

The Role of Performative Theory in Classroom Practice: Notes for the Teacher

Lekshmi R. & Dripta Piplai (Mondal)

Abstract

The notions of performance and performativity permeate all social settings that we encounter in our daily lives. This paper explores the classroom as a performative space, focusing on how language, reflective practices, and art-based pedagogy redefine teachers' roles. Drawing from performance theory, it discusses how classroom practices reinforce or resist social hierarchies. The discussion highlights the performative nature of teaching, the importance of teacher reflections in restructuring classroom dynamics, and how art and performance create pedagogies of resistance. The paper argues for a meaningful integration of these frameworks to offer a holistic understanding of teaching as a socio-cultural performance.

Keywords: Performativity, classroom as a performative space, reflective practitioner, art-based pedagogy

Introduction

Performance is any activity that can be repeated to be rendered convincing (Schechner, 2015a). The idea of performativity theorised by Butler refers to the never-ending production of the subject through the discourses in which the subject participates (1997). The everydayness of the classroom performance attributes specific social values to the teacher and the learner. Aspiring and practising teachers can use their awareness of the implications of performative theory as they reflect on classroom practices and daily feedback. Teaching can be understood as a performance in multiple ways: the enactment of a role, a discursive

practice that reinforces and adds to the established meanings, and an embodied performance that doubles up as a discursive act (Ruitenberg, 2007). Reflective practices help in linking the implications of the performativity of teaching to a comprehensive understanding of the events in the classroom and what went well and what did not, thereby allowing teachers to learn from the classroom experience.

Performativity and the Classroom

Schechner (2015b) identifies the seven functions of performance: to entertain, create beauty, change identity, foster community, heal, teach or persuade, and engage with the sacred or demonic.

In this sense, the classroom is a dynamic performance site involving roles, rituals, and responsive interactions. It offers immense potential for the teacher's performative role to be aligned in multiple modes of storyteller, counsellor, companion, subject expert, mentor and healer in the context of shared identities and the sustenance of empathy. The various functions of performance in the classroom can be outlined as follows:

1. Aesthetic: The classroom engagements contribute to the student conceptualisations of beauty and order.
2. Affective: The emotional sphere of the classroom and its sociality imbibes the practices of sharing experiences.
3. Outcome-based: The teachers need to reorient their role towards the most efficient attainment of outcomes.
4. Moral: The teachers' practices contribute towards building a repertoire of moral economy, which is inherently the reward. As Lazzareto notes, emotional labour is also 'immaterial labour' (1996, pp. 133-147).

Teaching as Social Performance

Drawing on Turner's ideas about 'social drama' and 'communitas', the classroom becomes a crucial site where performances intersect with institutional, cultural, and social expectations (1982). An understanding of teaching as a social performance can aid teachers in better situating the language practices of the classroom. Bernstein's analysis shows how social codes are reified through classroom practices (1996). The teachers function as storytellers who blur art, life, and cultural memory by

interweaving their experiences with collective cultural narratives. The classroom combines the potential of the two attributes, ritual and play' that characterise any performance (Fei & Sun, 2015) through storytelling, empathy, resistance, and transformation.

Ramanathan has extensively worked on the procedural displays in Indian English classrooms to understand the socio-educational practices and the 'epiphenomena' underneath them (2005, p.79). These classroom performances show how knowledge systems are organised and how resistance grounds in the local contexts. socio-emotional learning within the classroom becomes a unique aspect of the performance fostered through the community formed around teaching and learning. The students' expectations from the classroom are that it is a safe space where they can share all narratives without judgement—a space to forge social interactions and thereby carve out a place for the self in the world. It is also a space that promises social mobility and transformation for the learners. Hence, there is a need for autoethnographic and experiential systems to constantly interrogate whether classroom spaces create newer sets of hierarchies or challenge those hierarchies through performative acts.

