Do We Get More Points if We Take Bigger Risks? Modeling Boundary Setting in Devised Performance with Undergraduate Actors

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In the Classroom, Week Eleven, Fall 2021

It's a rainy morning in November of 2021, in a small dance studio on a large Midwestern university campus. I am leading my undergraduate acting class through their third devised performance workshop, the midway point of our three-week unit. The fifteen students are sprawled out on the floor with markers and brown parcel paper. As I call out prompts, adapted from a workshop I took with Tim Miller in 2015, the students fill in "maps" of their bodies and all of the stories they hold:

> What do you hold in your hands? In your arms?
> What promises have you made with your pinky?
> Who has been on the receiving end of your middle finger?
> Where does anger live in your body? Joy? Grief? Hope?
> Where do you feel different members of your family?

Less than five minutes into a free-writing exercise based on their maps, I notice one student is wiping away tears. Taking a deep breath. Attempting to return to their notebook. Pulling their knees to their chest, burying their face to quiet their sobs. So as not to break the silence and draw additional attention, I scribble down and slip them a note with a reminder that if they need to take care of themself, they can step out of the room, get water, take a walk, even go home, and return when they're ready. The student reads it, nods, and slips out the door; I adjust the remainder of my lesson plan. Instead of inviting students to share sections of what they wrote with the full group, I welcome them to either continue writing or pair up with a scene partner from one of their previous projects to share. Once pairs of students settle, the room fills with excited chatter. With a few minutes left of class, the student returns from the hall and I overhear them confess to their group, "I don't know what happened. I should be fine by now. She died over a month ago. I should be able to do this." I debate stepping in to say… something—I'm not sure what. I don't want them to feel like I'm eavesdropping, so I let it go and gather the class to give instructions for the next workshop.[1]

For next class they will need to bring in "an object with a story behind it" that they could use as a prop to develop a two-minute performance. As an example, I pull a disposable razor—grabbed off the bathroom counter in my rush out the door that morning—out of my bag and tell a story of my own:

I learned to shave three times. First, at eleven years old. Concerned that the other girls would make fun of my leg hair, my mother just said, 'it's time.' Oh, important context for this story: I'm transgender. So, picture eleven-year-old me about a foot shorter, wearing basketball shorts and a ponytail. I asked her, 'How do I do it?' and Mom said 'Carefully.' So I made my way upstairs, started the shower and carefully [sliding still-capped razor up, ankle to knee, wincing]. I don't use any soap. I arrive to the first day of middle school with smooth, Band-Aid-covered legs. When you're trans, you've got to do puberty twice. So the second time, when it was time for me to learn to shave my face at twenty-seven, it was right at the beginning of the pandemic, and there was no one there to teach me. But how hard could it be? I figured it couldn't be that different from shaving my legs. I used soap this time—learned my lesson! I lathered up and [sliding razor against the grain, neck to chin; the men in the room cringe] gave myself the worst razor burn of my life and too many in-grown hairs to count. The third time, when the hair had grown back and my face had healed, I swallowed my pride and called up my friend, Gabe. And over zoom, in my bathroom, talking it through step-by-step, he taught me how to shave.

In the last few minutes of our fourth devising workshop two days later, the class stands in a large circle. Pairs of students just worked through several rounds of rehearsing, refining, and incorporating their props into their two-minute stories. I invite anyone interested to share their monologue-in-progress. After about thirty seconds of silence, one of the typically more outspoken students hesitantly looks around the room before saying, "I guess I can go." She puts on a black baseball cap embroidered with the university logo and recounts a story of coming out as a transgender woman at her on-campus job. As she describes the emotional turbulence that came with the experience, she removes the cap and turns it over in her hands, avoiding eye contact with the rest of the circle. The normally confident, energetic former captain of her high school debate team trails off. Forcing a smile, she finishes her monologue with an energetic but awkward "so... yeah!"[2]

Learning and Looking Back

What struck me about those moments was not necessarily the shift in these two students' emotional states, but rather the pressure they seemed to feel to draw upon such raw and painful experiences in our class devising workshops. Months later, during Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Consent in the Acting Classroom" virtual workshop, I found myself returning to these moments from the fall semester. The facilitator, Kim Shively, emphasized the importance of recognizing the power dynamics between actors and director in theatrical settings and students and instructors in classroom settings. Such power imbalances complicate consent because they often cultivate

situations in which students feel a need to "say yes to survive" (protect their academic standing, their role, their relationship with the instructor, their perceived chances at surviving the theatre industry later on). This is often when boundaries are crossed (Shively 2022). "Saying yes to survive" may take the form of my student's insistence that they "should" draw upon their grief and "should be able to handle it." It might also manifest in a student sharing a traumatic story she clearly wasn't comfortable telling. Most of the time in the classroom or rehearsal room, boundaries are set in response to what is explicitly stated in the text or the staging suggested by a scene partner, instructor or director. In the context of devising workshops in which students generate texts themselves, theoretically, they have more agency to work within their own boundaries than they do when I assign scripted scenes. Was there something I said as I was facilitating the exercises that implied I was expecting students to make themselves so vulnerable?

Shively's overview of her own process of creating the conditions under which more fully informed, affirmative consent is possible in the classroom further illuminated the need to pay attention to what is typically left unsaid. The "Consent in the Acting Classroom" workshop modeled examples of how instructors might talk through boundaries with students in scene work, but it also emphasized the necessity of defining explicit expectations from the start of the semester. This included expectations for everyday class participation, for how students will be assessed, for how they will receive feedback, and for how both the students and instructor can communicate boundaries (Shively 2022). During the devising workshops in my own acting class, beyond the "learning to shave" story I told as an example, I had not named many explicit expectations. I had hoped to invite creativity and avoid prescribing what the performances "should" look like. On the other hand, in leaving my guidelines so wide-open, there was no opportunity for conversation about what I *did not* expect from my students or what boundaries might be necessary as we draw inspiration from our own lives. Without an explicit counter narrative, the prevailing norms and narratives of academic and artistic culture end up filling the gaps. Students are left to assume what is expected of them. Someone must speak up if the instructor asks the group if anyone is ready to share; you must earn the instructor's approval and avoid disappointing them to be a good student or do well in their class; it's normal, even noble, to suffer for the sake of your art; great art is born from pain and trauma.

