

Theoretical Theatre: harnessing the power of comedy to teach social science theory

Abstract

Role playing is increasingly used in European Studies and political science more generally to foster students understanding of social science theories. Yet in most cases, role playing is only done by students. Not so in Theoretical Theatre, a teaching innovation which puts the onus on teachers to act. In our performances, teachers embody competing theories and enact dramatic scenarios in front of, and in collaboration with, their student audience. We explain how we developed Theoretical Theatre and contextualises it in the pedagogical literature of games and simulations, and more usefully, Drama In Education. We reflect on our experience of performing across four modules since 2012, and our students' feedback, to discuss three key themes emerging from our practice: making theory more interesting and engaging; making theory easier to understand and apply; and changing classroom dynamics and engagement. We discuss the challenges and opportunities in sustaining this teaching method over time, and transferring it to other settings and disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Theories are at the heart of social science teaching, the centre piece used to foster students' analytical capacities and their ability to interpret the world. Yet, teaching social science theories can be a very complicated endeavour (Asal et al. 2014). On the one hand, teachers have to convey the usefulness of theories to students who may never have felt a need for them. On the other hand, theories offer students different ways of understanding the world and they are often encouraged to think critically about the limits and benefits of each of them (Boyer et al. 2006, p.67). Understanding the role of theories in social science is a 'threshold concept', which students are required to grasp effectively before they are able to access and succeed in more advanced learning (Kiley & Wisker 2009). To address this, we present Theoretical Theatre (TT), a new award-winning team-teaching method designed to engage students in active learning about competing theories, with wide applicability across the curriculum. In TT performances, theories are 'not merely discussed, but embodied' (Jacobs 2010, p.2) by a group of instructors and/or students, bringing conceptual debates to life as interacting characters in semi-improvised scenarios.

We begin this article by providing a brief introduction to TT as a teaching method and explain how we have used it across four different modules in environmental social science since 2012. We then situate TT within innovative teaching literatures, arguing that while some of its elements are similar to simulations, discussions in Drama in Education help shed light on how TT redraws the relationship between teachers and students. With this pedagogical perspective, we critically reflect on our experience, and our students' feedback,

to discuss three key themes emerging from our practice: TT makes theory more interesting and engaging; it makes theory easier to understand and apply; and it changes classroom dynamics and engagement. We discuss the challenges and opportunities in developing TT as a team, sustaining this teaching method over time, and transferring it to other settings and disciplines.

THEORETICAL THEATRE: A TEACHING INNOVATION

Theoretical Theatre is a teaching tool using semi-improvised comedy performances. In our work to date, teams of 2-5 teachers collaborate to portray different characters who physically embody theories in interactive scenarios including a *Question Time*-style debate, a chat-show, or a date. We use props and costumes to enliven the ‘extra-ordinary’ lecture setting. Characters may get along or argue with each other, reflecting academic and policy debates between different perspectives. Using comedy helps students make an emotional connection with complex material, and results in active and deeper learning (Berk, 2014; McKarron and Baden, 2008).

The School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia is interdisciplinary; students with natural science backgrounds commonly encounter social science for the first time in our modules. We have found that students accustomed to dealing with ‘facts’ struggled to comprehend competing theories about society, and that they did not distinguish the nuances between different theories, or struggled to apply a theory. Sometimes students advocated ‘adding together’ all the different perspectives to get the ‘best’ aggregated approach which appeared to be ‘common sense’ and ‘the best of all worlds’.

Consequently, we created Theoretical Theatre to help students better comprehend the underlying basis of competing theories of society and the environment, and encourage them to reflect critically about their strengths and weaknesses. The performances we have developed to date are presented as exceptional lectures, one per module (as outlined below), to convey theoretical threshold concepts. In some cases, follow-up activities involve students developing or adopting and performing concept-characters themselves to further deepen their understanding. This is a deeply experiential way to learn: as drama pedagogue Gilberto Scaramuzzo asserts ‘if we want to speak [on a topic] we must learn to become [the topic]’ (Grove 2015, p.22), and pedagogical work on humour and improvisation as learning tools attest to the strength of this active learning (Brecht, 2014 Berk and Trieber, 2009).

Developing Theoretical Theatre

We adopted TT as an evolving experiment in improving our teaching effectiveness as we struggled to address the recurrent teaching challenges explained above. We developed our first prototype in summer 2012. We began by drafting notes about how the theories (each represented by a different lecturer) of sustainable consumption interprets the world and how they would answer questions, e.g. ‘how can we encourage more people to use public transport’ or ‘why do we consume as we do?’. These became quite elaborate scripts, but the

delivery was still essentially in ‘lecture’ mode, albeit a multi-voiced lecture. It lacked characters and dynamism, and we felt there was more we could do to bring the debates to life.

