



## **Teaching as Transformative Performance: Performance as Kinesis in an Argumentative Writing Class**

**Gene Segarra Navera**

*Centre for English Language Communication, National University of Singapore, 10 Architecture Drive, 117511 Singapore*

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper demonstrates how the notion of ‘performance as kinesis’ or ‘activist performance’ (Navera 2007) can be applied to the teaching of argumentative writing. In order to achieve this, the author first revisits his earlier work based on Dwight Conquergood’s (1991, 1992, 1995, 2002) notion of ‘performance as kinesis’ and how such notion may be used to conceptualize facilitation in the teaching and learning context. In this earlier piece, the author argues that when facilitation is seen as performance as kinesis, the teaching-learning situation becomes a site of negotiation, students become responsible co-creators of content and process in the teaching and learning context, and classroom participants exercise self-reflexivity. Following this brief discussion is a sample lesson that aims to demonstrate how the approach is realized in an argumentative writing class. This sample lesson is then subjected to two levels of analysis. The first looks into the significance of the specific activity-based lesson to the teaching of argument while the second points out how the overall framework of organizing the writing lesson enacts the notion of performance as kinesis. In both levels, teachers and students engage in a dialectics of action and reflection (Freire 1972, 1997) that can potentially bring about a change in their ways of thinking and acting. I conclude that the teaching of argumentation becomes transformative when the notion of performance as kinesis is materialized in the teaching-learning context. This is significant to 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy as it encourages the development of critical citizenship crucial to a fast-changing world.

*Keywords:* Argumentative writing, performance as kinesis, transformative performance

### **ARTICLE INFO**

*Article history:*

Received: 25 October 2011

Accepted: 28 August 2012

*E-mail address:*

elcgsn@nus.edu.sg (Gene Segarra Navera)

### **INTRODUCTION**

The conceptualization of performance in contemporary times departs from the Platonic binary opposition between reality

and appearance. Performance is no longer just about role-playing or managing impressions. It can, on the one hand, embody cultural norms and values, that is, sustain or maintain the status quo. On the other, it can transform or change culture by challenging cultural expectations and providing alternative ways of viewing reality (Pelias, 1992; Conquergood, 1991, 1992, 1995, 2002). Performance theorist, Dwight Conquergood, suggests that performance can potentially put into question and bring about changes in current state of affairs. It can offer ways to disrupt or subvert current practices, existing realities or dominant ways of thinking and doing things. He offers the concept of 'performance as kinesis' while differentiating it from the mimetic rendering of performance (Conquergood, 1992). Such concept of performance underscores its potential for (re)inventing and transforming culture.

This paper rearticulates Conquergood's notion of performance as kinesis by showing how it may be applied in the teaching of argumentative writing. Specifically, this paper aims to: (1) discuss how the notion of 'performance as kinesis' can be employed in teaching and (2) demonstrate through a sample lesson in argumentative writing how such notion can be applied in the language arts classroom, specifically in the teaching of argument.

### **TEACHING AS PERFORMANCE AS KINESIS**

In the article titled 'Performance as Kinesis: Language Teaching as Activist Performance'

(Navera 2007), I argue that Conquergood's notion of performance as kinesis—or performance as breaking and remaking—can be employed as a lens to think about or conceptualize facilitation in particular and teaching as a whole. Reflecting on my experience as a teacher of communication arts in the Philippines using such lens, I have generated insights which I organize into three more specific conceptualizations about teaching: (1) teaching as an engagement and negotiation; (2) teaching as embodiment and retelling; and (3) teaching as transformation and synthesis. I expound on these conceptualizations below.

#### *Teaching as an engagement and negotiation*

When I talk of teaching as an engagement and negotiation, I regard it as a social event where interaction between and among participants (that is, between teacher and students as well as among students) takes place. The interaction takes the form of question and answer, argumentation and refutation, giving information and receiving it, questioning assumptions and reaffirming reconsidered thoughts. It entails the problematizing of issues and sincere attempts at proposing solutions to address them. It is a thoughtful exercise in reflection and self-reflection aimed at working towards convergence while recognizing divergences. The exercise consequently moves towards a culture of commonality that becomes a ground for more dialogue and expansion of individual as well as collective horizons, as it were.

*Teaching as embodiment and retelling*

Teaching as an embodiment means that the performance of teaching necessarily creates or recreates a tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation across cultures. The very act of teaching in the classroom is itself a reaffirmation of the values of learning articulated and rearticulated by the great thinkers throughout human history. Teaching is therefore culture-maintaining and culture-producing and -reproducing.