The Role of Reflective Practices

Reflective practices comprise a description of what happened in the classroom, the feelings and thoughts of the teacher, an evaluation of what went well and what did not, an attempt to make sense of the classroom proceedings, and an action plan. In short, reflective practice includes recall, reflection, and making plans through journals and classroom activities. Moore (2004) characterises the teacher as a 'reflective practitioner,' who learns from lived classroom experiences. Reflective practices can integrate theories from Dewey (1938), Piaget (1936) and Vygotsky (1967), emphasising the experiential, cognitive and social aspects of teaching and learning. Reflective practices can facilitate the autonomy of both the teacher and the students in the classroom as they make sense of and prepare for any uncertainties that arise in the classroom.

Reflective practices can be a gateway to understanding the theories, prejudices and subjectivities that shape the teacher's performance. For instance, a student teacher from Delhi reflects on the pre-class activities during her teaching practice with Grade 3 students when discussing

a poem titled 'Seashells' that was preceded by sharing childhood memories (N. Arora, personal communication, September 23, 2022). The sharing of narratives created a community of readers who appreciated the poem with tangible memories of the sea. Thus, reflection bridges performativity and pedagogy, helping teachers reimagine their roles not merely as subject experts but as facilitators of social-emotional learning.

The Evolution of Performance in Indian Learning Systems

The constructs of the ideal Indian teacher and the guru-shishya relationship were products of the self-effacing cultural framework of Indian thinking, particularly the physical and performance traditions. The Vedic tradition envisioned the teacher as infallible and was based on a total 'surrender of the pupil's will' to the authority of the guru (Sarangapani, 2003, p. 113). There was a spirit of heterogeneity in the traditional indigenous education systems, which equipped their pupils with necessary skills and different streams of knowledge, often associated with their socio-political position. Such institutions developed the ethos of classical and folk performative traditions of music, theatre, martial arts, and performance in the students' minds by facilitating the aspects of memory, ritual, make-up and singing.

The colonial times saw a shift away from the existing indigenous traditions of learning, which were rooted in the local traditions and were sustained by members of those communities (Dharampal, 2000, p. 18). Under the colonial system, the teacher's role moved to that of 'meek dictator', and the independence movement aimed to reclaim the pedagogical practices rooted in the cultural traditions of India (Kumar, 2005, p. 73). Figures like Gandhi and Tagore envisaged the revival of indigenous education systems and emphasised the role of various performances in learning, like music, dance, theatre and pottery, understanding those as integral parts of the curriculum.

The post-independence debates surrounding education renegotiated the state's role in education, and the teacher was regarded as a facilitator. The national policies on education have homogenised educational goals. The 'textbook culture' influenced Indian classrooms, where the teacher and the student have to redefine themselves under the extrinsic demands of performance, competition and comparison (Kumar, 2005; Ramanathan, 2005; Sarangapani, 2003).

...in India the teacher's appropriate job continues to be regarded as that of delivering the prescribed content of textbooks. The student's duty is to ingest this prescribed content. There is no room in this process for genuine inquiry, for it is assumed that all necessary inquiry has already been made; and that the results of the inquiry have been packaged in the syllabus and the textbook. (Kumar, 2005, p. 94)

Performance as Reclaiming the Teacher's Agency

In the neoliberal market economy framework, human talent is regarded as a commodity, and there is an ongoing discourse of evaluating the students' and teachers' performances through multiple modes. These practices limit the teacher's role as a facilitator of an outcome-based education. Sarangapani and Pappu observe that the rhetoric of performance has crept into discussions of homogenised policies in the South Asian education systems (2021, p. 16). In English classrooms in India, the teachers internalise 'standard' English as a performance, inadvertently creating hierarchies, and the concerns about fluency percolate to students (Gihin, 2023, personal communication). The teachers are portrayed as overworked, dispirited, physically tired and unjustifiably sexualised in the description and illustrations of the four-part series of *Mathrubhumi*, a newspaper in Kerala (*Syllabusinumappurathe Adhyaapanam*—Teaching that is Beyond the Syllabus, *Adichuvaaranam, Napkin Katthikkanam*—Sweep and Clean, Incinerate the Napkins, *Annamorukkaan Abhyaasam*—The Labour of Making Meals, and *A Plus Pedi Adhyaapakarilum*—The Fear of A Plus Among Teachers Too) (Kala, 2022, August 20, 21, 22 & 23).

