# TEACHERS AND ACTORS. SEVERAL CONSIDERATIONS ON TWO SIMILAR PROFESSIONS

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**Abstract:** *I have always thought that I am actually performing on a stage when teaching. Many of my fellow teachers have confessed to have experienced the same feelings. So, I have conducted some research, employing the comparative method, to strengthen my thesis that when teaching we are actually acting, without even being aware of the transformation. The possibility of detaching yourself from the person you are in your free time, being able to take on the role of an educator is to be regarded as a beneficial shift as it puts focus on teaching, on building a deeper rapport with your students, on the communication process itself. On the other hand, both professions require true calling, otherwise boredom and routine are in the danger of damaging the connection that settles between the sender of the message and the recipient, the communion made possible through feelings and emotions. Numerous scholars have proven the similarities of the jobs in question in their studies, starting with the Antiquity, with, for example, Aristotle's famous Poetics and continuing with the modern classics, just to mention one of the genius directors and actors of all times, Constantin Stanislavski. These are the pillars that I have constructed my case on, together with other analogies and with hypotheses alike, along with on my own expertise of teaching. Teaching needs to be enjoyable with a twist of drama, to be remembered, and above all, to achieve its ultimate goal, to convert the knowledge of others.*

**Keywords:** *teaching, performing, communication, stage, Aristotle, emotions*

## Skimming Dictionaries and Studies on Performing Arts

Dictionaries are not usually generous with their definitions, but it can be a reasonable starting point for a research. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* gives us the following explanations: *acting* is "the art or occupation of performing in plays, films, television (Hornby 12)", whereas *to teach* is explained as "to show somebody how to do something so that they will be able to do it themselves" (Hornby 12).

Being more liberal and analyzing the items from more diverse angles, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* supplies more exegeses: "acting**,** the performing art in which movement, gesture, and intonation are used to realize a fictional character for the stage, for motion pictures, or for television"[1] and "teaching**,** the profession of those who give instructions, especially in an elementary or a secondary school or in a university"[2]. When it comes to the role of an actor or that of a teacher, the encyclopedia gets into details, putting the two professions on the same level. The most valuable gift that an actor possesses is his sensitivity:

> The qualifications of the actor are generally thought to be a good physique, a retentive memory, an alert brain, a clear, resonant voice with good articulation, and controlled breathing. While looks and the even more important element of personality are undoubtedly factors, their characteristics are difficult to determine; they are usually recognized after the actor has become successful rather than before. Many actors do not possess them offstage but seem to ignite them as soon as they begin to perform.

[1] https://www.britannica.com/art/acting
[2] https://www.britannica.com/topic/teaching



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> The central element of the actor's talent, as differentiated from his means, is a special sensibility ("fire," "enthusiasm," "spirit," in the words of 18th-century theoreticians), an ability to respond to imaginary stimuli and situations, which makes it possible for him to enter into the experience and emotions of the character he is to represent. These elements have always been recognized as distinguishing the great actor but were assumed to be beyond the reach of the ordinary actor; they were regarded as elements "born in him" and not susceptible to training. This is precisely the area of the modern training of the actor.[3]

The teacher stands on similar grounds, especially if we consider the history of the profession or the basic steps that one needs to take to climb the career ladder:

> teaching young children and even adolescents could hardly have been called a profession anywhere in the world before the 20th century. It was instead an art or a craft in which the relatively young and untrained women and men who held most of the teaching positions "kept school" or "heard lessons" because they had been better-than-average pupils themselves. They had learned the art solely by observing and imitating their own teachers.[4]

By *observing* the way senior teachers did their job, we understand that it could not have been sheer imitation, but talent because a young professional should have been gifted at doing it as an actor. The profession was passed on by observation rather than by specific training, rationally which is also the case of acting.