Teaching also participates in the formation of identities of participants in the teaching-learning context as it attempts to historicize content or the subject matter. The exercise of historicizing involves the recounting and accounting for the factors and forces that have contributed to the conditions of the present or the current state of the subject matter. A historicized subject matter helps determine the position of the learner (a term that I use to refer to both teacher and students) and casts for him or her possible directions to which the subject matter may be pursued. It enables the learner to understand what and how existing knowledge both privileges and undermines, to recognize how he or she figures in the current system of privileging, and to decide on ways to deal with such system.

*Teaching as transformation and synthesis*

When it becomes clear to learners why they are learning what the university or the faculty thinks they ought to learn, it is not difficult to imagine teaching as a

transformative enterprise. Learners, in this case, take a more questioning role. They begin to examine closely and incisively what is there, that is, challenge the status quo. The questioning position may take the form of disrupting or destabilizing what has been neatly put together. This should result in a rethinking or re-conceptualization of existing (or dominant) vocabularies and ways of viewing and representing ourselves and the world. Transformation begins when differences are accommodated and careful reflections are made on these differences. It demands finding common threads or combining and recombining seemingly disparate ideas to develop new ways of looking at reality. Teaching as transformation enables learners—teachers and students—to work towards achieving criticality—that is, the readiness to question or problematize (which is what makes us human), to engage in a dialogue, and to be open to alternative visions and possibilities.

I wish to suggest that the conceptualization of teaching as performance—specifically as engagement and negotiation, as embodiment and retelling, and as transformation and synthesis—can very well apply to the teaching of argumentative writing. In the following section, I discuss the sample lesson on argumentative writing and explain how such lesson employs the notion of performance as kinesis and the implications of using such notion in a writing class.

## PERFORMANCE AS KINESIS IN ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING

The sample lesson (Appendix A) is an introduction to argumentative writing and is divided into two parts: (1) a list of instructional objectives and (2) the ADIDS framework which stands for activity, discussion, input, deepening, and synthesis (Victor, 2000; Daya, 2010; Ortigas, 1999). The list of instructional objectives is expressed with the students' point of view in mind, while each part or section of the ADIDS framework consists of descriptions and specific instructions to the classroom participants, i.e., teacher and students.

The *activity* section provides instructions on what students are supposed to do: to write an essay of rant. The *discussion* allows students to process and communicate their reflections on the activity. In dyads and/ or in groups, students share their observations, interpretations, and comments on the activity using guide questions provided by the teacher or facilitator. Publishing these observations and comments through documentation and recording is encouraged while the discussion takes place. In the *input* section, the teacher or facilitator organizes ideas shared in the group. Basic concepts that have to do with writing an argumentative essay and how it differentiates from a rant are also presented in this section. Input is followed by *deepening* which involves asking students questions meant to enable them to create generalizations from the group sharing and input communicated by the teacher/ facilitator. The *synthesis* section provides instruction on an assignment

or post-lesson activity that would allow students to apply what is learned from the lesson, which, in this case, is developing an argumentative essay from a rant.

In the analysis of the sample lesson, I focus on two levels. In the first level of analysis I examine the significance of the activity-based lesson. In the second, I focus on the use of the ADIDS framework in organizing the lesson and how such way of organizing the lesson enables both the teacher-facilitator and the student-participants to engage in a negotiation of meanings in the classroom situation. In the course of explaining the framework, I shall cite instances from my previous and more recent experience in teaching writing courses to university students.

I would like to suggest that the activity-based lesson on transforming a rant into an argumentative essay strategically serves as an opportunity for the students to understand and appreciate argument as an embodied experience. The activity reaffirms not only the notion of argument as a language-based social phenomenon engaged in the processes of inquiry and advocacy (Zeigelmueller & Kay, 1997; Toulmin, 1958; Toulmin *et al.*, 1979), but also as a human activity rooted in an experience of disparity between what is and what should be and the urgency to address such disparity.

To rant is to speak or write at length and aggressively about something. It is usually motivated by vehement feelings of anger, disgust or disappointment. When students are asked to write an essay of rant, the question posed is 'What makes you angry?'

or ‘What disgusts you?’ The question is supposed to stimulate a student to remember pet peeves or things that bother him. There is an outburst of emotion involved in expressing a rant through writing; and when the essay of rant is examined by another student, she comes to grips with the idea that highly emotional expressions can be overwhelming and difficult to handle. There is no way another person can argue, find reason or be reasonable with an outburst of emotions. However, when one is disgusted or angry or tremendously disappointed about something, there may be underlying reasons for doing so. The students must find and discover these through interaction with fellow students. Interaction on the essays of rant would allow them to check if the compositions, no matter how emotionally laden, are convincing enough to warrant an audience and an informed response. One way to extract reasonability in rant is to examine the difference between what is (what disgusts, what angers) with what should be (what is acceptable or what would calm people down). By showing or revealing the disparity, students realize opportunities to reconsider initial thoughts about an item that makes them angry or disgusted. Here, they begin to realize that the experience of anger or disgust is more than personal. It can have a social dimension in that the experience of disparity or disjunction between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ may in fact be shared by others. This, I should note, opens the possibility of transforming the rant into an argumentative essay.

