

# The Now and Now and Now of Acting Educated

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### **Abstract:**

*Acting educated is proposed as a useful metaphor for understanding the position people undertake when they become students of a university. In this role they become both audience and performer of their own education. This piece considers the value of self-consciousness in playing this dual role and argues that technology can support this awareness. Simple podcasts of classroom lectures provide direct unifying support for learning the terms and discourse of a subject in a focused manner.*

### **Key Words:**

acting educated, meta-lecture, Handke, Offending the Audience, Kaspar.

### **Introduction**

Arguably, it has never been easier to be a university student. Support in this role has increased tremendously in the last few years. The sweeping rise of accommodation services, writing and success centres mark this. All three have been stoked dramatically by the development of on-line technology. Collectively, various social media have created a cultural arm for students, in turn used by university administrations and alumnae offices to identify student interests, desires and needs. The paths within academia offer more support than ever, it seems.

One avenue left unswept is the embodied role of the student. That is: the individual's performance in the role of "student". University success or failure happens at the level of the individual, of course. And arguably, the conscious, mindful self-awareness of one's role as a student is central to success but receives little recognition or discussion. This paper argues there is practical value in making students explicitly aware of the larger meaning behind their "job title" of "student." Articulating this 'job' of "student" needs open, clear and continual discussion with the people undertaking the role. Making students conscious of this self-casting is an on-going important idea to keep before individuals on a regular basis as they perform being a "student." This article discusses some central considerations of the role and offers a perspective on supporting it as professor.

To become a university student requires dedicated years of study as secondary school student. Yet, the position of student changes significantly between high school and university. The self-directed nature of university unshackles the prescribed training of the high-school student. This shift in the nature of the role needs pointing out to students because they bring over-familiarity to the role in the early transitional years of university. Indeed, many first-year students flounder in part because of their own lack of intellectual direction or orientation. Such a situation can be avoided.

Arguably, there is strong educational value in explicitly and consistently telling university students that they must keep in character (i.e., their role) over the course of a term, regardless of their possible disinterest in any given subject. A strong way of framing such positive self-talk might be to ask them to act educated. To act educated is to know and enact your role as a student of academic inquiry. This involves a sustained demonstration of your acquisition of knowledge.

### **Acting Educated**

Acting educated is an unlikely role for first-year university students because, in truth, it is unfamiliar. It is unfamiliar because it is not asked of them. While they might privately think they should, the process is simply uninitiated by any specific university body. Why is this? To begin with, upon entrance to university, students generally have a breadth year during which they take courses in a wide variety of subjects. These experiences serve them to select a major subject area of concentration in their subsequent years. In this position, the new student is unlikely to see themselves in this role of mindfully-aware student when there is no immediate direct path of study. The larger certainty is that the pathway the student takes will change in the first several years. Upon arrival then at the university, students are not directed with any focused point of study. Yes, they have chosen a field, (say, “science”), but generally they are asked to survey four or five areas of this field in introductory lecture courses. Yet, this broad field before them demands flexibility in the foundational features taught as take-aways knowledge for the student. And here, mindfulness in the role of student (which is key to any success they might find), is overshadowed by considerations of field choices.

However, in the absence of a focal point of study for first year students, strength may be found in giving these students a strong sense of their role as student. This might be the use of getting the student to act educated. Laying this concept down as a foundational element to first-year university education holds great potential. Making it a primary signpost for first-year students would give them a firm step-up to the four-year process they are beginning.

### **Showing up casts you**

How might one understand the role people put themselves in as “students”? One could examine what students actually do. Showing up at large “cattle-call” breadth-of-field courses is a central experience for first-year students. Typically, these are courses with two hundred fifty students (or more) who attend a formal lecture, and subsequently smaller tutorials. Showing up at such a lecture casts you, confirms you and affirms your position as a student. There is a truism that to show up for work is half the battle. This holds true for university lectures. Showing up for a lecture necessarily confirms some level of participation in a course, even if it’s simply being present during the lecture. This

act of showing up begins the role of “student”. Yet, how does a student’s presence in such lectures begin the role they have cast themselves in? Here, playwright Handke (1967) offers insight into the process of attending as, and what it means to be, an audience member.