Furthermore, comparing the two professions more deeply, it has to be acknowledged that we do not turn from spectators into actors at the end of a play, whilst with teaching, students are expected to have gained the right skills to enable them to speak better English, to write better reports or presentations, to communicate better in a foreign language, at the end of a class. The results can be counted easier when an educational process of any sort is involved. On the other hand, the transformation that spectators can undertake when a play finishes is not at all visible, even though it stands valid. We could not possibly quantify the conversion triggered by an artistic event just for the simple fact that it is connected to emotions, feelings which can stick with the audience long after the performance has ended. Teaching is also about connecting, about transferring emotions to others, not only barren skills, but sensations that are so necessary for the process of communication. Therefore, we consider it necessary to advocate a common belief which advances the idea that one can learn more efficient if he or she likes the teacher that is to say when the communication process flows smoothly, supported by feelings, emotions, connections made possible solely by human beings. This is why, we strongly argue, that neither teachers nor actors would be replaced by artificial intelligence in the future because it lacks those mentioned above, especially, pure humanity.

Turning back time to support our idea with the help of some colossal thinkers, we find it inspirational to revisit the Greek Antiquity, the cradle of civilization for many societies, the foundation of our beliefs, mentality, social systems and not in the least, the birth place of arts and education.

Aristotle argues that imitation stands for our very nature. We learn by imitating, we perceive art by it. We would not reproduce the distinction Aristotle makes between *tragedy*

[3] https://www.britannica.com/art/acting/The-actors-qualifications-and-training
[4] https://www.britannica.com/topic/teaching



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*a*nd *comedy*. The interest of our pursuit lays in the reaction that theater plays, of any nature, induce into the audience. So, in his *Poetics,* the category of emotions occupies a central role: "A perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinct mark of tragic imitation." (Aristotle 45) One ought to advisedly not take words literarily, as the range of feelings can be expanded from fear and pity to joy, laughter, well-being, confidence, all the variety of good feelings that we would like our students to go through during the process of learning.

The manner in which feelings that overpower communication is expressed has to be something to take into consideration, too. The Greek philosopher makes reference to the body language an actor (may we add "an actor" in the field of education) has to employ if he wants to be more productive: "the poet should work out his play to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures, for those who feel emotions are most convincing through natural sympathy with the characters they represent" (Aristotle 61). Staying connected through empathy provides the key to excellent communication and learning.

For the process to become even smoother, the teller of a story can take the liberty of adding an element of surprise, an irrational touch to the whole rational and intelligible scenario. Then, Aristotle points out: "The element of the wonderful is admitted in tragedy. The irrational on which the wonderful depends for its chief effects…..the wonderful is pleasing as it may be inferred from the fact that, in telling a story, everyone adds something startling of his own, knowing that his hearers like it…" (Aristotle 95). To put it in other words, for teaching, it is essential to embrace creativity, to vary, to bring a bit of irrational into the classroom if you desire to be heard, apart from putting your soul into the whole operation. By "irrational" we understand that educators should not try to explain everything, every single moment of the lesson, be it grammar or vocabulary. Teaching is more memorable when it becomes personalized. Then it is also, remembered. We do believe that some things are better left unexplained for the students to emerge themselves into the language they are learning, by irrational means. They can, at the same time, learn, through questions, through the use of critical thinking which is sure to develop their personality, their specific way of seeing solutions, including the accumulation of knowledge routine.

On top of that, lesser hedonists as we might be as educators, teaching does not need to turn into an ordeal. Once again, Aristotle, the Greek thinker, makes it clear that "each art ought to produce, not any chance pleasure, but the pleasure proper to it" (Aristotle 111) Such a statement is only meant to make space to more questions. What kind of pleasure is, then, suitable for teaching? Most people would argue that it ought to be the pleasure of growing, of widening your horizon and your possibilities for your career, your status, your standard of living.

Do we learn more out of fear or out of pleasure? Is learning a cure or a fatal disease? Does it have the catharsis effect that watching theater plays can unleash? Is learning and knowing empowering? Is it therapeutic for both participants in the process, the master and the apprentices? These are all thoughts to bear with, we assume, if we want our teaching to be enriching for us and for our students, equally.