I share this story as an illustrative example of an instance in which consent in the classroom can become fraught. The context of autobiographical devised performance with undergraduate

actors offers an opportunity to examine dynamics present more broadly in performance-based courses because pressures to meet academic expectations alongside the workshops' demand for personal exposure are brought to the forefront. The competing, sometimes conflicting, social factors surrounding academic theatre can leave students saying "yes" to survive the class, project, or exercise. Building a fully informed, consent-based classroom requires a holistic approach to modeling boundary-setting for and with student artists. In order to create a foundation for such a classroom, it is necessary to make visible the structural, cultural, and social forces that complicate consent and address why boundaries exist in the first place. In my experience as a student and university educator in the United States, I have found that students are given little opportunity to consider their own boundaries in academic settings, let alone exercise them. As Kim Shively and Susanne Shawyer point out, historically actor training has encouraged ignoring one's own boundaries, explaining, "training that celebrates the quality of vulnerability as essential for creativity and good acting may dissuade students from establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries necessary for protecting their health and autonomy" (Shawyer and Shively 2022). While the #MeToo Movement has prompted a massive increase in public dialogue on college campuses and in U.S. popular culture, discussions tend to maintain a near-exclusive focus on sexual consent rather than consent as a broadly applicable practice across social settings. Even with increased conceptual awareness, Shively and Shawyer note that, in practice, "identifying personal boundaries is often a new concept for the undergraduate theatre student" (Shawyer and Shively 2022). Given these cultural circumstances, to make consent-based practices accessible in the classroom—to provide students with the opportunity for the kind of repetitive, intentional practice in identifying and exercising boundaries that Shively and Shawyer advocate for—we also need to give them concrete frameworks for identifying and communicating explicitly about risk.

For the purposes of this essay, I am defining boundaries as healthy limits an actor puts in place to manage risk to themselves and/or their relationships. Shively and Shawyer explain that students must first "develop an awareness of the state of their boundaries" before they can meaningfully exercise them (Shawyer and Shively 2022). Yet, in my own classroom, I have found that my students have struggled to identify "where" their boundaries were when I framed them as something existing in the abstract within individuals. They found it difficult to distinguish between content and activities that had potential to cross their personal boundaries and those that could productively challenge them to step outside of their "comfort zones." In their essay, "From Safe

Spaces to Brave Spaces," Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens observe a similar confusion among students and instructors alike as they engage in challenging work requiring vulnerability. They caution that in these contexts there is a danger of conflating safety with comfort in a way that can impede growth (Arao and Clemens 2013). To counteract this conflation, I advocate for an action-based understanding of boundaries. They are an active, intentional response to the environment and the people around us. Much in the way that Chelsea Pace employs "fences" as a visual metaphor for establishing physical boundaries in *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (Pace 2020), rooting boundaries more broadly in concrete, direct action can offer clarity in communication and grant the actor agency. Additionally, framing boundaries in direct relation to risk in this way opens up an opportunity to identify and explicitly name potential for harm, power dynamics, and cultural expectations. Rather than searching internally or debating "where should my boundaries be?" the focus of the conversation can shift to why and how we can enact boundaries.

Building from the ideas and practices Shively presents in the "Consent in the Acting Classroom Workshop" and Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Best Practices" (Rikard 2022) which provide guidance on how to set and communicate boundaries, this essay will propose a series of tools that may help educators and directors facilitate frank and open conversations about the decision-making processes that go into boundary-setting and giving informed consent. I do not intend to make any generalizable claims about the efficacy of these tools as pedagogical interventions; I've yet to have the opportunity to test them in any systematic way. Rather, this essay serves as an account—as accurate as my memory allows—of my own emergent practice-as-research as a teacher; it outlines what I witnessed in the classroom, how I responded in the moment, and how I shifted my practice. In the following sections, drawing upon my own background in theatre for social change, I will lay out how Theatrical Intimacy Education's work around consent and boundaries may be put into productive conversation with applied theatre's work around risk. Then, I will describe the ways that I have engaged in conversations with my students about risk and boundary-setting. These descriptions will offer an overview of how those discussions played out in practice, how students responded initially, and how they continued engaging with the concepts and language beyond individual lessons. Finally, combining concepts from intimacy direction, applied theatre, and trial-and-error pedagogical praxis, I will propose a framework and

tool that my fellow instructors might use to facilitate conversations about risk, boundaries, and consent in their own classrooms.

Putting Applied Theatre and Theatrical Intimacy in Dialogue

The field of applied theatre offers theory, practices, and language that can productively be put into conversation with those currently being developed by and for theatrical intimacy directors and educators alike. Because applied theatre practitioners are often engaged with projects exploring issues related to inequity and social justice with marginalized communities and/or youth participants, questions of power, agency, and risk are at the core of the work we do. In her introduction to *Risk, Participation and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, Alice O'Grady highlights the layered and paradoxical meanings of "risk" in community-engaged art, writing,

> Risk and uncertainty are now regularly conflated in common discourse. In the contemporary world risk means danger; high risk means a lot of danger. Risk is largely something to be avoided or, at least, carefully calculated to minimize damage. In general, people avoid exposing themselves to unnecessary risks. However, in the world of art and, more specifically, performance, risk has a different inflection. In this domain risk is seen as a necessary and integral part of the creative process (O'Grady 2017).

While risk-taking is praised and encouraged in artistic contexts and can lead to participants developing new skills, building relationships, making discoveries, O'Grady cautions,

> However, against this rather idealized backdrop of agency and empowerment, it is essential to interrogate where risk is located within participatory performance. Within the frame of play, what is at stake is not always clearly defined or made explicit. Where does the risk lie in opening up form and structure? Who is at risk and to what extent are they aware of those risks? Participatory practice can be understood as interplay between artists/performers taking risks and making themselves vulnerable and audience members/participants being encouraged to take risks through varying degrees of physical involvement. This interplay generates paradoxical feelings of vulnerability and agency on both sides (O'Grady 2017).