Begrudge me a fairly-lengthy time-travel experiment. To explain Handke’s (1967) work it is best to go back in time. Cast yourself into the 1960s. You find yourself in a small theatre, brought by a friend to witness a new play. There appears to be a bit of pre-show busy-ness behind the curtain, as the audience comes in and are seated by ushers. The house doors close, the lights dim, and you are in a familiar place, a theatre before the curtain rises. But then, you are not. What comes onstage is not what you expect. The play begins, but it begins by taking you apart. What you are doing there as a simple audience member is now what the play is all about. Simply sitting and watching a play comes under a hard full-court press. You are chided. You are questioned. You are reviewed, critiqued. You are washed-out and hung-up to dry as you sit there. You are complimented, and you are offended, no matter what you believe about what you see. You are called out for who you are as you sit there. Unforgivably. And it is this removal of smugness that stays with you after you leave the theatre. You are not the same person you were when you came in. Nor will you ever be again. Like a provocative university lecture, this play has changed how you understand certain features of your world.

Of course, for those in the know, they have guessed, the play you have been taken to see is Handke’s (1967) first and best-known piece, *Offending the Audience*--a notorious play for what it does to unsuspecting audiences. Indeed, you cannot go to this play and not be warned about what you’ll experience, unless you hide your eyes from posters and programs as you enter the auditorium. And yet, knowing the play’s title still does not prepare you for all that you experience.

The above time-travel experiment is important because it provides insight into the much longer experience of enrolling in a first-year lecture course. Also, it informs the lengthier experience of pursuing a university degree. Large portions of the population do both every year. And they do these activities for years at a time. Such lengthy and expensive experiences justify some consideration of the energy put into them. This paper’s position is that the act of taking university courses would improve if the experience were similar to being part of the offended audience above. By this I mean the university experience needs be slowed more, and its’ very structure discussed in a prolonged manner over a sustained time period.

Ideally, to get students to understand the experience of learning a subject, lectures would become like Handke’s (1967) play. Such lectures would de-construct themselves as they were taught. They would become meta-lectures. A meta-lecture is a lecture about the lecture wherein observations discussed include considerations on the lecture itself and the student’s relationship to it and how they might take in, position it and use it in their own analyses in practical ways. As Gooch (2019) notes, “An effective lecture *demonstrates* how the teacher’s mind works on the material” (P 197).

How does Handke’s (1967) play connect to this observation? Let me explain. Handke (1967) opens his play in a traditional theatre and has four performers enter,

come to the footlights and address the audience. In a lengthy address which is conceived of as a prologue to the play, but which takes up the majority of the work's forty-minute length, the four people make several features clear to the audience. They are not actors. What the audience is watching is not a play. They are told that a play will not be performed. They are told that nothing they see or hear represents anything on stage. Things simply are as they appear. The subject of the talk will be the audience who is directly listening to the actors. This striking work which Handke (1967) conceived of as a *sprechstücke* (literally "speak pieces" but often translated during the era as a "speak-in") is touchstone to theatre historians concerned with experimental theatre, specifically the possibility of nonrepresentational theatre. It is, in a way, a one-off. Conceivably, with this play Handke (1967) has reduced theatre to some of its fundamental limits. Handke's (1967) work of theatre asks the audience to become aware of their position as a group collected together for a type of social experience.

Extracting from Handke (1967), we can observe that, so too, traditional lectures bring together people for a social experience. It is in such a space that students are aurally introduced to, and asked to begin to, use the terms and language of the discourse they are being taught, at a very practical level. Into this one might observe that in such a traditional setting, making the student aware of their position in the classroom is key.

### **Living your Part**

For the last twenty years in the role of professor I have lectured students. Assured of my casting, I have come to wonder about their role. It makes me observe student actions demonstrate they are not aware of their position, their role. Did they not know that they cast themselves in their role? And did they not know this is the role that directly affects their future lives? Did they not understand they need to act their part? In being accepted by the university, it appears as if many of them were never told they have to learn their part if they want to be recognized in the roles they aspire to. Increasingly I have come to suspect this meta-narrative needs to be placed before the student and held there until it fixes onto them like a persona.

In my time as student in the 1980s and 90s classroom it certainly was not. My professors were focused on articulating specific field knowledge, more than being concerned with anything so prescriptive as student success. That was left solely up to the student. They taught content (the "what") not a way of knowing (the "how"). They were subject specialists, not teaching specialists. They had doctorates in a specific field, not in pedagogy. However, today, in an age when subjects can be endlessly researched online, what students need are strong instructors who teach the students how to learn the field. They need the lecture, and they need the context surrounding the lecture, which is part of the meta-lecture.