Some of these interrogations might be solved when examining a similar theory as Aristotle's view, on the art of acting, also seen through the eyes of intense emotions and human feelings, that of Constantin Stanislavski' s *An actor prepares*. The book written at the beginning of the 20th century comprises of a series of methods used in the Moscow Art Company having the main purpose of eliminating the artificial factor from the process of acting. The book includes general principles of art accompanied by excellent examples to be



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reflected upon by all actors. What is even more appealing about the work in question is the form. *An actor prepares* has revived the shape of dialogue with the help of which Plato putting his mentor, Socrates, in the main role of his writings, had supported the arguments of an idea, *maieutics.* Tortsov, the main character in the Stanislavski's book, actually embodies the writer. He engages himself in profound discussions with his actors to lead the way into making them more aware of their emotions when acting. Being built in the first person narrative, the confession of a young actor appeals to the reader more than a simple exposure of theories would have appealed. The book can also be read as a novel which transforms the act of reading into an even more enjoyable operation.

Stanislavski's work, an amazing faith confession, is no more a philosophical demonstration than it is a pedagogy for all educators fond of their profession. We advocate that this book ought to be introduced on the compulsory bibliography lists of teachers to be, in all systems of education.

Going back to the contents of the book under analysis, one of the first rules reported on, tells about projects, timetables, schedules, about organized work, engagement, about that particular blender of skills a teacher should possess: "the actor, no less than a soldier, must be subject to iron discipline." (Stanislavski 3)

An actor, Stanislavski states through the voice of his characters, has to have control over his methods and has to avoid repetition. The same is valid for a teacher. He also needs to rehearse and to picture himself dealing with multiple situations. Like a teacher needs, too.

Apart from that, the fear of facing the public is no match to any other fear that professionals experience at work. The fear of standing in front of your audience might be pounding, making you unable to move at first. Actors know it, teachers know it, too.

Fear comes at first like a sort of nausea growing mistrust in the heart of the tormented actor (or teacher, might we add). Then, as the performer gains the audience's approval, he shines because acting/teaching means throwing yourself into it with your whole body to gasp people's attention, subconsciously, intuitively. One has very much to rely on his intuition which can carry you along the right path. So, the professions under the spotlight cannot be restricted to planning and organizing, even though these features are crucial, as well as others. Intuition must be the secret ingredient to pay attention to. A burst of emotions might be preferable to strictly organized actions: "the very best that can happen is to have the actor completely carried away by the play" (Stanislavski 13). It is also preferable to live thought emotions on every single occasion, every time you play on stage, every time you teach. For the thousandth time, a teacher, alongside an actor should push aside boredom and monotony to make his act memorable, useful.

The phrase which explains it best is *living the part*, as it is put straight forward by the Russian genius director "you may play well or you may play badly; the important thing is that you should play truly" (Stanislavski 14)

A dilemma intervenes, though. As further as we might go on our professional paths, can we always play the part with the same lift? Are we always motivated, involved, physically fit to play the part? Some of the secretes in doing so might lay in some of the following ideas: have a well worked-out psychological technique, nourish on great physical and nervous reserves, add talent and lots of inspiration to fill in the blank spaces that are sure to appear along the way, Stanislavski advices.

Moreover, the connection to our audience is of an even greater importance. The actor's/the teacher's mimicry, voice, his gestures are not meant to support mechanical acting, but feelings, felt deeply and truly:



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> an actor is only human, when he comes on the stage it is natural that he should bring with him his everyday thoughts, personal feelings, reflections and realities. If he does this, the line of his own personal humdrum life is not interrupted. He will not give himself up wholly to his part unless it carries him away. When he does so, he becomes completely identified with it and is transformed (Stanislavski 196).