However, the new reality of the Covid-19 pandemic and the challenges related to the accessibility and effectiveness of existing learning methods created new avenues for teachers to redefine their ways of connecting with the students. Art pedagogy becomes an important bridge for this purpose as Kotnala outlines how teachers can integrate art into various subjects (2021). The NCERT position paper on art education, which dealt with enhancing creativity in learning to foster the values of autonomy and reflexivity among learners (2006), becomes a guiding document here. In contemporary classrooms, certain practices stand out, as in the case of the Kerala economics teacher who imparts lessons by reviving the archaic art form of Kathaprasangam, a storytelling performance (Praveen, 2022).

In contemporary classrooms, certain practices stand out, as in the case of the Kerala economics teacher who imparts lessons by reviving the archaic art form of Kathaprasangam, a storytelling performance (Praveen, 2022). The Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad, a people's movement for science education, organised several performances and undertook a statewide foot march to remind the people in power about the environmental effects of advancing urbanisation. The songs, group activities, making things from waste materials, puppetry and theatre create an ecology of art that can become an important tool in decolonisation. Yandell et al. (2024) note that 'imposing the clean simplicity of the laboratory on the messy complexity of a classroom' can be reductive. When a student says 'I don't know', it is important for the teacher to understand where it comes from. To understand and distinguish between ignorance, reluctance, lack of surety about the self or the teacher, and preference for invisibility, the teacher's sensitivity comes in handy. This practice of empathy and sensitivity by the teachers through art and performance fosters ways to decolonise knowledge practices in Indian education.

The Use of Art in Classrooms

Experiential learning meaningfully integrates art into pedagogy. As Sartre notes, "The attentive pupil who wishes to be attentive, his eyes riveted on the teacher, his ears open wide, so exhausts himself in playing the attentive role that he ends up by no longer hearing anything" (1957, p. 60). Thus, in conventional classrooms, students often internalise the performance of listening instead of learning. On the other hand, theatre infuses the spirit of collective action, accountability and embodied learning. The classroom is the primary site for the sharing of emotions and narratives. The teacher can be sensitive towards the linguistic realities of the learners, bringing out the cultural nuances in their local repertoire. Memory, rhythm, oral traditions and expression can be facilitated using songs in the classroom (Sankaran, 2021). Songs and poems in the mother tongue enrich language education, fostering a sense of belonging. As the NEGFIRE report (2016) and the digital archives of Kerala's First Bell initiative (KITE, 2020) show, the concept of play in joyful, student-friendly spaces can foster inclusive values, gender equality, leadership, and confidence and eliminate the exclusionary practices within schools. The teacher and the learner are engaged actively through play. These practices simultaneously enhance learning and acting as forms of

protest. They challenge the dominance of textbook culture and reclaim the classroom space as a site of creativity and autonomy. The teacher can adopt thematic approaches and coordinate paired action, thus constructing the classroom as a democratic space by infusing the ideas of inclusivity and social justice.

Conclusion

The neoliberal turn in education has commodified students and teachers as isolated forces succumbing to the market economy. As a counter to this model of assessing performance, Sachs proposes the notion of the activist professional identity to re-professionalise teachers through teachers' unions (2001). The power of training programmes, mobilisation, collective performance and reflective action can help teachers reclaim their agency.

The theory of performativity, combined with reflective practices and artistic engagements, provides a powerful framework for reimagining contemporary classrooms in India. Teachers can be envisioned as negotiating identities, creating archives and counter-archives of resistance. By integrating art and reflection into pedagogical practices, teachers can transform classrooms into spaces of inclusion, creativity, and social change. As education continues to face pressures from neoliberal policies, it is imperative to reassert teachers' performative and reflective roles to nurture humane, equitable learning environments and thereby redefine the agency of teachers.