Here, O'Grady distinguishes between the creative risk of taking a nontraditional approach to form and the emotional and social risks of vulnerability in front of an audience or with a group of fellow workshop participants. The level of vulnerability a performance requires among different members of the group, even when they are all participating in the same activity, can vary widely and is influenced by power dynamics between performers, facilitators, and audiences; social identity

markers; trauma; and overall cultural context. This differentiation that O'Grady makes aligns with the theory underpinning Theatrical Intimacy Education's framing of consent as contextual, conditional, and revocable (Rikard 2022). Furthermore, TIE's broad definition of boundaries as encompassing the physical, the personal, the cultural, and the professional echoes O'Grady's emphasis on facilitators' need to attend to multiple layers of risk facing participants.

Like Shively in "Consent in the Acting Classroom," applied theatre practitioner and scholar Clark Baim encourages facilitators and instructors to pay deliberate attention to what is being asked of participants during the creative process and how power dynamics in the room may impact the level of vulnerability participants agree to take on (Baim 2017). Given that applied theatre practices frequently draw directly upon participants' lived experiences for purposes ranging from ensemble building to illustrating how structural oppression impacts us at the individual and community level, projects can demand very high levels of risk and vulnerability from them. Drawing upon drama therapy and social work praxis, Baim proposes the Drama Spiral, which he describes as "a practical decision-making tool intended to help theatre and arts practitioners to negotiate the complex, contested, and inherently risky terrain of personal stories […] and is designed to offer a clear and coherent model for safely regulating the degree of distance and focus in drama-based processes, from the fictional to the highly personal." (Baim 2017). The outer rings of the spiral represent creative activity at the metaphorical or fictional level and circle inward with each new ring representing stories which are increasingly personal and sensitive for the participants (80). The six rings, beginning with the outermost (lowest risk or least vulnerable), moving inward toward the center (highest risk or most vulnerable) include:

1. Games and creative activities
2. Fictional/distant stories
3. Fictionalized personal stories
4. Positive personal stories
5. Stories of resolved difficulties
6. Stories of unresolved difficulties

The facilitator, in dialogue with participants, guides the workshop or rehearsal process "so that the material and issues explored are pitched at the right level of aesthetic and emotional distance in order to maintain safety, ethical responsibility, and respect for personal boundaries" (Baim 2017). As the group moves through the spiral, they engage in a repeated cycle of 1. identification of aims, needs, and boundaries; 2. exploration of stories through generative activities and/or rehearsal; 3.

informal presentation of works in progress, shared among members of the group; and 4. evaluation and reflection.

The facilitator uses feedback throughout this cycle to inform how they move the group or individual participants closer to the center of the spiral, encouraging more vulnerability, or further from the center, mitigating risk by adding aesthetic elements which "fictionalize" parts of participant's stories.[3] Although developed for a different context, Pace's protocols for theatrical intimacy, using desexualized language, choreography, and de-roling (Pace 2020), can function as techniques for increasing emotional distance. Across the contexts of staging intimacy, autobiographical performance, and the acting classroom, Baim's description of the facilitator's managing risk and vulnerability as "distance regulation" may serve as a useful visual metaphor for instructors as we aim to challenge students while encouraging establishment of and respect for boundaries.

Back in the Classroom, Week Twelve, Fall 2021

Since I had used Baim's model successfully several times to inform my design of community-engaged, personal narrative-based workshops with youth, it was the tool I shared in my first attempt to navigate conversations about risks and boundaries with my undergraduate acting students. Although we had talked about boundaries and consent when it came to touch and physicality during rehearsals for their scene studies, the devising workshops I described in the introduction highlighted the need to extend those concepts to emotional vulnerability. The following class period was focused on planning rehearsals and drafting proposals for their final projects, so I decided to emphasize reflection on risk as part of that decision-making process. The project itself tasked students with either refining and further developing one of their performances from a previous unit or creating a new performance drawing upon techniques practiced in the devising workshops. I opened the conversation calling attention to a frequent message we get as actors and artists: "Take big risks!" I explained that most of the time, that directive is meant to refer to creative risks like making bold artistic choices or taking a new approach to your work. I contrasted this with the emotional risks of tackling heavy material and drawing upon your own experiences to create original work. I introduced Baim's understanding of risk in staging personal stories as a tool that might help students visualize the kinds of vulnerability that staging our own

experiences can demand from us as performers. Drawing the Drama Spiral on the chalkboard and labelling its six circles, I explained,

> It absolutely can be valuable to create work based on experiences that fall within these inner circles. Sometimes it does result in beautiful, provocative art. At the same time, I want to emphasize that it's important to consider the emotional impact. Before you dive into a story that's sitting at level five or six for you right now, you'll want to think about whether that is an experience you are ready to engage with and live in for the next two and a half weeks. Is this something you want to return to over and over in class? Is this a story you feel comfortable sharing with the whole class?

One student raised his hand and asked the completely earnest question: "Do we earn more points if we pick a higher risk level, like if I pick a level five or six instead of a level three? Or do we lose points?"