To give an example, I refer to my experience in teaching argumentative writing in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> I distinctly remember one student who talked about her disgust for people who expectorate in public places. This behaviour, she said, is unhygienic and indicates what she considered the low level of civility of people in the community. In other words, she considered people who expectorate in public places as lacking in good manners and urbanity. Her rant, though easily regarded as reasonable (i.e., to expectorate in public is indeed insanitary), may be construed as smug because of the way she talked about it in her essay. However, upon discussion of her rant with her classmates and her reflection on what is the case (i.e., the act of expectorating in public is taken for granted) and what should be (i.e., expectorating in public should be prohibited as it is a public health-hazard), the student began to think of the act of expectorating in public beyond her personal disgust. In her argumentative essay, she argued for a prohibition of the act—a claim of policy—and went on to state and substantiate her reasons that support her claim. The example reveals that what may initially be considered a personal source of disgust or dissatisfaction may actually be a public concern.

The sharing and discussion of the essays between and among students in class also signify the social dimension of argument.

---

<sup>1</sup> I taught argumentative writing in the University of the Philippines Los Banos from 1999 to 2004. Each of the classes I handled consisted of 17 to 20 students.

By creating opportunities for students to read and to comment on their fellow students' written works, they are given the chance to understand how arguments circulate, get reproduced, and are negotiated through interaction. They also begin to realize the need to be critical—that is, to be discriminating in processing information and to not take utterances at face value especially when they are driven largely by human emotions. Moreover, the sharing enables students to think back and reflect on their own experiences as communicators either via the spoken or written word. They become discerning of what to say and how to say it more effectively before an audience, in a small group or in an interpersonal context.

In the same argumentative writing class I taught, the students were asked to comment and to provide feedback on their classmates' essays of rant. This was done either in pairs or in small groups of three. By commenting on their classmates' essays, the students were able to sound off their reactions towards the essays of rant and began to empathize with their classmates or at the very least understand where their classmates were coming from. They were also able to suggest ways on how to transform an essay of rant into a more convincing piece of writing. From a pedagogical standpoint, such an activity positions students as active communicators who are able to re-articulate ideas, paraphrase emotions, and negotiate meanings with their fellow communicators.

Meanwhile, the ADIDS framework enacts the notion of performance as kinesis. The following reasons support

such proposition: (1) it challenges the traditional 'banking method' (Freire, 1972); (2) it breaks the 'culture of silence' in the classroom by creating opportunities for the participants to share ideas, observations, and reflections based on an immediate experience as well as remote ones; (3) it positions both the teacher and students as co-creators of the learning content and process; and (4) it is provocative, and not merely evocative, in a sense that participants are encouraged to question taken-for-granted notions and to constantly seek and clarify the bases for assertions made in the teaching-learning context.

ADIDS, because it is experience-based, does not position the teacher as the 'sage on stage' or the expert who is the source of knowledge in the classroom. The framework rests on the assumption that students are resource persons in the classroom and that their contributions to the discussion are as vital as the input of the teacher in class. Unlike the 'banking method' which imposes on students what they ought to learn, the framework allows students' ideas generated from their experience of the activity to build on, extend further or even supplant ideas introduced by the teacher. Idea-building using the ADIDS is one created not by a powerful figure but by the power of all—the power of the collective.

I believe that collective idea-building in a writing class is demonstrated when the teacher allows students to reflect on their writing experiences and also to comment on other students' works. In a writing course that I teach at the National University of

Singapore<sup>2</sup>, for instance, students in class are made to express their insights from their experiences of writing various aspects of their drafts and to comment on selected drafts projected on screen. In this exercise, their comments are regarded as legitimate and valuable as what I have to say about the drafts as a lecturer. In this set-up, it is inevitable for students and the teacher to develop shared feedback on the drafts. Hence, the role of the teacher becomes one of synthesizing ideas articulated in class and of helping the students re-articulate the learning points that they need to consider as they re-work their papers.