Take on the role completely to be good at it! Try to tear all connections to your everyday life in order to live the part: "When those lapses are frequent and subject to interpolations from the actor's personal life, they ruin the continuity of the role because they have no relation to it." (Stanislavski 196)

As a consequence, there should not be "a constantly breaking line of communication on the stage" (Stanislavski 196). Communication on stage "is ten times more so" (Stanislavski 196) than in real life. It can be regarded as inter-communication of the dramatis personae, as the Russian director puts it in his book. He also mentions two major types of communication: self- communication and communication with an object, be it a partner of a dialogue or an imaginary person.

Needless to say that in the case of actors, namely teachers, the desire to create an impact, the flow of feelings and emotions cannot be jeopardized "if actors really mean to hold the attention of a large audience they must make every effort to maintain an uninterrupted exchange of feelings, thoughts and actions. And the inner material for this exchange should be sufficiently interesting to hold spectators" (Stanislavski 197).

On the other hand, while communicating with yourself might be achieved easier, communicating with "a collective object" (Stanislavski 203), meaning *the public*, proves to be the most challenging task of all. When the challenge ends successfully, it turns into a celebration of all senses: "To play to a large and sympathetic audience is like singing in a room with perfect acoustic. The audience constitute the spiritual acoustics for us. They give back what they receive form us as living, human emotions." (Stanislavski 203). Still, the mob is diverse, people come from different backgrounds and they adhere to a multitude of mentalities. As such, the audience develops mixed emotions and feelings. Their responses differ, too. So, an actor, as well as a teacher, should not always expect to be adored, praised or looked up to. When in direct contact with the public, "you have better dominate it" (Stanislavski 203), Stanislavski states with no doubts. The process of communication gets intensified in this manner, but it is sure to give birth to astonishing results.

Stepping forward in our research to more recent theories about acting and performing arts in general, we cannot but celebrate a new confirmation of our hypothesis stated above, that of common grounds between teaching and acting.

More contemporary researchers have come to the same conclusions as their predecessors, as follows. The nature of acting is intentional which develops the actor's reflection on his actions. A teacher also needs to be reflexive, to seriously weight all his deeds and words. The context the event takes place in is a social one, thus the effects it triggers are social, too. Regardless of historical periods of time, acting has the ultimate target of unleashing emotions through the help of actors and by the participation of the spectators: "sensory...happen in our bodies beyond our conscious control." (Allain and Harvei 149) We get goosebumps, our skin blushes or our heart is racing when we live the part. Theatre has become a "service industry" (Allain and Harvei 150) now more than ever. So, has teaching!

As we speak, it has been observed an increasing influence of Asian performing arts such as yoga on modern acting which shines a new light on Stanislavski's approach: naturalism. On the other hand, we are sure to witness an analogous trend in teaching where



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traditional methods are abandoned to leave room for more spontaneous, more dynamic approaches.

A relevant example for our parallel is be found in applied theatre. Here, trained practitioners work with the spectators who become part of the performance. In India, for instance, there are groups of actors travelling around the country to act social problems such as gender discrimination, for these issues to be better understood by those in need and by those who can help. Therefore, theater can bring about social change, it can even revise rules and regulations, shape mentalities. The purpose is largely educational, therapeutic for the marginalized categories of citizens, uplifting for the entire society on its way of becoming a fairer world for all, no matter the gender, the status, the religion, the background.

**Performing in the Classroom**

The educational purpose of teaching does not require a more detailed demonstration. It is its very essence. The means that serve the goal are equally important. We would strongly advocate not to force learning on our students. The process needs mutual agreement, mutual interest and mutual involvement and respect.

While conducting our research, we have found many attractive methods to combine teaching with acting, be it consciously or out of instinct. There are numerous games, tricks, contests to be used in the classroom, especially for younger students. But older students adore a few sparks of drama, once in a while. Our interest went in the direction drawn so far by our theoretical support, that of acting in the classroom as a manifestation of a natural process along which feelings and emotions are stimulated, mutually.