After my initial response of—and these were my exact words—"No! It has nothing to do with your grade. For the love of God, please do not traumatize yourself for the sake of this class," I appreciated the opportunity to reiterate why I was sharing the Drama Spiral with them and to clarify my expectations. One of the benefits of addressing risk head-on was that it invited direct questions like this one. It allowed me the chance to return to the rubric to review with the students what they were, and importantly, *were not* being evaluated on in their performances. It opened up space for further discussion of how the Drama Spiral was intended as a tool that we could use together to engage in difficult material safely and in a way that prioritized mental and emotional health. To model how boundary-setting might work in tandem with the Drama Spiral, I explained that, as artists, we need to be conscious of the vulnerability involved when we are working with material related to a difficult personal experience, especially one we are still processing. I offered a few reminders:

> You get to make the choice about which parts of your own experience you share. You may have a powerful story, and if right here, right now, you are not ready to engage with it, you can always come back to it later. You can still explore that story after this class ends. The amount of time that has passed since a difficult experience doesn't always mean it's 'resolved.' In my own writing, I have had stories I knew I wanted to tell, but it took almost ten years before I was actually ready to engage with them in performance; there are others that I've used to create art that is only for myself and that I don't plan to share with an audience. I have a boundary that those pieces stay in my notebook. If you do have an experience that you want to draw upon that you think might fall within one of those innermost circles of the Drama Spiral, let me know. We can talk about techniques you can use to get the emotional truth of the story across while keeping the vulnerability it takes to share that experience at a manageable level.

A couple of students took me up on the offer to help them identify some emotional and aesthetic distance regulation techniques that could work within the pieces they devised: working with visual metaphor, movement, repetition, episodic styles of storytelling. The young woman who had shared her workplace coming out story in the previous workshop told me she had been considering continuing to develop the piece for the final but upon further reflection decided that it was not an experience she felt ready to dwell in for the rest of the semester. She added, "In the spirit of not traumatizing myself for this class project, I'm thinking I'll go back to my monologue from *Hidden: A Gender*." I affirmed her choice and told her I looked forward to seeing her take that role further. To be honest, I felt relieved.

As much as I—as a trans artist who has found that autobiographical performance is one of very few ways our stories make it into the theatre at all— would have loved to see her write her experience onto the stage, I was glad that she had the time and space to choose not to. I worried that in the example monologue I shared, since I told a trans-specific story, I may have set an implicit expectation that students should draw upon fraught experiences related to their own identities. At the same time, having experienced this myself as a student, I was hyperaware of the intense social pressures trans people face, when we choose to be visible, to tell stories about transition and coming out for the purposes of proving the validity of our identities or educating our peers. When our boundaries concerning the intimate details of our lives are acknowledged at all, they are frequently crossed in the name of "starting a conversation."[4]. At least in my classroom, that pressure could be alleviated enough for "no" to be a viable option.

Limitations

While the discussion of the Drama Spiral did result in a few students taking a greater consideration of risk into account as they chose the direction of their final project, this approach had limits in the context of this particular class. First, Clark Baim designed his model with a different context in mind; it works best in group applied theatre and therapeutic settings where the facilitator/practitioner closely monitors the full group or individual over a much longer period of time, usually around a much narrower set of experiences. With the focus on navigating risk in relation to trauma, the tool is best suited for emotional risk and boundaries. It has proved helpful to me as a facilitator of applied theatre in its framework for ongoing communication and awareness of the emotional risks my workshop exercises might demand of participants. Yet, it could not

translate smoothly into the college acting classroom. In the educational context, there are additional layers of risk to navigate related to academic structures and roles, the demands of graded assignments, and relationships with peers. The Drama Spiral model, if used effectively, relies heavily on the instructor/facilitator guiding the process of managing risk. It is difficult, especially for young artists, to recognize in the midst of the creative process when they might be entering emotionally risky territory and what tools might help them add aesthetic or emotional distance in the moment. If all fifteen of my students are working on projects independently, I cannot engage in the work of facilitating distance regulation for all of them at once. The following semester, I adapted my approach to the discussion of risk and boundary-setting, hoping to provide the students with tools that they might be able to pick up quickly and use on their own.

Spring 2022: Broadening Understandings of Risks and Boundaries

The following semester I taught two sections of the same undergraduate acting class, each with sixteen students. I had attended Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Best Practices" workshop with Laura Rikard in January and "Consent in the Acting Classroom" with Kim Shively in March and had been incorporating language around consent and checking in with scene partners throughout the semester (Rikard 2022) (Shively 2022). To better prepare this group of students to engage in a series of devising workshops, I moved our discussion of risk and boundary-setting to the beginning of the unit. Drawing upon the language that Rikard used in the "Best Practices" workshop, describing boundaries as personal, physical, cultural, and professional, I created a drew up a chart (pictured in Figure 1) that correlated each type of boundary to a type of risk. In this iteration, personal boundaries were set in response to emotional risk, physical boundaries were set in response to physical risk, and professional and cultural boundaries overlapped with social and creative risk.
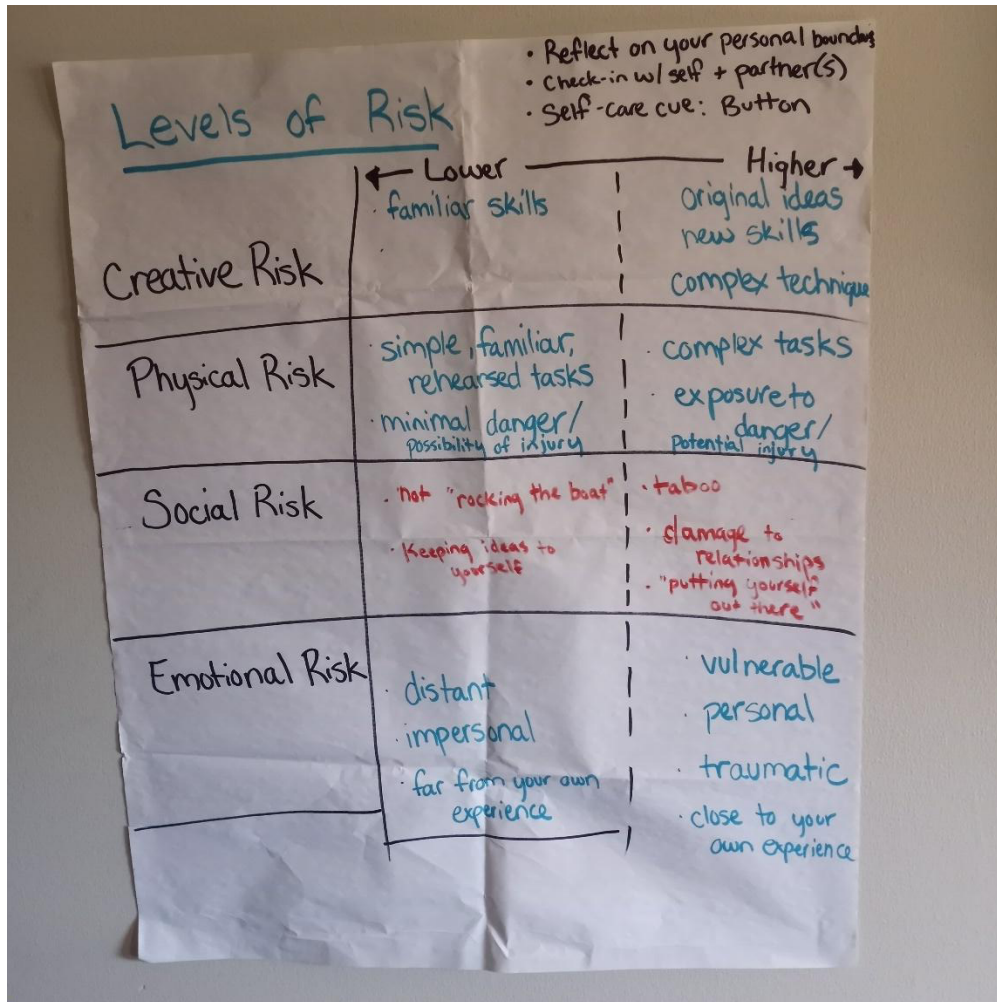
Figure 1. Hand-drawn chart with examples of creative, physical, social, and emotional risks divided into "lower-risk" and "higher-risk" categories.