We started working with an expert in comedy improvisation, Charlotte Arculus¹, who used drama and improvisation games to help us lose our inhibitions and build trust as a team. We learned about performance skills, stage technique, the power of silence and stillness, awareness of the ensemble, and the importance of taking a risk. None of us had theatre or drama training, yet these techniques enabled us to gain confidence in working together and simply having a go. We began to feel comfortable in letting go of the aura of serious authority that as academics we usually feel we must convey, and embrace creativity and silliness to help us communicate more effectively.

We then moved on to thinking about the performance piece itself, and Charlotte Arculus asked us to put the scripts aside and think instead about the characters we would be enacting. What kind of car would they drive? Who was their hero? What did they eat for lunch? Answering these mundane questions helped us create fleshed-out characters in our minds, people (representing theories) who we would pretend to be. We then moved on to ‘hot-seating’ and the characters explaining how they felt about each other. Characters then became real people with backstories, hobbies, and opinions about each other. Above all, the interactions were incredibly funny and we enjoyed seeing each other play these characters. And once we ‘knew’ our characters and their views, the scripts were not needed. The drama essentially wrote itself, based on the improvisation of the characters’ interpersonal dynamics.

Sustainable Consumption

The first performance we created was for a Masters-level module on *Sustainable Consumption* (20-30 students, over 12 weeks), and addressed the question of ‘why do we consume the way we do?’. It portrays a *Question Time*-style debate between four competing theories of consumption behaviour: logical Rational Choice Theory, gossipy Social Psychology, busy Social Practice Theory and puppet master Systems of Provision, plus the curious (and importantly, neutral) show host (see Shwom & Lorenzen (2012) for a comparison of the four approaches). Students choose one theory to apply to a case study, and critique, in their assessed work. Prior to TT, students often attempted to aggregate all the theories despite the fact that the theories fundamentally disagree with each other. Our performance brings those disagreements to life. In a follow-up workshop, students adopt the characters themselves, and this really cements their understanding as they physically embody the concepts.

Theoretical Blind Date

Developed as part of a 2nd year undergraduate module *Energy and People* (60-70 number of students, over 12 weeks), Theoretical Blind Date involves three characters (a business person, a policy maker and an environmental activist) facing ‘real world energy problems’ posing questions to three different theories (theories of behaviour change; social practice and

¹ Her work can be found at <http://www.theatreofadventure.co.uk/>, accessed 08.12.2016

transitions – each played by a different lecturer) that are ‘hidden’ behind a screen. The theories provide answers to the questions posed derived from their particular theoretical standpoint. Finally, after some vocalised deliberation and with the help of the audience of students shouting out their opinions, the character asking the question then decides which theory to take out on a ‘date’, in which they are tasked with the challenge of solving the problem posed in the question. Toward the end of the module, the students themselves then engage in a group activity in which they have to decide how each of the different dates went. They then have to put on a short performance to the rest of the class, playing the role of the characters and the theories themselves.

Theatre of Power

Theatre of Power brings together the three dimensions of power as developed by Dahl (1961) Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Lukes (2005) which are central to the second year module on *Environmental Politics and Policymaking* (40-60 students, over one teaching semester, equivalent to 12 weeks). It is the first of several theoretical approaches students are exposed to in the module, and many adopt it in their case study. However, we noticed over the years that the distinction between the dimensions is often poorly understood by the students. We devised a half hour performance aiming at better fleshing out their key differences and commonalities, as an add-on to a standard lecture. The lecturer starts with a 20-minute conventional presentation about applying theories of dimensions of power to a historical case study (currently, the 1932 Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout and the rambling movement). At the end of the presentation, the first dimension of power (holding a sword to represent brute force) interrupts the lecturer and explain how they view the events. The two other dimensions (the second carries a magnifying glass to investigate hidden agendas, and the third a magician’s wand to signify mind-control) take issue with the first dimension imposing its views and follow suit. All three then engage in a lively debate on the pros and cons of each approach and they answer questions from the audience.

Swipe Right for Sustainability

‘Swipe Right for Sustainability’ is our latest performance. It presents two competing approaches to sustainable development (Gareth ‘green growth’ Juggernaut, and Daisy ‘de-growth’ Beansprout) using a dating app, and going on a date. It was developed for the first-year undergraduate module *Sustainability, Society and Biodiversity* (154 students in 2015/16, over 12 weeks in the Spring semester), and has since been used with Masters students on *Sustainable Consumption* (20 students in 2016, over 12 weeks). This piece was designed to help students grasp that there is no correct definition of sustainable development, but rather different perspectives (Hopwood et al. 2005). The subject is first introduced using a traditional lecture comparing and contrasting the two approaches, followed in a subsequent class by the performance. Although Daisy and Gareth initially appear to have so much in common (they are both keen advocates of ‘sustainability’), their differing views soon become apparent and the date doesn’t end well. The drama and comedy lies in seeing their dating optimism wither during the course of their conversation. Students follow-up by creating new dating profiles for the characters, and can also enact the characters themselves to give a ‘date report’.