That the students are enabled to share ideas, observations, and reflections based on an immediate experience as well as remote ones indicates that a culture of participation is harnessed in the classroom. The ‘banking method’—which is largely the case in the use of traditional lecture—silences and represses students from providing alternative perspectives on a subject matter (Freire, 1972, pp. 45-59). On the other hand, the ADIDS framework encourages that insights coming from students be expressed (and published) because it is through their articulation that students develop the confidence to learn independently and learn with others. By making students feel that they have something significant to contribute to the discussion table, they develop trust in

themselves as learners as well as recognize the potential of learning together or cooperative learning. Cooperative learning launches opportunities for collaboration and corroboration of ideas which are both important in working in teams and in developing reasoned argumentation.

The emphasis on cooperative learning does not, however, regard the teacher input or lecture as unnecessary. In fact, in my writing course, I give mini-lectures from time to time and as the course committee requires, but as a teacher, I mostly regard these lectures as ways to augment and not to undermine what students already know. Conducted in an interactive fashion, they are meant to synthesize points articulated in class, expose students to perspectives from what has been written or said about the topic, and frame the direction and flow of the activities and assignments that students are required to do throughout the course.

The ADIDS also positions the teacher and students as co-creators of the learning content and process. The hierarchy of teacher/student is diminished and replaced by cooperation and collaboration. There is no question that the teacher who uses ADIDS enters the classroom with his prior knowledge and with knowledge generated through his preparation for the course, but he is always open to the possibility that his knowledge may have to be reconstructed or reshaped by the knowledge shared and developed by students in class. On the other hand, students assume the role of the teacher in that they come to the classroom prepared and ready to share insights from

<sup>2</sup> The course, called Critical Thinking and Writing, is taken by engineering undergraduate students and requires them to write two writing assignments: an evaluation of an argumentative essay and a position paper on a topic of social concern.

their readings and experience of structured or unstructured learning activities in the classroom. Accountability and responsibility for the learning process are then shared.

In teaching writing, I recognize that my own reading of a draft essay is not the only reading. It is then important to involve the students in the critique of drafts whether through peer reviews in small groups or through a collective class critique. The collective class critique of a draft essay projected on screen<sup>3</sup> is especially significant as students bring in their perspectives on how one might re-write the essay to make it more clear and intelligible to its intended readers. It also allows me as a teacher to make public my thoughts about the draft instead of keeping them between myself and the writer/s concerned. I open myself to students questioning why I made certain remarks about certain aspects of the draft but then this affords me that chance to explain these remarks before the class. In a way, the exercise allows me to reflect on as well as re-negotiate what I consider valuable in writing.

Another important point I wish to make about ADIDS is that it is provocative, and not merely evocative. To be evocative means to merely generate content from members of the class and this may be the case when one ends with a mere sharing of ideas and feelings after an activity. However, a provocative teaching framework—which is what ADIDS is—means that participants are

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a practice that I have adopted from my observations of a class in Ideas and Exposition, a module offered by the University Town Writing Programme of NUS.

encouraged to question taken-for-granted notions and to constantly and carefully examine the bases for assertions made in the classroom. This necessarily develops the students' critical voice and may be ensured through the deepening and synthesis parts of the framework. The deepening allows students to generalize, test, and apply ideas developed from the class discussion and the teacher's input to the various contexts that they encounter in real life. The synthesis, on the other hand, encourages students to engage in the creation of new material based on lessons learned in class. In the case of the sample lesson, synthesis is facilitated when students are asked to write an argumentative paper based on their essays of rant, their classmates' comments on their essays, and their reflections from their experience of the activity and of the group discussion. I believe synthesis in any writing course happens when students are enabled to make their own decisions about their writing assignments after a series of consultations and discussions. Needless to say, the exercise puts the learning points in fruition and enables the students to engage these points further.

Having expressed the reasons that support the adoption of ADIDS as a framework for teaching, I would also like to point out that it is not without limitations. The framework is most ideal for small group-sized classes and requires a considerable amount of time for it to work. Often the reality on the ground is that teachers are assigned large classes and given syllabi that cover wide-ranging topics and require a lot from the students that the classroom hardly

becomes conducive to learning. Given these constraints, a number of us, with the goal of covering topics in the most efficient way possible in mind, tend to resort to more teacher talk or instruction—in other words, the banking method. The constraints of time and institutional matters notwithstanding, teachers should actively find ways not only to adjust, but also to create opportunities for a more participatory framework to flourish in their writing classrooms. Teachers, in embodying the notion of performance as kinesis, may actually choose to engage school administrators and even policy-makers in a dialogue so that pedagogical concerns become a concern of the entire school and the larger community.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude that the teaching of argument potentially becomes transformative when the notion of performance as kinesis is materialized in the teaching-learning context. There are challenges to realizing its potential in the classroom context, but they are not insuperable. It is significant to 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy in that it encourages the development of critical citizenship crucial to a fast-changing world.