I encouraged students to think of risk as a spectrum, offering examples of how a lower risk vs. higher risk activity might look and feel. I began with creative risk, since that is the most explicit and salient when moving from working with scripted texts to devising performance from scratch. Lower risk activities might include those where one is familiar with the forms, techniques, and ideas they are using. Unfamiliar forms, new or complex techniques, and original ideas represent higher levels of risk. Physical risk referred generally to the level of danger and potential for injury or illness. Influenced by Baim's Drama Spiral, I defined activities carrying low emotional risk as those that are far from one's own experience and those with higher emotional risk as very close to one's own experience, vulnerable, highly personal, or potentially traumatic. For the category of social risk, I confessed to the students that I had been making the poster that morning and ran out of time before it was time for class to start. I wrote in that activities carrying high levels of social

risk have the potential to damage relationships. We brainstormed other examples that fit within the category of social risk; students offered "not rocking the boat" and "keeping your ideas to yourself" as lower-risk and "putting yourself out there" and "taboo" as higher-risk. Reinforcing the idea that, like consent, risk and boundaries are contextual, conditional, and vary from person to person, I gave the following scenario as an example of how one might assess risk and set boundaries accordingly:

> Imagine I'm working on creating a performance and my scene partner is Simone Biles. Simone suggests that we end our scene with a choreographed dance number, and for the big finale we both do back handsprings across the stage, stick the landing, and finish with jazz hands. When she asks how that works with my boundaries, here's what I'm taking into consideration: I have a little bit of experience with dance, but I'm not exactly confident in my skills in that area. That might present a bit of an emotional risk and a social risk, since there's a chance I might feel embarrassed dancing in front of you all, but I would say it's a level of risk that is within my boundaries. As for the back handspring idea, while it sounds like a spectacular way to finish the piece, and while it carries a relatively low amount of risk for Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, that particular choreography carries a very high level of physical risk for me. To prevent a serious injury, I'm going to have to say that part of the choreography does not work with my boundaries. Then, Simone and I can have a conversation about how we might adjust our ending in a way that will work within both of our boundaries.

To be completely honest, I worried that such an in-depth discussion of all of the potential risks involved in devised performance might have discouraged students from taking risks, even positive ones, at all. Aside from a chuckle or two imagining me choreographing a dance number with Simone Biles, my overview was met with mostly silence and serious nods.

However, as the devising unit progressed, I found quite the opposite to be true. In our post-workshop conversations and their weekly journal entries, I noticed a marked shift in both the way that students were discussing risk and the depth of their reflections. They had adopted the language of creative risk, emotional risk, social risk, and vulnerability to distinguish between their experiences of working on scripted scenes and monologues and creating devised performances. They celebrated moments where they pushed themselves to take more risks in areas where they held back earlier in the semester. Many spoke of excitement at the creative freedom offered by the devising process. Yet, they noted that the unstructured nature came with high levels of creative risk; at the beginning of the process the thousands of artistic choices available felt intimidating and overwhelming. They talked about the social risks they were engaging in, making suggestions they were not sure their collaborators would accept as well as their surprise when those ideas were met

with enthusiasm. Others spoke to the heightened vulnerability that devising demands, especially when working with personal narrative. A common theme across students' reflections was a sense of "feeling exposed" when presenting one's own writing or performing "as oneself" in ways that they had not in their monologues and scene studies. Many noted feeling a greater sense of risk, even when they acknowledged that the subject matter of their previous projects appeared more emotionally loaded. For some students, interrogating and sitting with those dissonant observations seemed to allow them to articulate what risks were present. From there, they could decide whether those feelings of exposure or discomfort were a hinderance to the work they wanted to do or something they wanted to lean into and how that distinction could inform their future projects.[5]

One More Factor: Risks, Boundaries, and Support

The final element informing my current thinking on the relationship between risks and boundaries in the acting classroom and in devised performance with undergraduates came from my students' responses on the end-of-course evaluations in the spring of 2022. On the anonymous evaluation form, students were invited to choose two or three open-ended prompts to respond to from a list of nine options, filling in the blank to complete the sentence. I had been using some version of these written evaluations for three-and-a-half years, and it had always included a variation of the prompt, "I was most willing to take risks in [class discussion/activities/written work] when..."[6] In previous semesters, students had rarely elected to respond to that prompt. In contrast, in the spring of 2022, the "risk" prompt had one of the highest response rates. Mentions of risk-taking additionally came up in prompts about what students found memorable or meaningful about the course. I have compiled a selection of their responses in Figure 2.