Let me stress that traditional lectures are foundationally important for students on a number of levels. Lectures allowed students to be in the presence of subject scholars to listen to their explanations of their field, and to do so while being introduced and then immersed in the language and the discourses of the field. This slow procedure, repeated week after week for months and then years, bring students slowly into an

understanding of significant issues in the field. And it all begins with the act of being present before the professor's conversation they have with the class (Worthen, 2015).

The act of reminding students to be self-aware during a university class is necessary because the role is long and unlike any role they'll have across their lives. It certainly will not be like any other role to this point. More importantly, it is a pivotal role for most. All who take it on, do so to succeed at it. So, reminding students of their role is a simple affirmation, in a way. One might see such an affirmation as copy-work for the mind. And while copy-work is easily disparaged, its process has value.

### **The Now and Now and Now of Being a Student**

Such practical considerations coupled with such analysis brings me back to Handke's (1967) work. Clarifying how this piece works demonstrates its value. It will show how a meta-lecture can make the student positively self-aware of their time in the lecture period.

"Offending the Audience" connects the practice of theatre (by the performers actually enacting the so-titled play) with the analysis of the play itself. The fun begins when the audience realizes the actors performing for the audience are analyzing the play as they perform it. (So, the audience awareness of the analysis occurs as they actually watch the play. The play becomes the analysis of the play they are watching, and applies to all plays, in general). The play does this by giving its audience—in their material experience of watching the play before them—the experience of being removed or taken away from, all they carry with them into the auditorium in their beliefs concerning the major conventions of theatre. How so? Let me explain.

In Handke's (1967) work, the play's analysis of theatre conventions happens right before the audience's eyes with what they see in this play. The audience experiences the absence of most of the conventions they expect that theatre requires to function. Indeed, the play's final take-a-way meaning is only possible with the audience present. This moves it beyond most plays and into an experimental edge of theatre, out of which the play initially arose.

In watching the play, the audience comes to be made aware of all the conventions of plays that they unquestioningly accept as part of its form. For instance, at one point in the play the speakers tell the audience:

This is no drama. No action that has occurred elsewhere is re-enacted here. Only a now and a now and a now exist here. This is no make-believe which re-enacts an action that really happened once upon a time. Time plays no role here. We are not acting out a plot. Therefore, we are not playing time. Time is for real here; it expires from one word to the next. Time flies in the words here. It is not alleged that time can be repeated here. No play can be repeated here and play at the same time it did once upon a time. The time here is *your* time. [...] This is no performance; you have not to imagine anything. [...] Time is not cut off from the outside world here. [...] Our time up here is your time down there. [...] Time is not repeatable even if we repeat our words, even if we mention again that our time is your time, that it expires from one word to the next, while we, we and you, are

breathing, while our hair is growing, while we sweat, while we smell, while we hear. We cannot repeat anything, time is expiring. (Handke, 1967, pp. 21-22)

Here Handke (1967) demonstrates and takes apart a foundational conceit concerning theatre. The conceit is that the performers in their roles are existing in a different time than the audience. While such pretense is generally accepted by audiences, Handke (1967) refuses this. Handke (1967) reminds us that all we ever have is the “now and now and now” of our lives. We are continually stuck in the ever-occurring process of our lived moments, even as we sit and watch once-upon-a-time stories.

Just as important is Handke’s (1967) observation that all plays cast the people who choose to sit before them as audiences. In turn, this informs what the university does when it selects its students to sit in its classrooms. They may think they are there as individuals, but in enrolling in the university, they have stepped into the lecture theatre to be students taking a specific course of study. And with this simple act, they then take up roles and responsibilities so much larger than many of the students in the course may even suspect might be at play. They are like the audience in Handke’s (1967) play. They identify themselves as individuals, yet they are also an audience. As audience to a lecture, they cast themselves as a student body. And I would argue that this needs to be made very clear to students. Thus, the need for a meta-lecture moment. At such points, students would be made self-aware of the very key lecture moments. They would also be reminded that they are the embodied presence of their own educational act at that moment.

Handke (1967) uses performers in order to attract an audience into the theatre. He then uses these performers to teach the audience about the unspoken conventions of theatre as an art form. Handke’s (1967) play crosses the usual performative divide by reminding audiences directly of their role as auditors. He makes them aware of the unstated but formative assumptions directly associated with the task they have taken up in sitting down as audience member.