Theoretical Theatre performances are thus all based on a common, highly flexible approach: using teachers to embody theories and interact in character in front of as well as with the students (Table 1).

insert Table 1

RECONNECTING THEORETICAL THEATRE TO THE PEDAGOGICAL LITERATURE

Although *Theoretical Theatre* was born out of our own experimentations in response to a recurring teaching challenge in our School, it fits within a much broader movement aiming to push for a more learner-oriented approach (Buckley & Reidy 2014, p.342) to address the limits of conventional lectures (Asal et al. 2014). There is a growing consensus that lectures on their own are not sufficient to help students apprehend abstract concepts. Asal *et al.* argue that lectures are mostly characterised by passive learning methods through which students can only gain superficial knowledge ‘because they are not forced to engage the course material in a way that they can make the knowledge they gained truly their own’ (Asal et al. 2014, p.347). Active learning is therefore a more effective alternative (Freeman et al, 2014), and in addition to a vast array of participative learning techniques and tools, increasingly simulations, games and role play have been developed in the social sciences to enhance teaching effectiveness.² However, to date this move towards active learning and simulations been limited to students-in-role and has neglected the role of teachers in enacting dramatic scenarios.

Theoretical Theatre uses drama and comedy to ‘prevent academic content from appearing lifeless, abstract and beyond understanding’ (Smith & Herring 1993, p.419). We argue that TT can be understood as a hybrid between simulations – widely used in political science and international relations teaching in higher education internationally – and Drama in Education approaches, mostly used in primary education in the UK. In this section, we compare and contrast our own experience of TT with central elements of both literatures.

Theoretical Theatre, a sort of simulation?

Games and simulations are an increasingly popular alternative to a ‘lecture only’ type of teaching (Lightfoot & Maurer 2013). They are extremely varied, ranging from a semester-long simulation of the administrative functioning of the European Commission (Giacomello 2011) to a series of short games – all held during one single lecture (Asal et al. 2014). Some may require specifically tailored material (Usherwood 2015) or use pre-existing material such as card games (Boyer et al. 2006).

² See for example the Active Learning in Political Science blog, <http://activelearningps.com/> (accessed 08/12/2016)

The approach that we present in this article is in many ways similar to games and simulations. It also moves away from simply ‘telling’ students, favouring instead ‘showing’ or ‘role playing’ (Paschall & Wustenhagen 2012), which can encourage ‘students away from the security of a singular, authoritative narrative’ (Stevens 2015, p.490). It also uses role playing to make theories ‘clear in a way that lectures and discussions do not’ (Asal 2005, p.361), and require an important amount of preparatory work by students and staff, often including more than one member of staff (Usherwood 2015). As games and simulations, it takes place within the context of a broader module, alongside traditional lectures, and require careful articulation between the innovative and traditional elements of teaching (Raiser et al. 2015, p.2). Finally, as simulations and games, it happens in conjunction with discussion and / or debrief with students (Boyer et al. 2006, p.73).

But TT radically differs from games and simulation with regards to the relation between teachers and students. In games and simulations, ‘the student becomes the lab rat and then gets to discuss the experiment’ (Asal 2005, p.361) and, for example, start behaving and interacting as members of a political institution. During the game or simulations lecturers can act as ‘facilitator, control team, and/or observer’ (Asal & Kratoville 2013, p.138) ensuring everything is running smoothly (Buckley & Reidy 2014). During a TT session however, the onus is on the teachers. Contrary to simulations, they retain more control, but it is up to them to put on a costume, to adopt a role, to behave sometimes foolishly, harnessing the power of role play and comedy to introduce students to social science theories.

These teaching methods also differ in terms of how they treat theories. In many simulations, students engage with theories before (to prepare) and after the performance (to make sense of what happened). These reflections often require prompting by instructors (Asal & Kratoville 2013), as students can struggle to make the connection between what they experienced and the theories they are taught. TT also aims to make students reflect on the different theories and how to apply them, but theories are at the heart of the performance. Instructors embody theories, turning key social science theories into full-fledged characters with a name, profession, hobbies, favourite food and holidays location.

Thus, while TT, games and simulations use role play they do so in a markedly different manner. As the section below explores, the central role of instructors in role-playing brings TT closer to the Drama in Education literature through the notion of teacher-in-role in particular (Prendiville 2000).

Theoretical Theatre by ‘teachers-in-role’

Drama in Education is an approach which sees students engage in drama, often through improvisation (Fleming 2010), together with their teacher(s). It was developed in the UK from the 1970s onward with key contributions offered by Heathcote and her co-authors (Heathcote & Herbert 1985).