Prompt
I was most willing to take risks in my acting/creative exercises when...

Responses
...I knew I had a group of supportive individuals who were also taking risks.
...I was in a small group of people because I was with others who were also taking risks and giving feedback.
...whenever I got confirmation from my peers through our group work. This is because knowing that I was doing an okay job made me feel a lot more comfortable and a lot less scared.
...when the group took things seriously because it made me feel more comfortable.
…I was willing to take risks in my acting and creative exercises because I felt this was a judgement free zone and I could express myself how I wanted to.
... I knew that everyone was coming in with an open mind and ready to support each other because we made a classroom agreement at the beginning of the semester and everyone in the class, including [the instructor], was extremely supportive.

Prompt
What I think I will remember five years from now is... because...

Responses
...setting the tone in new and possibly scary environments. In this class, others taking risks motivated me to let my guard down and it really showed me about allowing a tone to be set. If I can enter a new setting with confidence, I can at least put my best foot forward.
... Early in the semester all we did was focus on how we need to act amongst each other and what ways we could guarantee a safe/supportive space for us to perform because I feel that is necessary in any work/creative environment honestly.
... How important a guaranteed supportive group to work with is because having a judge-free zone is crucial to tapping into your genuine interests and abilities.
...how different/fun this class was because it pushed me to exit my comfort zone in a very safe space.
... how welcomed I felt by the instructor and students to be myself and take risks because everyone is on their own path and learning as they go.[7]

Figure 2. Student responses to end-or-course written evaluations for The Craft of Acting, May 2022.

In these responses, there are a couple of major themes that I want to highlight. First, students consistently reported that the main factor that made them feel open to taking risks was having supportive relationships with their peers. In and of itself, the connection between performers feeling more confident and creative when they feel they can trust their peers is not especially revolutionary; ensemble building is a standard practice across acting classes and rehearsal processes in educational settings. What I want to emphasize here is that the students themselves are identifying this sense of community and positive peer relationships as the most important factor in their willingness to take risks and one of the most memorable parts of their experience in the course. This pattern reveals the salience of perceived social risk in the classroom

setting. At the same time, it offers insight into how to reduce social risks: building a community where students can feel certain of the support of their peers. Beyond the explicit discussion of risk and what helped them feel supported, the importance that the students in my spring semester classes placed on their relationships to one another is reflected in the language that they use to describe their experiences. As a couple of the responses pointed to, we crafted a community agreement together at the start of the semester, defining what a supportive learning environment would look like for them as a group, what they needed from one another to feel confident expressing themselves creatively, and what actions we would all agree to take to make that possible. The phrases, "judgement-free zone" and "coming in with an open mind" are direct references to the community agreement, as is the acknowledgement that "everyone is on their own path and learning as they go" and the commitment to actively demonstrate support and encouragement for one another. The response that ends with "I can at least put my best foot forward" borrows the phrase from the closing ritual that brought us back together at the end of each class period. For my own pedagogical praxis, these reflections from my students have reaffirmed the importance of community-building in the classroom and clarified a key element of navigating risk and boundaries: support.

Below (Figure 3), I have laid out an updated model for thinking and talking about risk and boundaries with students that reflects the role of supportive relationships and community. I have divided types of risk into two categories, the first focused on the individual, encompassing physical, emotional, personal, and creative risks, and the second focused on the interpersonal, encompassing social, cultural, academic, and professional risks. The individual and interpersonal categories of risk reflect the framework of boundaries I offered earlier, foregrounding the focus on potential impact to the actors and their relationships. For the questions actors (or directors/instructors/other artists) might use to assess risks, most begin with "How could this choice..." This framing emphasizes the actor's agency in their decisions surrounding consent and setting boundaries, and it can be applied on a very small scale. One of the drawbacks of my earlier discussions of risk with my students, particularly the one that engaged the Drama Spiral, was that reflecting on risk could be seen as a single, consequential decision. The much smaller scale of questions beginning with "How could this choice..." allows for an ongoing conversation where setting a boundary does not have to mean abandoning a project completely. Over the course of a

rehearsal process we make hundreds of choices, and staying within boundaries, thereby mitigating risk, can be a minor adjustment to just one of them.

Key Ideas

1. **Risk**: potential for harm or danger; it is conditional and contextual, tied to power, cultural norms and expectations, and is always present in multiple forms but to varying degrees.

2. **Boundaries:** healthy limits an actor puts in place to manage risk to themselves and/or their relationships.

3. **Support:** intervention that decreases potential for harm/danger and/or increases certainty and clarity in relationships and expectations.

4. The greater the risk, the greater the need for support(s).

5. When an actor is taking on a challenge that involves a high level of risk in one domain, supports in other domains can help them remain within their boundaries and continue engaging in their work.

If risk is a spectrum, where does your choice fall? Is it within your boundaries?

$\longleftarrow$ _____ $\longrightarrow$

Lower risk   Boundary   Higher risk
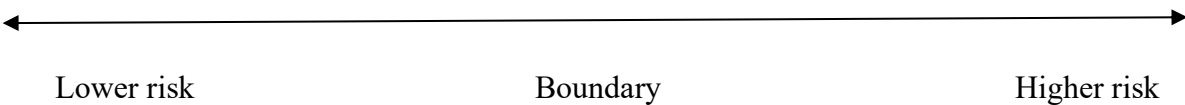
Questions for Assessing Risk

Individual Risks: How could this choice impact me?

Physical: How could this choice impact my body? How likely is this choice to result in injury, illness, or exposure to harsh environmental elements?
Emotional: How is this choice likely to impact me emotionally? How vulnerable does it require me to be?
Personal: How likely is it that this choice will ask me to challenge or compromise my values and/or beliefs?
Creative: How might this choice challenge my artistic skills, my thinking, or my approach to working? What are the chances it will fail?