Similarly, universities use professors to attract students into the classroom or lecture hall. But here students are not just audience, they’re also performers. The traditional university lecture casts students as both audience and performer. They are audience to the sage on the stage, and they are performers of their own learning.

In the narratives performed, theatre suggests its major concern is about a person, or groups of people. The stories of these fictional individuals serve as metaphors to take away and inform the audience’s lives. However, in its form theatre is about a group of individuals brought together, the audience. This can be simply demonstrated by removing the audience—without one, there is no play, simply a rehearsal. In this way, Handke (1967) is right in what he suggests in his play. Theatre is fundamentally about its audience. Universities, we must admit, are fundamentally about their audiences: a similarly gathered group of learners experiencing something together to develop themselves.

Proving this observation is easy. One need only consider the opposite. Conversely stated: being the sole audience member at a play is dissatisfying. Like hearing a tree fall in the forest, like dining or bowling alone, like taking a course online (or an entire series

of courses leading to a certificate online)—one becomes unsure the event actually happened or was worth the effort. At the least, you come to perceive that you would like someone else along to vouch for your perceptions.

### **Experiencing Classroom Performance**

If awareness of one's social and personal role as a student is necessary to create and sustain classroom consciousness, then this awareness might be a measurement to keep individual's attention on their own educational needs on a moment-by-moment basis in the classroom. This is important to recognize. The class-after-class grind created by the full-course load most students take-on for themselves (and promoted by student loan procedures) creates a situation where students become overwhelmed with multiple-course responsibilities. This quickly makes them lose the ability to be self-aware about their position as student in the post-secondary education system. Between new on-campus social communities, and outside menial labour taken on to off-set the cost of this new experience, many individual students are quickly moved to a position of going from class to class with a "get-through now and catch-up later" mentality. Doing so they lose one of the most important positions or roles they embrace when they apply to go to university. They lose sight of their role, or the performance, asked of them moment-by-moment in the classroom. The class-after-class scheduling grinds out and makes invisible any possible awareness of what students need to bring to a classroom and more importantly what they need *to do* every moment they are in a class.

### **The Now of the Classroom Stage**

Here, in these occasions, students need to be conscious of how so much like a performance their presence is in the class. Indeed, the metaphor is apt. When on stage, the actor is ever-aware of what is being asked of them. This is a position the effective student takes on for themselves: a consciousness of their performance in a class. This does not mean grandstanding by playing to the instructor or other watching students. It simply means an ongoing self-awareness, or self-consciousness, of the actual activities the student should be doing from moment to moment.

Much in the way an actor moving across a stage is aware of their next step, their next breath, their next words and exactly where they'll be at when the performance is over—so too the prepared student needs to be aware of several things: key moments of lectures or experiments; summative moments; reflective moments. These are all times in which the situation calls on them to undertake specific actions.

Of course, this can only happen in classrooms wherein the instructor has carefully planned their lesson. Often students are burned out in their attempts at keeping such performative focus by an instructors' poor classroom planning and management of the educational session. The instructor's own deficiencies as a performer, and manager of the educational stage they stand on, help to fail (or goad into failure) the performance of the student. Such a session becomes much like a play cast with enthusiastic actors, and gifted with a great script, but led by an unprepared director or stage manager. The will is there in the actors, but the director fatigues the process over the course of the rehearsal's hour with their own lack of effort, or consciousness to what is being asked of them in their own role. The lecture hour falls flat, and over a dozen weeks of this, the course ends with barely a passing grade for its instruction.

Alternatively, they might think of it being similar to the mindfulness they bring to their hour of a yoga class, wherein they are asked to pay attention to themselves and thereby mindfully monitor their thoughts. To not pay attention in a yoga class is to not show up in the worst of all possible ways: your time and financial windows put aside for the activity are wasted by you physically being there, but not cognitively there.

### **Leading Edge or Double-Edge Technology**

With new technology being rolled out to support students today, few in academia question whether such technology might actually take away or displace time-proven and effective pedagogical structures in the classroom. At the same time there is growing pressure on professors to increase technology in the classroom arguably to improve the educational outcomes for students. This is seen in a variety of ways: flipping the classroom experience; or fostering game-show participation in the form of clickers, or the use of in-class “apps”. All of these developments suggest there is a desire to be sophisticated with technology in the classroom, yet critics like Harris (2017) observe, as a society, “We have to go from being really, really sophisticated about technology to really, really sophisticated about human behavior” (cited in Morris, 2019, np)

Teaching university students to become sophisticated about their human behaviour must start with fundamental observations about their actions, their role as university students. So, while technologies have their values, there needs to be educational space to test the imperative argued here. That students need guidance in concentrating on simple personal engagement, continuously and consciously, through every classroom effort.