Our research can lean on many recorded moments of acting in the classroom, provided by different channels for open education. For such reasons, we have selected a video from YouTube showing a teacher turning himself into a rap singer when teaching irregular verbs to his ESL students. The process is intentional and it obviously has a social target. As surprising as it might be, grammar can become enjoyable when sang by Mc Fluency, the dramatis persona created by the teacher in question. So, the lyrics put on a very dynamic African – American rhythm are as follows below:

*Stick stuck stuck*
*Relax repeat remember!*
*The microphone take took taken*
*You shake shook shaken*
*Wake woke woken to the style I'm creating*
*Think thought though*
*Seek sought sough*
*Listen to the lesson that I teach taught taugh*
*Don't sleep slept slept*
*I creep crept crept*
*I sneak snuck snuck up*
*You leap lept lept*
*I keep kept kept having fun*
*I'm never beat beat beaten I win won won*
*Do did done*
*Begin began begun*
*Shoot shot shot, no, I don't own a gun*
*I lead led led so I can feed fed fed*



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*The knowledge you need straight to your head*
*When I bring brought brought it you catch caught caught it*
*Sit back, relax*
*Don't fight fought fought it*
*Please don't freeze froze frozen*
*When I speak spoke spoken*
*It's real. You can feel I don't steal stole stolen*
*I choose chose chosen the very best lines and write wrote written them into my lines*
*And into your mind when we meet met met I'll bet bet bet*
*I won't let you forget forgot forgotten I get got gotten*
*Every head nodding; don't think about stopping*
*Just come came came*
*This is hip hop; I don't sing sang sung*
*I cling clang clung on each and every word you hang hung hung*
*It's not enough to dream dreamt dreamt*
*You've got to spend spent spent time on your goals*
*Please lend lent lent me an ear, come near and I'll lay laid laid down this new sound that*
*I make made made*
*I hope you don't say that you think it's junk*
*I hope you didn't say that I stink stank stunk*
*If you're thirsty for English, come drink drank drunk because I sink sank sunk all the competition*
*When they hear heard heard that I give gave given encouragement when I spit spat spat*
*Never quit quit quit, don't sit sat sat*
*Yeah, I like it like that*
*I'll even kneel knelt knelt and beg you to express what you feel felt felt*
*I rise rose risen when I drive drove driven throught the beat*
*Tap your feet as you ride rode ridden*
*Those that hide hid hidden*
*I find found found if you flee fled fled then I'll track you down*
*Now you see saw seen that I mean meant meant every word of the message that I send sent sent*
*I show showed shown I can fly flew flown*
*Now you know knew known*
*I shine shone shone I throw threw thrown you the ball; it's your turn*
*Grow grew grown with the verbs that you've learned*
*Grammar through lyrics*
*I draw drew drawn*
*Peace to ELLs, now I go went gone!*[5]

The message of the song incorporating irregular verbs is positive, the atmosphere becomes extraordinary, the students are responding, participating. Who would not want such a teacher in the classroom? We would argue that Aristotle would be impressed by such a natural born actor, not to mention Constantin Stanislavski who would be pleased to discover a gifted

[5] Learn English ESL Irregular Verbs Grammar Rap Song! Stick Stuck Stuck with Fluency MC, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZzKe1BC2XU (accessed on 5th of September, 2019)



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educator that stays true to himself, to his feelings, to his profession, after all. This is why we should encourage our acting skills to modify the old ways of teaching for our students' sake, for better learning experiences.

**Conclusion**

Curricula and methods might change through ages. Some languages might die while others might be more fashionable or globally accepted as trading coins for business or communication. One thing is here to stay as long as humanity shall live: feelings and emotions, what is to be found in our soul. So why not explore it to its best? Why not develop special training courses for teachers to step into the secrets of the art of acting side by side with actors, directors, screen players to create a unique product for the benefit of education?

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