References

- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research, critique*. Taylor and Francis.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The psychic life of power: Theories in subjection*. Stanford University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Kappa Delta Pi.
- Dharampal. (2000). *The beautiful tree: Indigenous Indian education in the eighteenth century*. Other India Press.
- Fei, F. C. & Sun, W. (2015). Performance studies in China [MOOC lecture]. In R. Schechner, *Introduction to performance studies*. Coursera. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/richard-schechners-introduction-to-performance-studies>.
- Kala, K. V. (2022, August 20). *Syllabusinumappurathe adhyaapanam*. [The teaching

- that is beyond the syllabus]. Mathrubhumi.
- Kala, K. V. (2022, August 21). *Adichuvaaranam, Napkin Katthikkanam*. [Sweep and clean, Incinerate the napkins]. Mathrubhumi.
- Kala, K. V. (2022, August 22). *Annamorukkaana abhyaasam*. [The labour of making meals]. Mathrubhumi.
- Kala, K. V. (2022, August 23). *A plus pedi adhyaapakarilum*. [The fear of a plus among teachers too]. Mathrubhumi.
- Kerala infrastructure and technology for education (KITE). (2020). *First Bell 2.0 "Digital classes through Kite-Victers*. KITE.
- Kotnala, R. (2021, December). Art for reconnecting students with school. *Learning curve*, 63-65. Azim Premji University.
- Kumar, K. (2005). *Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. 2nd ed., Sage.
- Lazzarato, M. (1996). Immaterial labor. In M. Lazzarato, P. Virno & M. Hardt (Eds.), *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics* (pp. 133–147). frontdeskapparatus.com. <https://frontdeskapparatus.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Immaterial-Labor-Maurizio-Lazzarato.pdf>
- Moore, A. (2004). *The good teacher: Dominant discourses in teaching and teacher education*. Routledge.
- National focus group on arts, music, dance and theatre. (2006). *Position paper*. National Council of Educational Research and Training.
- New Education Group-Foundation for Innovation in Research and Education. (NEG-FIRE) (2016). '*Khel se Mel: Social inclusion through play*'. NEG-FIRE
- Piaget, J. (1936). *Origins of intelligence in the child*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Praveen, M. P. (June 25, 2022). Economics lessons imparted through Kathaprasangam. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/economics-lessons-imparted-through-kathaprasangam/article65563782.ece>
- Ramanathan, V. (2005). *The English-vernacular divide: Postcolonial language politics and practice*. Cromwell Press Ltd.
- Ruitenbergh, C. W. (2007). Discourse, theatrical performance, agency: The analytic force of "performativity" in education. In B. S. Stengel (Ed.), *Philosophy of Education*, (260–268). Philosophy of Education Society.
- Sachs, J. (2001). Teacher professional identity: Competing discourses, competing outcomes. *Journal of Education Policy*, 16(2), 149–161. doi:10.1080/02680930116819.
- Sankaran, S (2021). Practices of music education in gurukul and related systems. In P. M. Sarangapani & R. Pappu (Eds.), *Handbook of education systems in South Asia* (pp. 121-146). Springer.
- Sarangapani, P. M. (2003) *Constructing school knowledge: An ethnography of learning in an Indian village*. Sage.
- Sarangapani, P. M., & Pappu, R. (Eds.). (2021) *Handbook of education systems in*

South Asia. Springer.

- Sartre, J. (1957). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. Methuen & Co.
- Schechner, R. (2015a). 'Defining performance' [MOOC lecture]. In R. Schechner, *Introduction to performance studies*. Coursera. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/richard-schechners-introduction-to-performance-studies>
- Schechner, R. (2015b). The seven functions of performance [MOOC lecture]. In R. Schechner, *Introduction to performance studies*. Coursera. <https://www.coursera.org/learn/richard-schechners-introduction-to-performance-studies>
- Turner, V. (1982). *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. https://monoskop.org/images/7/79/Turner_Victor_From_Ritual_to_Theatre.pdf
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.2753/RPO1061-040505036>
- Yandell, J., Ahmed, I., Amin, J., Begum, T., Clarke, I., Dolega, E., Goksungur, S., Khatun, Z., Omar, Y., Shah, S., & Suciu, A. (2024). Knowing me, knowing you: Knowledge, practice and the formation of English teachers. *Changing English*, 31(4), 413-427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1358684X.2024.2384706>

Lekshmi R. is a Research Scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.

lekshmi.r1995@gmail.com

Dripta Piplai (Mondal) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur.

dripta@hss.iitkgp.ac.in