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To cite this article: Jayme Kilburn (2019) Writing wrongs: disruptive feminist teaching within the (anxious) ivory tower, *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 24:3, 433-437, DOI: [10.1080/13569783.2019.1604121](https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2019.1604121)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2019.1604121>



Published online: 07 Jul 2019.



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Writing wrongs: disruptive feminist teaching within the (anxious) ivory tower

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ABSTRACT

As a first-year writing instructor, I generally expect a few mainstays: a handful of bored students, recurring absences, and plenty of covert texting. In order to disrupt the usual lackluster engagement associated with required classes, I approach my writing seminar like a theatre class. By incorporating common performance practices such as the warm-up and personal narratives, I have bypassed many teaching landmines my peers encounter. Through simple theatre techniques, the class becomes cohesive, self-regulating, and most importantly, a place where burgeoning scholars can practice radical humanism.

KEYWORDS

Writing; teaching; feminism; performance

As a first generation college student I struggle with a terrible case of imposter syndrome. I am a graduate student; well, a Ph.D. Candidate. A distinction that was hard fought and almost didn't happen. I came to academia after becoming burnt out of the artist hustle. I ran a small theatre, directed plays, and worked three jobs to support it all. I have never been able to imagine a life without theatre, sacrificing most of my time and energy towards its pursuit. In my thirties, however, I grew tired and wanted adult things like job security, a disposable income, and free time. This is when I jokingly say I 'gave up' and applied for graduate school.

While my passion and drive for performance helped me get into a Ph.D. programme, I also feel the distinct stain of my blue collar roots. I always seem to be the least polished person in the room and am often reminded of my inadequacies when words like 'epistemology' fly out of my mouth and for a brief moment I think 'am I using that word right?' My anxiety is compounded by the fact that I am being pedagogically groomed by the prestigious Cornell University where I feel, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney describe in 'The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses', like a criminal:

... certainly, this much is true in the United States: it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. In the face of these conditions one can only sneak into the university and steal what one can (2004, 101).

However, it is my own hardships and sincere appreciation for academia that fuel my desire to make it a more welcoming and hospitable place for my students.

To earn my keep I teach writing. Like most college writing programmes, the goal of my class is to slowly wean students off of the five paragraph essay and teach them how to think critically in order to form their burgeoning ideas into a concise 8–10-page paper. Oh, and tangentially, to instruct students on how to manage their time effectively, be responsible academic citizens, and give them the tools to think freely within a rigorous high-pressure setting. When I was given the opportunity to design my own writing class, I had to decide what kind of instructor I wanted to be. I wanted to do more than teach students how to write, I wanted to help them find their voice. I wasn't interested in continuing a cycle of anxiety that stems from the fetishisation of grades, I wanted to develop a course that speaks back to neoliberal, capitalistic models and focuses on shared stories, vulnerability, and a humane care for others' needs. In other words, a course that borrows from performance-making methodologies.

I view performance as a countermeasure to the real and perceived pressures fostered by the anxious ivory tower. Performance-based methodologies rely on a humanistic approach, help build community, and encourage a critical and rigorous examination of the given world. In *Viewpoints*, director Anne Bogart writes

I became a theatre director knowing unconsciously that I was going to have to use my own terror in my life as an artist ... Out of the almost uncontrollable chaos of life, I could create a place of beauty and a sense of community (Dixon and Smith 1995, 7).

Theater is fucking powerful. Harnessing this power can transform classrooms. Not only for the theatre kid who is already invested in the material but for the biology major who just needed a class that fit into their schedule.

Using a performance-based approach, I become what Ann Elizabeth Armstrong and Kathleen Juhl call in the introduction to *Radical Acts: Theatre and Feminist Pedagogies of Change* the feminist teacher as trickster:

The feminist teacher as trickster is constantly pushing at the limits of the classroom community, negotiating the boundaries of identity and acknowledging differences, contradictions, and subjugated knowledge that may be present ... They destabilize power relations by providing constant variety ... they provoke laughter and subvert hierarchies. Their pedagogies dismantle the limits of traditional classroom protocol and learning becomes dialogical (2007, 15).

I begin each of my writing classes with a physical warm-up. The warm-up serves a few major purposes: to get students in their bodies, energise them, and form a connection with their fellow students. At the very base level, students learn each other's names and as a result speak more in class. Like performance itself, warm-ups are deceptively complex. A warm-up I often employ is the dance river. The game is simple: students make a circle, a dance worthy song is played, someone goes into the centre and starts dancing, everyone copies them, the centre dancer taps in a new dancer, the process continues. While extremely straightforward, this game contributes greatly to fostering active student participation by asking students to get comfortable looking silly. Like other theatre exercises, students are able to find safety in mimicry. It both asks students to be bold risk-takers and provides a very physical safety net through the rest of the group's imitation. In the context of the classroom, this exercise helps eliminate the trepidation students feel when they share their ideas; that what they say is stupid. By creating a support system that is precisely based on feeling uncomfortable students more eagerly connect with

one another and are willing to contribute to discussions without feeling the weight of judgement.

