that it was not simply a matter of reproducing your everyday behaviour in presentations. Something else needed to be added: 'You've got to be "you" enhanced.'

Discussion

The key point I would like to discuss about this workshop centres around the idea that public speaking can 'come naturally.' If presentation skills are natural, then one wonders whether there is any point in (or possibility of) teaching them. This is not to say that the training was futile or useless – far from it. The participants 'learned by doing' and developed self-awareness and critical capabilities in analysing elements of how to present (See *Figure 4*). In Lewis' (20013:16) terms, it was an instance of 'habit-changing'.

What arguments do these field observations sustain? Is NIDA's corporate presentation programme tantamount to sophism? The answer seems to be both no and yes. The case study reveals that the tutors are making the processes of rehearsal explicit, together with certain ways of using voice, body, and space. Rather than simply being a matter of a performer's innate charisma, the workshop proceeds through a process of trial, error, demonstration, and reflection, to identify specific elements that are meaningful to an audience.

In promoting these courses, NIDA trades off the caché of its theatre-training – but there is something else going on. The content does not exclusively have to do with theatre-techniques (although some are introduced, as outlined above). The tutors encourage a heightened awareness of the elements of cultural meaning-making: spatial orientation, body language and posture, pace of presentation, intonation, and eye contact – to name a few. Such meaning is not natural, but a matter of social convention. A by-product of the process is that the participants also have fun. The programme is as entertaining as it is instructive. As with team-building exercises in a corporate context, bringing people together and creating self-confidence may well be as important as any propositional knowledge that is gained. Indeed, the embodied nature of all of the exercises here is crucial.

The status of expertise in this pedagogical exchange is ambivalent, however. Rather than hard and fast rules or objective truths about presenting, the tutors emphasised the importance of context and

audience (in a way not dissimilar to Fitzpatrick, 1997). Everyone is an expert in viewing presentations, in the sense that to exist in the world is to be adept in deciphering verbal and non-verbal means of communication. By focusing on how certain behaviours are interpreted, together with techniques for bodily control and focus, the presenters reported feeling that they were more engaging at the end of the course than they had been at the beginning. There was a sense in which the 'magic' of NIDA was downplayed in the actual course, while simultaneously sustained in the Institute's wider public image. The tutors also sought to justify their own status as teachers by reference to their practical experience as directors and actors. They used metaphors and stories from the theatre-world in their teaching, together with explicitly theatrical discourse: that is, technical jargon such as tasks and objectives, references to Elizabethan stage dramaturgy, and the structures of theatre rehearsal. The use of music, humour, anecdotes and video cameras all contributed to a theatrical atmosphere.

Figure 4. (Photograph: Daniel Johnston)

Moreover, there was also a sense in which the place of NIDA itself adds *bona fide* to the training. The feeling of a brush with fame – in the photographs, paintings and paraphernalia that adorn the space – created a sense that there was something special about the Institute. It was not simply a matter of *what* you knew, but also of *who* and *where* you were to be deemed expert. Not only the tutors' own theatrical training and

connection with NIDA, but also the location of the course itself, served as legitimating factors in this pedagogical situation.

Nonetheless, the concrete skills in vocal control, breathing, posture, structure, and use of space taught in this course were not necessarily solely within the domain of theatre training. Throughout the two days, sporting, sales, and technological metaphors were invoked, thus indicating a broader sense of 'performance' at play (see McKenzie 2001). In a way, there is no reason why non-theatrical training businesses could not teach the same skill set. Along a performance 'continuum' (Fitzpatrick 1997; Lewis 2013) we can see that these various elements in everyday performance are equally applicable, if not magnified, in formal presentations. For example, the angle of my chin is important in everyday interaction by giving certain communication signals to my interlocutor about genuineness. This element is amplified in a larger presentation situation, perhaps even to the point of seeming slightly arrogant. The fact that such reflection takes place within an acting school adds authenticity and legitimacy to the process – the location acts as a 'frame' (Goffman 1956), or is 'thematized' (Lewis 2013) for the performance of learning.

It is beyond the purview of this paper to evaluate the effectiveness of this corporate training. Suffice it to say, the Corporate Performance arm of NIDA's business model has expanded significantly, with its courses now conducted in cities across Australia. There is obviously a demand for such training and a market endorsement of the product. Further investigation is required, however, to capture the appeal of the workshops and who might benefit from the training – whether newcomers to a business field, non-native English speakers, or introverted employees. According to the tutors, word of mouth and client referrals are the major source of new clients. There may also be effects beyond the immediate intention of the course in terms of employee networking and relationship-building.

As mentioned above, it is also important to note that there are many other skills applicable to a theatre-training conservatoire that might not be as applicable to business presentation. These include interpreting a role, script and character analysis, and dance, to name but a few. Moreover, what can be achieved in a short course is obviously limited. Nevertheless, it is not naturalistic, script-based drama that lies behind the concept of performance in this workshop, the aim of which is to develop a 'toolkit' that might be helpful in various contexts. Sometimes this might involve improvisation and spontaneity in presentations, and at others highly planned and scripted content.

Conclusion

There is a contradiction in the tutor's advice to participants to 'just be you-enhanced,' (presumably a variant upon the old acting maxim 'just be

yourself'). First, conscious altering of behaviour to convey a certain appearance is the *opposite* of being unaffected. And the idea of continually going 'out of your comfort zone' is aimed at artifice with respect to behaviour. There is a contradiction between things that come naturally and things that don't – what 'reads' as natural might 'feel' very fake. This paradox is at the heart of theatre.

Of course, there is nothing necessarily wrong with directors and actors working in corporate training. Indeed, they bring a transferable set of skills in communication. Nor is there necessarily a problem with NIDA supplementing its revenue by running courses such as the one described here. Nevertheless, it is in NIDA's interest to foster an aura of 'magic' around the Institute and its graduates, while at the same time denying that there is magic at play in the learning situation. The programme demonstrates techniques of behaviour that can be learned, and an awareness of communication elements that can be developed.

Second, the natural-artificial binary sets up a specific discourse and set of values privileging the first term over the second. The implicit proposition is that everyone has a natural ability for persuasive communication, but for some reason or other – whether because of bad habit, psychological blocks, or physical tensions – that natural disposition is inhibited.[5] To be artificial is 'bad.' To release your inner 'natural self' as a presenter, you need to do this course. Thus, there is a spin in the slogan 'public speaking can come naturally to you,' because the content of the workshop focuses on convention, not naturalness. In other words, the concept of naturalness conceals its own construction.

A more nuanced understanding of what is happening here is that participants are practising behaviours until they become 'habituated.' In Lewis's words (2013:15):

> Indeed, as [Gregory] Bateson noted, the more embodied or habituated the pattern becomes, the further it tends to recede from consciousness [1972:142–43]. This kind of incorporation is at the root of what anthropologists have often called the naturalization of culture: the process whereby people see their own habits as inevitable – as the only appropriate way to do things.

NIDA raises these elements of 'incorporation' to conscious awareness in its workshop participants. Yet, at the same time, the Institute is fostering an impression of magic: NIDA performs itself. In learning elements of presentation and developing an attentiveness to social convention, participants are also customers of this theatre school. As a corporation, NIDA is selling its own image and creating a product based on the

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[5] This idea of a truthful inner self is also prevalent in many contemporary theories of acting. For instance, see Colin Counsell's (1996) analysis of Strasberg's 'Method' in this respect. Also see Rossmanith (2009) with respect to contemporary discourses of actor training.

'naturalization of culture.' In this case, naturalness is a commodity that can be bought and sold.

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