While its original focus and early development in the UK is on primary education, engaging both students and instructors in drama, the uses of Drama in Education have become increasingly diverse over time (Lee 2014). The use of solo dramas, monologues (Kemeh

2015) or ‘hot-seating’ where students question a teacher-in-role (Pearce & Hardiman 2012) shows it does not necessarily require students and instructors role-playing together.

One of the central elements of this literature is the pedagogical strategy of ‘teacher-in-role’ – teachers interacting with students while ‘in role’, as part of a group or during solo drama. Two debates regarding ‘teacher-in-role’ were particularly helpful to build and reflect on Theoretical Theatre: what exactly are the teachers up to – is it acting or not – and how does theatre redraw the relationship between teachers and students?

Is teaching acting?

Early literature on Drama in Education argued forcefully that teacher-in-roles were not acting. Thus, for Prendiville (2000, p.12), teacher-in-role is ‘not about putting on a performance and becoming theatrical, if you do that, you push the children away from you [...] cheering and laughing from a safe distance, the distance you have created by ‘acting up’ the part’. Ackroyd-Pilkington contended that rejecting acting may appear reassuring and a good way to persuade ‘non-specialists to take on roles’ (2001, p.21). Furthermore, acting tends to be ‘associated with falsehood [...] not deemed appropriate for the worthy and serious endeavours of classroom drama’ (Ackroyd-Pilkington 2001, p.20). But such rejection is problematic, as it tends to underplay the skills required and also the creativity of role-playing (Ackroyd-Pilkington 2002, p.74).

Critically, asking whether ‘teacher-in-role’ is a performance brings us back to how much teaching, in all its varied forms, is a performance (Schonmann 2005, p.287). As Jacobs argues, ‘In many ways, a teacher is like a live-theatre actor. A teacher has an audience of students, and has to perform in front of and for (and in interaction with) that audience’ (Jacobs 2010, p.2). Yet we would argue that performing as a lecturer is not the same as performing, as we do in TT, as a character embodying a theory. Building on theatrical concepts, Schonmann (2005) argues these two types of performances are subsumed under the ‘role of the teacher’ under a binary understanding of teaching in which the only distinction is between the person and her role. Adopting an alternative triadic view of teaching allows distinguishing between the person, their professional role as a teacher, and the character, e.g. the theory embodied (Schonmann 2005; Kempe 2012).

Changing how teachers are perceived?

Aitken (2007, pp.91–92) argues that theatre relationships – be they in a real theatre or in a classroom – require a ‘shared understanding of how the fiction is to be distinguished from reality, what is to be considered of value, the behaviours that will support the relationship’ as well as, critically for TT ‘who will have the power to perform’.

These decisions are up to the teacher – the ‘relationship managers’ (Aitken 2007) – who need to communicate them to the students. Crucially, teachers have to take into account the pre-existing relationship with their students. When do teachers behave as ‘teachers’, and when are they ‘teachers-in-role’? And what does it mean for students: does changed behaviour from teachers implies changed behaviour from students as well?

Props and costumes are frequently used to mark the changed relationship, as illustrated by Prendiville (Prendiville 2000, p.12):

‘We are going to do a story [...] You will know when I am going to be pretending to be someone in the story because I shall wear this hat [...] When I take my hat off I will be your teacher again. Is that OK?’

Consequently, we built clear demarcation using props, costumes, music and lighting to set apart performances in which we appeared ‘in character’ from other lectures. In Theoretical Blind Date, for example, we have music and title credits to mark its beginning and end, props on the stage in the form of seats for each of the characters (in costume) and a screen to keep the date ‘blind’.

New roles for students?

TT does not only change how teachers behave, but offers different ways for students to engage as well. Based on the literature, we could expect during the performance, students to change from just attending a lecture, to being part of an audience, ‘aware of the responses of other audience members’ (Bundy et al. 2013, p.156) following both what happens during the performance and how their peers react to it. In the audience, students are exposed to a live performance, and to their teachers taking a risk – which is often positively perceived by students (Bundy et al. 2013).

In Theoretical Blind Date for example, students are explicitly invited to participate and at various points are required to shout out their opinions about which theory matches a particular character. Over and above these explicit invitations, however, students watching the performance tend to laugh (or groan) at the jokes, to film parts of the performance on their smart phones and are generally very active engaged in the performance. In the second half of most of the performances, students furthermore have the opportunity to ask questions of the teachers ‘in character’. Students also make use of questions planted beforehand amongst the audience to facilitate and encourage interaction.

In conclusion, TT can be conceived as a hybrid between two strands of innovative teaching: Drama In Education and simulations and games. It can be expected to change how we teach, adding a third dimension (the character) to our teaching, as well as affect how students engage in the classroom. The next section compares these expectations from the literature to student voices (Stevens 2015) gathered in our evaluations.