Interpersonal Risks: How could this choice impact my relationships or standing with:
     Social: my peers and/or friends?
     Cultural: my family, community, and/or faith?
     Academic: my instructor, school, and/or this class?
     Professional: my colleagues, supervisor, and/or industry?

Figure 3. Risk, Boundaries, Support: A model for the classroom and rehearsal studio

Beyond individual actors setting boundaries to manage risk, those around them can help lower the overall level of risk by offering support. The higher the level of risk, the more support the actor will need. Risk, as Alice O'Grady notes, can be experienced as both literal danger and high levels of uncertainty (O'Grady 2017). To address the latter, support can look like clarifying expectations, strengthening relationships, and offering opportunities for practice. In each area that there is risk, there are also possibilities for support, and those can be in conversation with one another.

To offer an example of what this model might look like in practice, I will return to the scenario from the fall of 2021, which I described at beginning of this essay. In the second devising workshop, where my student shared a coming out story she was not emotionally prepared to tell in public, I can imagine the most relevant risks that she was managing in that moment were emotional, social, and academic. She ended up taking on a high level of emotional risk, telling a story that required her to engage with memories of a traumatic experience and a high level of vulnerability. Thinking about the interpersonal risks present (How will this impact my relationship with the instructor, the class, my peers?) could have allowed for an identification of unspoken social expectations and classroom norms (someone has to say something if the instructor asks; it's going to be awkward if there is silence; the class can't continue if no one responds to the professor). In that moment, being able to name the interpersonal risks at play in and of itself may have helped the student compare those risks and make choices that prioritized her own emotional wellbeing. It also might have given me as the instructor a framework to identify what risks might be present and where I might be able to offer support. Here, that might have looked like clarifying my expectations and intent in leaving that last few minutes of class open. I might have said, "I want to hold this space for you to share your work with the group if you want to;" "I know you just started working on this and you can share your work-in-progress, unpolished as it may be;" "it is fine if no one feels ready to share."

This model could also be used in conversation with Kim Shively's advice to provide students with clear and explicit guidelines in preparation for their participation in class (Shively 2022). For this case study, those explicit guidelines for participation could also function as support to help students manage risk and work within their boundaries. That may have looked like what I did the following semester: give an overview of what the workshop process would entail the class period beforehand and suggest considerations they may want to make in choosing a story. The

following semester, I told students, "Your assignment is to go home and choose an object that holds some significance for you. In class, you'll be telling the story behind it and crafting that into a two-minute monologue. You'll want to choose a story that you will be comfortable telling to a partner and a small group and repeating five to six times in a row."

Had this student chosen to continue developing a performance based on her coming out story for the final project, or if it were part of a devising process that extended beyond a single class period, we might have had a more in-depth discussion about managing emotional risk while acknowledging and grappling with specific cultural risks. An assessment of cultural risk, in this classroom, would consider the question: How might this choice impact my relationship to my community? In this student's case, "community" encompasses the people with whom she lives, works, studies as well as a much more dispersed, identity-based transgender community. In everyday life, for many trans people, coming out carries immense risk of rejection by family, faith-based organizations, and our local communities. Unsurprisingly, managing such uncertainty in one's foundational interpersonal relationships is often an emotionally volatile process. Within the classroom, the level of risk to her standing within the community was relatively low. She had previously played roles in class that dealt explicitly with trans identity including Rue in Leanna Keyes' *Doctor Voynich and Her Children* and Herman in Kate Bornstein's *Hidden: A Gender* (Keyes 2021; Bornstein 1994). Both performances had been well-received by her classmates. Rather than serving as a coming out, her narrative would be recounted to a small group of people she knew would be affirming. Here, the sense of classroom community could function as a source of support.

Cultural risks surrounding her relationship to the transgender community are less obvious on the surface but can be equally salient, as I discussed earlier in this essay. These may involve decisions about how to navigate intracommunity respectability politics and pressures from a heteronormative society to be "representatives" for all who share our identities. These may also encompass contending with existing cultural narratives and media portrayals which have stereotyped and dehumanized trans and gender nonconforming people for decades. Support, in the devising process, might be dramaturgical; which parts of her experience does she want to emphasize? What opportunities are there to have agency over how she frames the story now, even if the experience she is recounting is one where she felt disempowered? Which artists might she

look to for examples of performance styles and storytelling techniques that challenge or complicate the dominant cultural narratives that frame her as Other?

When we are staging narratives and experiences of marginalization, it is especially vital to consider how individual and interpersonal risk factors influence one another. Seeing boundary-setting as a protective action limiting a specific risk can be a helpful framing, particularly in instances where the level of interpersonal risk varies depending on the context. It is within the particular consideration of cultural risk that I see this model as potentially in conversation with Kaja Dunn's work. Dunn calls for intimacy directors to incorporate critical race methodology into our practice:

> "How do you take what we're doing with intimacy choreography but also look at the dimension of differential racial embodiment? How do I have to think about consent differently when I'm working with Black and Latinx and Asian bodies on stage in relation to these white bodies onstage? Because it says something different than if I have all white bodies" (Fairfield, et. al 2019).

The model I have offered may serve as an entry point for artistic and pedagogical shifts engaging these questions in the classroom and the rehearsal hall more broadly. However, to be an effective tool for boundary-setting with student artists, it has to be used in a way that acknowledges how the individual and interpersonal elements of risk which complicate consent are always simultaneously present and interconnected. Approaching them in isolation, it's all-too-easy to prioritize one type of risk over another and dismiss necessary boundaries, creating conditions where students are subject to "mandatory self-erasure and negative stereotyping" within unacknowledged racial hierarchies (Dunn 2019). This tool can be used to encourage increased awareness and explicit naming of power dynamics and attention to the meanings read onto racialized and gendered bodies. It can be effective only when the instructor or director demonstrates trust in students to identify risks, honors their lived experience as a valid source of knowledge, and offers support without demanding justification when boundaries are put in place.