Beyond the warm-up, I assign two performance-based writing assignments: the personal narrative and the ten-minute play. The personal narrative is framed through a story of self. Community organiser and Harvard Senior Lecturer, Marshall Ganz, describes the outcomes of a story of self in his worksheet 'What Is Public Narrative: Self, Us & Now':

By telling personal stories of challenges we have faced, choices we have made, and what we learned from the outcomes, we become more mindful of our own moral resources and, at the same time, share our wisdom so as to inspire others. Because stories enable us to communicate our values not as abstract principles, but as lived experience, they have the power to move others (2009, 2).

Taking principles of community activism, the story of self is taught in conjunction with a section on solo performance using David Román and Holly Hughes' compilation *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance* (1998). Students are asked to write a personal public narrative or solo performance that focuses on a struggle they have overcome. Unlike a traditional research paper where students can get bogged down by the delicate balance between research and analyses, the story of self offers a concise and clear template for writing a compelling essay. Students are asked to consider how the small glimpse of their life is representative of the whole and necessitates an engagement and connection to the material. In preparation for more formal writing assignments, the personal narrative tasks students with finding their writerly voice. They must consider questions such as: What do the words I chose to use communicate to my reader? How much detail should I use? Why is this story important and how did it shape who I am today? I have received stories that discuss struggles with learning disabilities, making friends, coming out to parents, immigrating to the U.S., finding religion, losing religion, and the crushing responsibility of making parents proud.

I make it known that each student will share their story of self. With that information, students can tailor their story to reveal as much or as little as they like. I like to think of it as keeping the stakes comfortably high. Some students approach the story as a solo performance complete with props and costumes. Most read their story at the table, some with confidence, some with eyes down and quivering voices. After describing the assignment, I share my own story of self in an effort to invite vulnerability. The story of self provides a platform for students to practice speaking with efficacy. It is in these moments of sharing that the classroom is transformed. No one pulls out a phone or looks bored. Students are attentive, as if silently supporting their classmates, in what I perceive as a remarkable act of humanity. As Jill Dolan describes in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (2005):

This is where the utopian performative might be found: in feelings of pleasure and hope that often come before the security of articulation, that require a process of arriving in speech, the sense of possibility for something never before seen but only longed for, that glimpse of the no-place we can only reach through *feeling*, together (66).

The last assignment I give in my course is to write a ten-minute play. This strategically placed assignment formalises the theatrical writing process, builds off writing techniques students have previously learned, and promotes a sense of sanity for both student and teacher at the end of a long term. As a writing instructor, I truly believe students need

to know how to write a formal, well-researched, rigorous essay. At the same time, balancing formal essays with creative assignments can help ignite their passion for a topic or issue. Writing formal essays requires that students select a topic they are passionate about and interrogate it within an inch of its life. In some ways, I feel like I am taking the joy out of their newly discovered favourite thing. ‘You love the lesbian feminist performance group Split Britches? You think they dismantle gender norms? Well, prove it’. Conversely, the ten-minute play allows students to revel in their passions and hyperbole. Students are asked to select a cause, politic, or idea, research it, and then make it personal. The last two weeks of class are spent presenting staged readings of the plays. The students serve as readers and each playwright is given 10–15 minutes of class time to elicit feedback using Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process (Lerman and Borstel 2003). One of the most exciting things for me as a teacher to witness during the readings is not only how good the plays are but how thoughtful and respectful the feedback is and with what grace students accept critique. As an added bonus, instead of spending time giving notes on somewhat haphazardly constructed paper drafts at the end of the semester, I get to watch short plays while the rest of the class takes on the responsibility of providing feedback.

Whether we like it or not, as graduate students we are being groomed as the next generation of gatekeepers. While we can protest against years and years of institutional policies that have reinforced racism, sexism, classism, and elitism, we are still encouraged to ingratiate ourselves into a system whose survival relies on selectivity. Many students have confided in me that they feel inadequate, isolated, and consumed by the systemic pressure to succeed. While there are many aspects of university culture that I believe feed into this mentality, I also believe that humanities and performance-based scholars are in a unique position to provide a holistic and anxiety-tempering approach to learning. As Dolan describes, theatre can help us ‘reinvest our energies in a different future, one full of hope and reanimated by a new, more radical humanism’ (2005, 2). In addition to employing performance-based techniques in the classroom, I practice radical humanism by eliminating grades on individual assignments, preferring to discuss grades at in-person meetings during the middle and end of the semester. I give students two penalty-free late passes to help alleviate their workload during especially difficult points in the semester. I encourage students to use their two sick days as personal time if they need it. I tell them about my own struggles in academia. And above all else, I strive to foster a classroom community that encourages humanity.

This was my first time experiencing a feminist classroom, and I cherished the experience. I was most taken aback by the level of intimacy and comradery fostered between classmates, especially during the class period when we shared our stories of selves. All of us came from differing backgrounds, yet by the end of the semester we were following each other on social media and meeting for breakfast prior to class. I found this course to be the most rewarding I have taken this semester ... I found the material interesting and saw my writing skillset and overall understanding of identity to have been broadened. – Christian Hall ('20)

Notes on contributor

Jayme Kilburn is the Founding Artistic Director of the Strand Theater Company, Baltimore City. She is a graduate of the University of California Santa Barbara, New York University, and is currently a Ph.D.

Candidate at Cornell University. Jayme has received three Cornell Knight Institute awards for her first-year writing seminar.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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