## REFERENCES

- Conquergood, D. (1988). Health theatre in a Hmong refugee camp: Performance, communication and culture. *The Drama Review*, 32(3), 174-208.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58(2), 179-194. Reprinted in D.S. Madison & J. Hamera (Eds.) (2006), *The SAGE handbook of performance studies*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Conquergood, D. (1992). Ethnography, rhetoric and performance. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 78, 80-123.
- Conquergood, D. (1995). Of caravans and carnivals: Performance studies in motion. *The Drama Review*, 39(4), 137-141.
- Conquergood, D. (2002). Performance studies: Interventions and radical research. *The Drama Review*, 46(2), 145-156.
- Daya, R. A. (2010). Experiences of facilitators in using ADIDS as participatory approach in a training class: An exploratory study. *University of Southern Mindanao Research and Development*, 18(2), 171-180.
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (trans. M. B. Ramos). New York: Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. (1997). *The teacher as cultural worker: Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Navera, G. S. (2007). Performance as kinesis: Facilitation and language teaching as activist performance. Reflections on English Language Teaching, 6(2), 65-75.
- Ortigas, C. (1999). *Group process and the inductive method*. Manila, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Pelias, R. J. (1992). *Performance studies: The interpretation of aesthetic texts*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Pelias, R. J., & VanOosting, J. (1987). A paradigm for performance studies. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 73, 219-31.
- Petraglia, J. (1995). *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction*. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Toulmin, S. (1958). *The uses of argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Toulmin, S., Rieke, R., & Janik, A. (1979). *An introduction to reasoning*. New York: Macmillan.
- Victor, M.L. (2000). Oral presentation on facilitation. *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) orientation workshop for the project Rapid Appraisal of the Agricultural and Fisheries Councils on Potential and Capability for Social Mobilization*. Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA), Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines.
- Ziegelmüller, G. W., & Kay, J. (1997). *Argumentation: Inquiry and advocacy*. USA: Allyn and Bacon.

## APPENDIX A

### Argumentative Writing: Introduction

#### Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, the students should be able to:

1. differentiate a rant from an argument;
2. familiarize themselves with the features or characteristics of an argument; and
3. develop an argumentative essay from a rant by taking note of such basic concepts as proposition, evidence, and argument as a rhetorical process and product.

#### Activity

To students: Put your rant into writing. What makes you angry? Or disappointed? Or disgusted? Develop about 3 to 5 paragraphs on this one topic or idea that peevs you or incurs your wrath. Make sure to express in your essay why you are peeved or angered by it.

#### Discussion

To students: Find a partner (your seatmate, or when the class is large, group yourselves into 3 or 4). Exchange essays and from your partner's essay identify the core statement and be able to account for how such statement is established in the essay. Share your observations to your partner or the small group. Get the person's feedback on your observations. Let her clarify if she feels the need to do so. Then, answer the following questions:

1. Was the point of your partner or group mate convincing?
2. What makes it convincing? What makes it not convincing?
3. What do you think would make it more convincing?
4. From the observations and discussion, what generalizations can you make about what makes a rant in written form convincing?

#### Input

Ask 3 dyads or the groups to present their observations and insights to the class. Ask the rest of the groups if they share similar observations and quickly ask for any addition to what has been registered in the plenary. The points should be made visible by writing them on the board.

Reaffirm the points raised by the class by sharing additional information about what makes a convincing essay. At this point, introduce basic concepts such as propositions of fact, value, and policy; evidence as a creative act; and the nature of argument—as an inquiry and advocacy, as a rhetorical process and product.

Engage the class into further familiarizing themselves with these concepts by encouraging them to find manifestations of these concepts in their own writing—whether they be rants or formal ones.

#### Deepening

To allow students to further understand the basic concepts, ask them the following questions:

1. From what we have discussed so far, what makes a convincing essay?
2. What differentiates an argument from a rant?
3. If you were to develop a convincing essay from your rant, what would you retain and what would you leave out? Why?
4. In relation to number 3, how else would you make your essay convincing?

#### Synthesis

To students: Develop an argumentative essay from your rant. Make sure you make your essay convincing by being clear about your proposition, providing considerable evidence to prove your claim (you can make use of testimonies, expert opinion, analogy, parallel case, examples, etc.—all of which will be discussed in depth in the following lessons), and using clear and appropriate language—one that is devoid of emotive words and is not polarizing.

