

Performance

I got the idea to incorporate performance into the classroom from the choir director at Carthage College. I went to the annual concert of the choir, a magnificent Christmas concert held each year in December. The concert was repeated several times on the weekend and drew thousands of people from the college and from the area. As always, I was bowled over by the quality of the student performances. John Windh, the director and professor of music, had a personal and a professional manner, and he knew how to draw the most out of his choir. But the student singers! Wow! How did he get the students to work so hard in preparation and to work together in the various dynamics of harmony necessary to produce such a magnificent sound? And the amount and range of music they had prepared was impressive.

My immediate thought was this. OK, I am a teacher. What would I have to do with my students in a class as a means to draw that level of commitment and that quality of work? I know students want to function at a high level. So what could motivate them to do it? At the time, I was preparing to teach a January interim course on “Daily Life in Jesus’ Time.” The January term is a month-long intensive course that lends itself to innovation and experimentation. So my mind went to work to figure out what I would have to do that would result in such high quality work.

My idea was that the motivation of choir members came primarily from working together. After all, it was a communal project. Sopranos depended upon altos who both depended on tenors and basses and vice versa and so on. I could imagine that each student knew how much the others counted on her or him to be there and to sing well in order to produce the desired sound. Only by cooperation could they together create the marvelous music that was much more than the sum of the parts—music that filled the auditorium and the ears and hearts of those present.

So I devised a process for the study of daily life in Jesus’ time that would replicate the interdependence I found in the college choir. Here was my idea. I had fourteen students signed up for the class. Each student would be responsible for a different area of daily life: houses, clothes, work, synagogue, marriage and family life, geography and travel, economic life of peasants, priests, temple in Jerusalem, festivals and pilgrimage, or coins, and so on. The student responsible for a certain area would need to be an expert in those matters. At the same, each student would imagine an ordinary person out of the first century (no known figure from the Bible or elsewhere) and write an autobiographical story about their life—a peasant wife and mother, a farmer from Tiberias, a tax collector living in Capernaum, a priest from Jerusalem in the Temple, and so on. In order to do this, however, each one would have to go to other students in order to find out from their areas of expertise what their own character would wear and where they might live and what their work would be like and to construct certain events in their lives and so on. The students would be interdependent. They would count on each other. And this would provide the motivation.

I was quite pleased with my plan for the upcoming class. I encountered John Windh one day in the college mailroom. I asked him if he had a minute, and I proceeded to explain to him how I had been inspired by the choir and his leadership. And then I told him about my idea for the January class and what I was planning for the students to do and how it would lead them to be motivated as the choir members were. His immediate response was clear and direct: “It won’t work!” I was stunned and somewhat taken aback. “Why not?” I said. “Because,” he said, “You need a performance.” Then he explained to me that it was primarily because the students knew

there would be a performance before an audience that instilled them with the desire to work hard and perform well and to take such pride on their work. Instantly, I saw the wisdom of his words.

Okay. Back to the drawing boards. I did not want to abandon my earlier idea, but now I had a new challenge. How could I incorporate a performance into the class? Well, I just arranged for a performance. I called several churches in the area whose pastors I knew and got us invited to do a program for a senior citizen group on a Wednesday morning in January. I stayed with the earlier plan for the class and just added a performance into the mix. And what a difference it turned out to be!

On the first day of the class, I told the students about this and asked if they would like to accept this invitation. They were enthusiastic. We decided that we would develop a program in which we would present scenes from first century Jewish life. The students began choosing their areas of expertise from a list I gave them. Then they each chose an imaginary character. This freedom to choose meant that students had an investment in creating such an imaginary person. So they got to work on their research and reflections. Each day they shared what new they had learned and conferred with each other about their projects. Then we went to the theater department and asked if we could borrow some costumes. With their help, we picked out garb that was appropriate to each of the characters. In the end, they would not only make up their character, they would also *be* their character.

Once these things were in place and the process of working interdependently took off, the rest fell into place. The scenes were made up of interactions between the characters. So we had a priest declaring a leper clean. There was a scene in which a tax collector demanded tribute from a fisherman. A Roman soldier arrested a Zealot. Three women talked at the well. And there was a wedding! There were other scenes I cannot recall now, but the whole thing was quite entertaining and informative. The students had to practice their parts to know them well. The program was planned for the third week of the class. It went really well. Someone would introduce and explain the scene, and then the students involved would act it out. The presentation took almost an hour. One of the additional features was that we arranged for the audience to ask the students questions after the scenes were over. The students remained in character and answered the questions as their first century persons!