The actual classroom space of university lectures provides a place that is the principle site for education. Indeed, Paul Gooch in his recent book eloquently articulates how the embodied human experience is one located in space and time (Gooch, 2019). And in such places as the classroom and lecture hall students finally confront the presence of their knowledge which form their overall education. Society certainly keeps the secondary features of being a student in front of them with its images and idealized advertisements about student lifestyle. The explicit affirmations and expectations of the role of student also need to be there. These are elemental and need articulation for the student’s sake. This expression needs to happen in the space of the university classroom.

### **Listening after Class**

By far the most helpful technology introduced to my classroom has been the recording my lectures for students. Unlike “apps” and clickers, I simply give students an audio recording of the class session we shared. I record my lectures on a smartphone as a lengthy voice memo, with all the imperfections of the pauses and awkwardly-asked student questions. No editing. Simply recorded. I upload this to Dropbox and then transfer the audio file into the online course website, alongside any lecture slides. This opportunity for students to replay my talk with them is proving to be most powerful.

Doing so, Handke’s (1967) “now and now and now” of important educational moments can easily be repeated for students to study and learn. Listening to podcasts of lectures allows “the now” to be deliciously returned to for their study. The student can



keep that educational moment before them again. In doing so, the recordings lengthen their knowledge-exposure time. It is a returning to the directly-lived personal past that students of the class were present for. In listening again, students replay their own lived experiences to learn for their future improvisations which mark their lives. Doing so the students enact their own *Krape's Last Tape*, which provides an authentic and immediate knowledge that is unlike no other. Two results arise: students understand the material better, as evident from the exam essays which have really begun to be breath-takingly good. These students really know the material, because the primacy of listening as a function of human understanding is superior to reading, I would argue. Secondly, with students listening to me extensively outside of class time, they come to be familiar with my voice. The result is an immediate, active engagement with me in the classroom. They show themselves to be much less intimidated speaking with me, because they have listened so much to me in their own personal time, outside of class.

### **Be Someone like Somebody Else was Once**

Being an actor is hard, it calls for mental and physical preparation that is then channelled and held over several sustained hours. Being a student is even harder. University students are playing for their future lives and need to hold their role as student over sustained periods of months without a break. Having cast themselves in a role, they only learn their part as they show up in lectures and perform in the improvisation that make up their lives. They little suspect that their motivation for their performance is one that other humans have thought and written about before them. And in this way, they are following in the footsteps of other's self-cast in their own role of student. In that role they might gain understanding of the performative nature underlying this experience by seeing it reflected back upon them.

Such reflection is found in another Handke's (1971) play, "Kaspar", which fictionalizes the true story of Kasper Hauser, a young man raised in complete isolation who finds his way into the world. In Handke's (1971) version of this story the eponymous character appears on stage for the first time and we learn he is able to speak only a single phrase: "I want to be someone like somebody else was once" (np). Recognized or not, this dictum is a starting point for all those entering the halls of the university. While the phrase marks a known past, it openly allows for the unknown future we all face. More distinctly, it hints at the unknowable improvisations awaiting the student in their future selves as the someone they become. Reflecting onto the observer, the play makes one aware that we all hold the same position as Kaspar. In recognizing this comes self-awareness of one's own position as student. Here, Handke (1971) suggests that the starting point for building oneself is the past of others. In this way, acting educated is more performance than students might initially suspect. We all stand on the shoulders of those who came before us.

Just as significant, Handke's (1967) earlier discussed work, "Offending the Audience", reminds us of the importance of when people come purposely together as a group. To be in "the now and now and now" of living with other is at the heart of our society. Equally important it is at the center of one's university education. This cannot be reduced. The recognition of this fundamental human feature needs to be kept before us, as part of ongoing conversations we have. Doing so is necessary to allow individuals to develop for themselves as students of their own future. Finally, doing so

will allow these conversations to continue, whether in the lecture theatre with others, or with ourselves as we listen to conversations played back as audio recordings, or as we find them in other's writings.

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