Conclusion

Though some of the considerations I have shared throughout this piece are specific to devised performance with student actors, many more are applicable across a variety of artistic processes in educational settings. The heightened vulnerability required in autobiographical devised work demands particular attention to risk. However, the dynamics of power, identity, and

unspoken expectations that surface in the stories I have shared here are nonetheless present in the traditional classroom and acting studio. With that in mind, the model I have proposed in this essay for facilitating dialogue around risk, boundaries, and support in creative practice is intended for teachers, students, directors, and actors alike. Rooted in applied theatre and intimacy direction theory and practice, I have framed boundary-setting as an active response and ongoing process in managing both individual and interpersonal risks. It can serve as a practical tool for students, providing a framework in which they may practice identifying and exercising boundaries. Additionally, it can serve as a tool for instructors and directors to identify potential supports and to be intentional about the nature and extent of the risks we ask students to engage in as part of the creative process. While this model does not, and quite frankly cannot, address every possible risk that students may encounter in the acting classroom, my hope is that it can be used a starting point for dialogue, and a means to establish a shared vocabulary so that we may better communicate what risks are salient and what kind of support can help us manage them. I hope that it may be used as a tool in consent-based directing practices where the question "How does that work with your boundaries?" is followed by "What kind of support do you need?" Finally, I hope that putting boundaries and consent in conversation with risk and support may help my fellow educators cultivate classroom cultures that are more fully informed, consent-based, and intentionally community-oriented.

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[1] Notes on classroom anecdotes: I did not begin this practice-as-research with any intention to formally document or share it, let alone organize it as an IRB-approved human subjects research study. Still, I want to acknowledge the steps I've taken to maintain students' anonymity when possible and obtain their consent where I've included specific detail about their stories. Contacting students to obtain consent for this project was significantly complicated by my own transition in employment. I taught the classes described in this piece while I was working as an adjunct lecturer in the department where I earned my PhD the year before. I began collecting my thoughts to write at the end of the spring of 2022, expecting to be able to easily follow up with students whose work or stories ended up in the final version of the piece. Then, in July, I was offered and accepted a full-time contract at a different university, so by the time I finished the article in September, my previous institutional log-in had been deactivated. I no longer had access to my class rosters, former students' contact information, or their assignments (beyond what I had written down in my notes in May). I have used gender neutral pronouns and avoided including identifying information in order to maintain students' anonymity, except in one case where I was able to contact and obtain consent to use a specific story.

Notes

[2] I reached out to this student, who had graduated since taking my class—meaning she would be unlikely to see a message sent to her university email—via her public LinkedIn profile. In my message I asked her permission to use this story and explained the purpose of the article and where it would be published. I attached the full text and indicated which pages referenced the story involving her and the context in which I was using it, explaining that I wanted to make sure that she was comfortable with the way I had represented her. I asked "1. Do I have your permission to use the story, in general, as it's written? (If not, I can take it out entirely or make it significantly more vague.) 2. If yes, are there any details you would prefer I omit OR add for context? 3. The editor has suggested that I generally change pronouns to they/them for anonymity, but in this case that felt like misgendering. Would you prefer I use she/her or they/them for you here?" The student granted permission to use the story and requested that I use she/her pronouns.

[3] For a visual representation of the Drama Spiral, see Baim's essay "The Drama Spiral: A Decision-Making Model for Safe, Ethical, and Flexible Practice when Incorporating Personal Stories in Applied Theatre and Performance." (2017, p. 96). For further discussion of the Drama Spiral as a tool, practices of aesthetic and emotional distance regulation, and applied theatre ethics see Baim's book, *Staging the Personal: A Guide to Safe and Ethical Practice* (2020).

[4] For in-depth discussion of this phenomenon see Namaste (2000) and O'Rear (2020).

[5] A previous version of this article included direct quotes from several students, which I have unfortunately had to omit because I was not able to reach them to get permission to use their words from class assignments. Working within my own professional boundaries, the most appropriate method I found for contacting former students, since I could not access the university email system, was through the messaging function on LinkedIn. Shortly after graduating one student connected with me on the platform, so I was able to message them directly; although, I did not receive a response. As noted earlier, I was able to reach one student via LinkedIn. While I searched for all of the students whose words I had hoped to include, the rest either did not have a profile on the site or their professional profiles were listed as "private" and therefore inaccessible via direct messaging. In this section, I have summarized trends that I noticed in our conversations and recurring themes in written reflections. While I cannot feature their individual insights directly in this piece, I do want to honor their thoughtful reflections and acknowledge how they have shaped my own praxis.

[6] I adopted this approach to course evaluations in 2018, after Dr. Shilarna Stokes shared it with me as a means of gathering more meaningful and specific feedback than I was receiving the general university-wide "Student Evaluation of Instruction" system (Stokes 2018). I adapted some of her original language to reflect the context of an acting class rather than a writing seminar. The full text of the prompt in this section of the written evaluation reads "Your insights into your learning in this course can help me see our course from your side of the desk. Please respond to any three of the statements below (more if you'd like).
In this course …
    it most helped my learning of new acting skills when…because…
    it would have helped my learning of new acting skills if…because…
    the assignment that contributed the most to my learning was… because…
    the kinds of in-class exercises that contributed most to my learning were…because…
    the biggest obstacle for me in learning the material was… because…
    a resource I know about that the instructor might consider using is…because…
    I was most willing to take risks in my acting and/or in creative exercises when… because…
    what I think I will remember five years from now is…because…
    Next time the course is taught, I would change… because…

[7] By their nature, end of course evaluations are a source of anonymous feedback from students. Although these were written before I had planned to write this article, students were informed ahead of time about the various purposes

for which I might use their responses. I told them who would likely read them and that they may be used to inform changes to future versions of this course, to inform my teaching generally, to assess my job performance, to be included in job application materials as "evidence of teaching effectiveness," to evaluate different teaching approaches in conversation with other educators, and/or to be transformed into performance art ("but only if you say something really mean or bizarre").

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