The whole thing went so well that the students agreed to repeat the scenes for the religion department at the school—faculty members, religion majors, and any other students they wished to invite. This experience took it to another level, because now they were performing for the religion department, and they had to get it right, and they had to be able to answer the questions posed by faculty and fellow students. As a result, the last week of the course involved more study in their areas of expertise and more refinement as they wrote the stories of the characters they had chosen. The performance at the school went super. And note, the students did it, with enthusiasm, at the beginning of the second term—after the interim class was over!

John Windh was right: “You need a performance.” I learned a lot from that experience. But more importantly, the students learned a lot. There is a Chinese proverb that says:

“Tell me,
and I will forget.
Show me,
and I will remember.
Involve me,
and I will understand.”

I really felt as if students got a grasp of first century life in ways they never would have done without this “involvement.” And as we were coming out of the church after the program for seniors, one of the students in the class who had been most skeptical said to me: “That was fun!” So I might add to the Chinese proverb:

“Have fun,
and I will want to do it again.”

Also, in all of this, my initial idea to set up an arrangement in which students were dependent upon one another for their learning worked well. And the cooperative learning was enhanced by the fact that they were actually working together to prepare and to put on this program. They did it together.

What made the difference? Why was performance so central to the success of this class? Why were the students so engaged? And why were they motivated to do so well? There are probably a lot of good answers to those questions. But a key one is this: An activity done in a classroom is artificial, but a performance to an outside audience is for real. Clearly, this is overstated, but it is accurate enough. In a classroom, we do things just for the teacher (often for a grade) or for other students. It can easily feel like it is “practicing for something else” or an activity done for a grade. But when there is a real audience out there, the stakes are raised and the desire to do well is magnified. It is amazing how this event transcends any motivation a teacher may give the students as a means to bring the best out of them. In fact, the teacher now becomes a coach or director working *with* the students to prepare for an (outside) activity, rather than an evaluator and judge.

I believe students long to engage in learning that is meaningful, meaningful not only for themselves but for others as well. The whole experience of college and seminary often becomes a liminal state of betwixt and between, of “taking in” rather than “giving out.” The performance was a way to engage students in an activity in which they were definitely taking in the knowledge about first century life *and* they were also offering something that was meaningful for others. The best learning may be “learning by doing.”

Unfortunately, not all classes lend themselves to this type of performance for an outside group. I was able to repeat this class several times with performances. But there came a time when I taught this class at night with a larger group, and it was just not workable to incorporate doing scenes from daily life. I did, however, come up with another idea that worked just about as well. I asked people to prepare their first century areas of expertise in written form from many library sources. These were due in the middle of the course. I edited all the offerings, organized them, had them reproduced, and placed them in a spiral binder. The names of all the contributors were on the front of the book. Before the course was over, each student received a copy of the book. But the key is this: They knew from the start that this book they produced would be used as a textbook for the next class on Daily Life in Jesus’ Time! This process turned out also to be highly motivating. Their audience was not present at the time, but the audience would show up in the next class and see the work and the names of the students who preceded them. And when the next class saw the book and realized that they would be revising and expanding it and that their names would be added to the front cover of the new version of a textbook for the next class, they too were highly motivated to do the research and to get it right! One summer school class put together a terrific book just on the Temple in Jerusalem. And, in all these cases, I got just the textbook I wanted for my next class!

I have used what I learned about “performance before an outside group” in several other classes, especially at seminary where I have experimented with students doing performances of

biblical texts. I have also learned from the idea of a performance that one can do presentations/performances to the inside group of the class and the professor in such a way that they too had meaning and were not just experienced as artificial. The key is to make it clear that other students and the professor were counting on learning from them as part of the teaching and learning in the course. I have incorporated this kind of presentation into many more of my classes than the one that lent itself so well to a performance. In this way, everyone in the class—students and faculty—become both teachers and learners. We became a “community of learners.”

You never know where ideas might come from to enhance the teaching-learning experience—a choir concert, a kindergarten teacher sharing her philosophy of child development, a grade school instructor excited about a new way to teach math, a middle school tutor for special education, a CEO talking about new structures of management, and so on. I have learned from conversations with each of these people—as a kind of pedagogical pack rat who loves to store away new ideas and try them out when the time is ripe. And what an adventure it has been!