EVALUATING THEORETICAL THEATRE

TT was born out of a desire to encourage our students to engage with social science theories and thus to try and improve their understanding. Rather than being driven by the wider pedagogic literature on Drama in Education or teacher-in-role (as reviewed in Section 3) TT was developed more experimentally and we have come to evaluate it against this literature more recently.

In the very first year of running the original Sustainable Consumption TT in 2012 we noted that the overall quality of the coursework students produced was considerably higher than any previous cohort: the average grade jumped from 60 percent to 67 percent. Whilst this is far from a robust or conclusive result, it did encourage us to persevere in developing TT and to make use of several other techniques, especially student surveys, for monitoring its effectiveness (Baranowski & Weir 2015).

Both the Sustainable Consumption and Theoretical Blind Date variants of TT have been regularly assessed via open-ended mid- and end-of-module reviews conducted in class with the students (mid-module reviews conducted a week or two after the performance). In these, students write anonymous comments on sticky notes under three headings: ‘what worked well on the module?’, ‘what didn’t work so well’, and ‘how can we improve the module next year’. It is striking that TT usually garners more positive comments than any other aspect of the modules.

In addition, for Theatre of Power, follow-up online surveys (sent a few days later) conducted focussed predominantly on whether and how the performance increased student understanding of key concepts. Response rates, however, were low, with just 14/55, 7/40 and 16/60 completed surveys in 2013, 2015 and 2016 respectively. **QUESTIONS??**

There was also a more extensive follow-up online survey for Swipe Right for Sustainability, involving a focus on increased understanding as well as the extent to which the performance encouraged students to think about theory and to talk about it with others (55/110 response rate, conducted 1-2 weeks after the class). In addition to quantitative results cited below, the qualitative responses quoted here are responding to questions: ‘how did it change your view of the module or your degree as a whole?’ and ‘how did it change your view of the lecturers themselves?’ (in both cases, for those that indicated it had done so) and ‘any other comments?’.

This section reflects, in turn, on three core themes emerging from this student feedback: i) making theory more interesting and engaging; ii) making theory easier to understand and apply, and iii) changing dynamics and engagement in the classroom.

Making theory more interesting and engaging

A core aim of TT is to encourage students to engage with theory more enthusiastically by making it seem grounded, interesting and valuable rather than abstract, complex and unhelpful. Student feedback from across all TT variants suggests strong success in achieving this aim in two ways. First, and as the following quotations show, students regularly report that a TT performance is more interesting and engaging than a conventional lecture.

‘You’ve helped me get excited about theory!’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

‘Theoretical Blind Date! Highly entertaining with great interaction and learning as well. Unique and interesting.’ (Theoretical Blind Date, 2014)

‘Interesting and mostly fun alternative to 'dry' lectures.’ (Theatre of Power, 2016)

Second, the students also regularly note that TT encouraged them to pay more attention in class and increased their motivation to study beyond the classroom itself. For example:

‘It was a bit of a surprise at the end of the lecture – good way of getting us to pay attention! Helped my understanding a lot.’ (Theatre of Power, 2015)

‘It...made me more motivated to study.’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

A core aspect of this increased motivation and excitement about theory seems to relate to the fact that, through the performance, students were able to witness the passion and enthusiasm their lecturers have for their subjects. For example, several quotes illustrate this more ‘human’ connection with theory that TT generates:

‘Lecturers are normal human beings trying to teach subjects they're passionate about and aren't as scary as they sometimes seem!!!’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

‘I like the fact that it came out of nowhere. It was so surprising. Everyone seemed really passionate and enthusiastic.’ (Theatre of Power, 2015)

In this respect, whether TT involves teaching or acting, or something in between, it appears to matter significantly that it is the lecturer herself who is doing the performing, rather than a professional actor.

Making theory easier to understand and apply

Baranowski & Weir argue that ‘that gauging what students learned is unquestionably more difficult than determining how much they enjoyed a simulation experience’ (2015, p.396), but that doing so is necessary to evaluate whether an innovation was truly successful. Here, student feedback again suggests that TT has fostered students learning in a number of different ways.

Results from the follow up surveys suggest that students themselves think TT significantly improves their understanding. For Theatre of Power, 88% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the performance had helped them understand key aspects of each dimension of power in 2013 and this rose to 100% in 2015. For Swipe Right, 78% felt it was better at helping them learn key concepts than a normal lecture.

Students’ open-ended comments provide some insight into these numbers. First, students argue that the performances make theory seem clear and simple. For example:

‘I liked the three different characters playing the three dimensions of power - made it clear to see the separate ideas.’ (Theatre of Power, 2016)

‘Theoretical Blind Date made the theories so easy to understand.’ (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

Whilst we have evidently thought hard about how to clearly communicate theoretical ideas through TT, we have also strived hard to ensure we do not dumb-down complex theoretical ideas. Indeed, we use aspects TT as a means of demonstrating the more in-depth debates between different theoretical approaches. As such, the fact that students feel TT makes things easy to understand stems from the performance as a medium of communication rather than from any simplification of content.

A second potential reason that students felt TT increased their understanding emerges from the fact that TT appears to turn theory into something students want to discuss with others. In an early response to the Sustainable Consumption performance, a student noted that:

‘It improved my understanding a lot quicker than merely reading and making notes about the theories, and... generated much enthusiastic discussion between the students which reinforced the concepts effectively and made them interesting to explore.’
(Sustainable Consumption, 2014)

Comments such as this, as well as our own perceptions of how students respond to the performances in class, encourage us to follow-up on this theme in subsequent surveys. Here, for the Swipe Right performance, results show that TT encourages students to talk to others about the performances with 76% saying they spoke about it with their classmates, 74% with other students, and 44% with friends or family outside UEA. One student even commented:

‘I enjoyed telling my parents all about it and ended up giving them a lesson on types of sustainability.’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

A third potential explanation for why the TT performances appear to increase student understanding emerges from the fact that several students noted that the characters help them to identify with different theoretical approaches and thus think about how that character might respond in real world settings. For example:

‘Love the theoretical Blind Date which we can put into any situation and go through each theory. Very good practice.’ (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

‘I like that you gave a real life example and applied the theories of power to a case study.’ (Theatre of Power, 2016)

This comment appears to bear out the value of theories being embodied rather than merely discussed or taught through TT. TT seems to allow students to identify with how a lecturer becomes a particular perspective in the performance and apply this themselves beyond the classroom.

Changing dynamics and engagement in the classroom

Whilst the core aims of TT are to increase student engagement with and understanding of theory, an unexpected side-benefit of the performances has been dramatically improved student engagement in the classroom. Student feedback identifies two potential reasons for this.

First, the performances changed how the students perceived lecturers themselves and made them seem like ‘normal human beings’. This theme was widely represented in student feedback with 56% of students who completed the follow-up survey for the Swipe Right performance saying it changed how they viewed lecturers.

‘[It] made the lecturers seem more approachable and less intimidating ... [so] it was easier to participate.’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

‘I felt more comfortable asking questions to lecturers.’ (Swipe Right, 2016)

Second, and closely related, students also commented that TT created an ‘informal and fun’ atmosphere during lectures and seminars which made them more confident to take risks in class and play with, test out and try to apply the new theoretical ideas they are being exposed to. Although we’ve found this to apply equally across year groups, these side-benefits seem likely to be especially significant and valuable for first year students and those less used to participate in class discussions.

In summary, despite limited formal evaluation to date, the various methods of gathering student feedback we have used suggest strongly that TT not only achieves its aims but also, and perhaps more importantly, carries a number of additional benefits around student engagement, risk-taking and confidence in class that have the potential to improve student performance more widely. Nonetheless, despite TT’s apparent benefits, there are many important challenges and areas for further development that remain to be further explored and to which we now turn.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPING THEORETICAL THEATRE

TT has been recognised for its innovativeness in teaching, contributing to two of the authors winning UEA Teaching Excellence Awards, and a further University Teaching Fellowship. TT was a highlight of the SCORAI teaching benchmarking exercise and features prominently at pedagogical conferences; it has also been performed as a keynote presentation at UEA’s Learning and Teaching Day 2016, which has encouraged colleagues to adopt it in their own teaching. In order to enable us to help transfer TT, but also to monitor our practice – and evaluate progress and change – we have developed and made available a resource hub through our website³. The platform contains resources and experiences, supporting sharing best practice and inspiring educators world-wide who would wish to adopt and adapt TT with a view to innovating, building and transferring skills and making teaching fun.

We take inspiration from this feedback to reflect on the opportunities and challenges associated with TT (within UEA and externally) and outline what the future of comedy in the classroom looks like from our perspective.

³ <https://comedyintheclassroom.org/> accessed 08.12.2016

Despite its inherent flexibility, TT as any kind of team-led innovation, relies on building and sustaining a team over time (although a lower resource option is now available, developed as a response to this challenge, see below). TT necessitates a group of dedicated people enthusiastic and willing to use improvisation and comedy to expose students to theories in an alternative to standard lectures. When this group changes over time, as teachers move to other employment or are unable to provide their time for TT, the challenge becomes how to adapt TT so that it can still be performed and engage students. One option we have successfully undertaken to date is the regular training of teachers willing to participate in TT, who view participation as a way to develop skills and abilities as well as introduce a smile into the classroom. However, we foresee that such a strategy may not be always sustainable: relying on a shrinking pool of teachers may put undue pressure on them. We have therefore started exploring other alternatives.

Working with PhD students and Early-Career Researchers

In recent years, we have offered the opportunity to PhD students and early-career researchers to assist with in-role performance. We have had a mixed success with this strategy. Engagement with TT from enthusiastic researchers has enabled some of the TT performances to take place over several years; conversely, we now experience, in one of our modules in particular, a paucity of new recruits, due to a variety of reasons. As a temporary measure (e.g. 2-3 years) involvement of researchers can be productive, but it does not resolve longer-term staffing issues.

Video recording

We have started recording our TT performances⁴, in order to have them available for reflection, demonstration and training purposes as well as for use in the classroom should the TT not be deliverable due to lack of teachers-in-role. However, we are aware that this substitute does not fully convey the spontaneity of the performance, the direct enactment in front of the students, the improvisation (which by its very nature changes every time TT takes place) and the lack of interaction. A concern is that this mode, although less 'risky', removes the element of direct performance. By not being exposed to 'human' teachers, student engagement may be reduced, lessening the effectiveness of TT.

Theoretical Theatre is based on the interaction between teachers-in-role and their students, using improvisation and comedy to expose students to theories in an alternative to standard lectures. For us, TT has been an unexpected positive team-building exercise. Our performances were shaped with the participation of colleagues – teaching on different modules – who were asked if they would be willing to contribute. Reciprocity resulted in making us more aware of, and participant in, the teaching conducted across the School, and helped the spread of innovative teaching across the curriculum. Hence two of the lecturers helping out on the first TT performance subsequently adapted it to their own modules.

In our experience at UEA and presentations of TT at conferences and other settings, we have come to the realisation that transferring an innovation such as TT can be done in many

⁴ <https://comedyintheclassroom.org/> accessed 08.12.2016

different ways, from selecting only one aspect, to organising whole new performances built on different theories. TT is adaptable. Its key characteristic, engaging students with theories, remains the same in the various forms it can assume.

Devising smaller and simpler performances

The performances we present in this paper vary in length and in the number of teachers delivering them, making TT malleable and possible for both small and larger teams. Team size is driven by the number of theories for students to familiarise themselves with and the scenario or format devised. Crucially performances ‘need only be as complicated as the educational goal demands’ (Asal & Kratoville 2013, p.137). Examples such as the *Swipe Right for Sustainability* performance indicates that only two instructors may be needed to show profound theoretical divergences. Moreover, some elements of TT can also be led by only one instructor. When presenting Theoretical Theatre in conferences, we found that simply constructing a character – similar to students re-writing dating profiles after the *Swipe Right for Sustainability* performance – is an interesting exercise which allows to identify key elements of each theories and discuss them in groups. Contrary to full-fledged performances, developing character sheets does not require the support of a broader team, nor long preparation. It is a low-resource TT. Thus the ‘concept in character’ TT model has a wide range of potential applications, and can be adapted in a variety of disciplines and teaching contexts. We have tried it out at a variety of conferences; for example, at EUROTLC16 the character development led some participants to argue that Realism was just like Justin Bieber.

Training needs

We have argued earlier that in TT the distinction between our professional role (as teacher) and character (as a specific theory) is critical. It points toward the need for specific skills and training for becoming characters that are not necessarily covered in our training to be teachers. When we started developing TT we struggled to move out of ‘lecture’ mode, to relinquish control and use comedy improvisation – these were new skills which we had to learn in order to be better communicators, develop our characters and interact with our colleagues and students while in character. Thus, one of the challenges for transferring TT may be training needs. Part of what we learned through our training – how to flesh out characters out of abstract concepts – can be pursued with no specific training (see Figure 1). However we have found training in performance, improvisation and comedy skills absolutely key in facilitating becoming ‘teacher-in-role’ and engaging with students and colleagues in a radically different manner.

Ease of accessing this type of training will depend on the cultural resources on hand, but initially we would recommend seeking relevant staff training that may already be offered institutionally (eg on the performance elements of lecturing, or applied improvisation). Drama departments, or local comedy improvisation groups may offer classes, drop-in workshops or bespoke training sessions, and will be able to identify local performers who run workshops too. Two online sources we have found valuable are DramaResource.com, and the Applied Improvisation Network.

In our experience, a 1-day training workshop is sufficient to cover the key performance and improvisation skills, and a follow-up workshop or two (of performers only) is required to create and rehearse the characters in their scenarios. But let us be absolutely clear that TT does not require lecturers to have acting experience or theatrical talent – in fact the most important quality is a willingness to try something new and creative, and put self-consciousness and the traditional detached teacher role to one side. It is essential, first and foremost, to take the teaching method seriously, while taking ourselves somewhat less so!

CONCLUSION

This article presents a teaching innovation, Theoretical Theatre, developed in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia since 2012. The elements of TT set out in this article speak to different debates within the pedagogical literature: in relation to the teachers' role in the performance, training requirements, student engagement and learning. We asked if performing in TT is a form of acting, and how does it compare to giving a lecture? Does performing in TT redraw the relationship between teachers and students?

Our experience reveals that performing as theories draws upon elements of performance in lecturing, but goes beyond it. In TT we (lecturers) perform as theories with the awareness that we are interested in conveying particular understandings to our students, to enable them to discern the differences between the theories enacted and use these in turn to make choices and distinctions about the theoretical perspectives used in their own work. We found that training is a key component to provide skills and confidence to perform a theory in front of a student class.

Our experience of TT suggests that performing in TT does contribute to reshaping the relationship between teachers and students. We find that students are surprised and occasionally taken aback by the seemingly quirky performances. Especially in modules where students are then encouraged, later, to try it themselves and enact some of the theoretical perspectives they have been studying, the boundary between teacher and student becomes more permeable and less strictly defined: the students are themselves teachers who perform for the benefit of their peer group, to provide further insight and understanding stemming from their individual study.

We also reflect on the challenges and opportunities provided by the development of TT. We have emphasised how the TT performed in our School has been the product of a team endeavour built on reciprocity. This takes time and effort and we foresee this will be a challenge to TT in forthcoming years, as some of this team diminishes in number, due to changes in staffing. However, to deal with this challenge, recruiting new interested people to the team, as well as video-recording the performances so that they can be presented to future student cohorts are options we are actively exploring.

Our experience and evidence collected from evaluations of TT shows that TT is a highly-effective and engaging way of teaching theories: most students enjoy the performances, are engaged with them as new way of learning, are affected by them in terms of promoting their

own thinking and reflection about the material performed. An emerging area of our work is to collect more systematic, comparable robust evidence of learning outcomes, to substantiate the various evaluations we have to date. We will be conducting longitudinal and controlled comparisons of learning impact in the coming year.

As we have shown, TT remains a work in progress but, we (and our students) think it has been effective in reaching its aims and is therefore worthwhile developing further in more and more varied settings. We thus conclude by inviting responses/suggestions/comment from readers of this journal and, above all, to encourage others to try TT for themselves, experience its benefits and challenges, and work with us to continue to bring social science theory to life in the classroom.

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	Sustainable Consumption	Blind Date	Theatre of Power	Swipe Right for Sustainability
Target audience and module description	40min performance, first delivered in 2012 for Masters-level postgraduate students (20-30 students)	40-50 min performance first delivered in 2014 for 2 nd -3 rd year undergraduates (60 students in 2013/14; 70 in 2014/15)	25 min performance first delivered in 2013, for 2 nd year undergraduates. (55 students in 2012/13, 40 in 2014/15 and 60 in 2015/16)	20-40 min performance first delivered in 2015 for 1 st year undergraduates (150 students) and in 2016 for Masters-level postgraduates (20 students).
Learning objectives	To understand critical similarities and differences between competing theories of consumption behaviour.	To introduce students to a range of theories that explore issues of social and technical change in relation to the energy system.	To introduce students to how the three dimensions of power explain events and the relationships of power among social actors differently	To understand critical similarities and differences between two competing perspectives on sustainable development
Topic	Consumption behaviour	Energy system change	1932 Mass Trespass and access to land in the UK	Sustainable development
Theories	Rational Choice, Social Psychology, Social Practice Theory, Systems of Provision	Behaviour Change; Social Practice Theory; Transitions Theory	The three dimensions of power	De-growth and Green Growth
Staff needed	5 teachers (Show host, 4 theory characters)	5 teachers (Show host; 3 theory characters, and one teacher playing businessperson, policy-maker and activist)	4 teachers (facilitator, 3 theory characters)	2 teachers (degrowth and green growth characters)
Role for students	As an active audience, they are invited to ask the panel of theories questions about sustainable consumption policy and practice.	As an active audience. They are asked to shout out their opinions about which theory each character should choose to go on a date with, with a few students selected to explain their reasoning in slightly more depth.	Passive viewers of the performance initially; then invited by the facilitator to express their views (yes / no) on the views presented by the different theories, and ask questions (planted among the audience in advance, as well as their own)	Active audience in the run-up to the date (giving feedback to both characters), then passive during the date.
Follow up activities	In a follow-up workshop, students work in small groups to adopt one of the theory-characters and tackle a sustainable consumption problem (eg food waste) from that perspective. Students represent the characters in a short classroom	A follow-up seminar, towards the end of the module puts the students in the role of the characters and the theories and requires them to perform to the class how they think the dates between the characters went (i.e. how did the theories approach the problems,	Students encouraged to reflect on these theories and how they can be applied to understand contested situations during the seminars they present in weeks following the performance. Many students also apply these theories in their case study coursework.	Following the performance, students work in small groups to create new dating profiles for the two characters which bring out their core differences as well as their similarities. Students can also enact the characters to give date reports on each other, as an alternative, more interactive way of

	performance and debate in character.	how did the characters respond to this etc.).		presenting this analysis.
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Table 1: a comparison of all four performances (2012-2016)

