



## Performing Leadership: John Cage's 4'33" Reprise

Lynn Fels, Simon Fraser University

### ABSTRACT

This narrative article describes key moments of meaningful encounters and learning through performative inquiry as university students and their professor engage in creative play and inquiry. What emerges is an understanding of how leadership might be performed, by students, by teacher within the classroom, within our lives. The first performative inquiry experienced by the class and teacher occurs within the opening minutes of the first day of class. Learning arrives through creative engagement and reflection, as students engage in creating one-act plays. An understanding and practice of reciprocal leadership, as conceptualized and experienced by author and students through their work together, invites us to reimagine ourselves in relationship and action with each other. Who we are in leadership, and how we come to understand performative inquiry as an emergent journey of collaborative learning through embodied creative action, dialogue, and reflection, is the heart of our exploration.

*An unidentified instructor sits in in the third row of chairs facing a podium on the first day of class, waiting for students to invite her into action. Students filter in, drop backpacks on the floor, and choose a chair facing the podium. Time passes. Two or three latecomers rush in, apologetic faces turn to relief as they note that no one stands at the podium. Throughout the room, a low volume of chatter rises in crescendo, pauses, then diminishes into uncertain silence as the wall clock is consulted, a soundscape that repeats like a sinusoidal curve. We wait, anticipating my arrival. Minutes pass.*

*Then slowly, oh so slowly, the instructor raises her hand. A scattering of arms immediately stretch upward like flagpoles; others are briefly raised then lowered, hands hanging like flags at half mast. Students cast anxious glances to those beside them, as if to see what others are doing. Conversation has ceased. Five, ten, fifteen minutes pass in silence.*

*This moment is a stop.*

**A** stop, like a child's tug on our sleeve, is a moment that calls us to attention. Notice me, a voice whispers, *this moment matters*, even as the moment passes, ethereal, temporal. A stop is a moment embodied within action. How shall we listen? How shall we engage? Philosopher David Appelbaum (1995) recognizes the stop as *a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity*, a caesura, a gap:

The stop lives in the interstices of action. . . . it gives us a key to a deeper engagement in a meaning that unfolds our lives. For it offers a choice. Either to remain habit-bound or to regain freedom in one's approach to an endeavor. (p. 15)

The stop, explains Appelbaum, "is the advent of an intelligence of choice" (p. xi). A stop invites us to recognize moments of discomfort, or surprise, or uncertainty that call us to question the familiar or the unexpected as potential action sites of learning. As we inquire into the event, the encounter, the relationship, the action that has arrested us, we recognize an opportunity to interrogate our lives, our relationships, our choice of actions and responses, and, through individual reflection and/or collaborative dialogue, ponder on what else might be possible. The stop is a catalyst, an invitation, an embodied dare that through reflection opens us to new recognitions and ways of being in the world.

In this moment of arrest, here now in this classroom, where 35 students await instructions, seek clues, indicators of what to do, we are momentarily suspended. We have performed ourselves into a difficult position. I choose not to release them from this uncertainty, this discomfort. I wait for someone (anyone?) to take action. What will happen?

*Twelve minutes and 43 seconds. My arm trembles, burns with the strain of being held aloft. Rustles of confusion, unease, curiosity, impatience, (fear?) circle the room of students caught in a performance they are struggling to understand. I listen to the emergent soundscape. Fourteen minutes and 56 seconds. I begin to panic. Will we remain frozen like statues in a tableau, unfortunate characters in a fairytale gone awry, until I am obliged by aching muscles to initiate action? Will no one perform us through*

*this moment? And then, a student in a chair behind me, asks, "Miss Fels, are we supposed to raise our hands?"*

I teach theatre in education to university students, who with the odd exception are not enrolled in theatre, but rather in psychology, criminology, history, economics, education. (One semester, half of the wrestling team crossed the threshold of my studio). Many choose the course anticipating an entertaining escape from the rigorous demands of their academic studies. Others enter with fond memories of days in high school drama. The majority are looking for an easy A. The drama room is a place of fun, of creative exploration and engagement, an opportunity to explore relationships, issues, feelings, through the imaginary worlds created by role drama, play building, script writing. What they, and I, did not expect was that our work together would call us individually and collectively to reconsider how we embody leadership.

*Released from the tension of my position, rubbing blood back into my hand, I applaud their perseverance.*

*"Congratulations! We've just beaten John Cage's performance 4'33" by 10 minutes and 49 seconds!"*

*I describe Cage's composition, 4'33" as I had experienced it: a motionless orchestra, the conductor's baton a single upbeat to introduce each movement. I explain that Cage's piece is a soundscape of ambient sounds in the room, primarily the audience's response—muted coughs, rustling of programs, anxious whispers, noise of bodies, nervously, impatiently, restlessly, shifting positions.*

*"I am curious about your response." I say to my students, as I stand at the podium. "What thoughts were you thinking as you sat there? Did you know the instructor was in the room? Why did you choose to do or respond as you did? Welcome to drama in education. This is our first performative inquiry."*

And thus begins our first class, and our exploration into the learning that is possible through creative play, inquiry, collaborative dialogue, and reflection. What intrigued me was my students' response (or lack thereof) as they sat in rows of chairs before an empty podium, waiting for the professor to appear. Looking for the expected, my students failed to recognize an opportunity to take action beyond the dictates of a familiar script. They did not initiate a creative or resistant response. They wanted, as they informed me, to respond correctly, to receive direction, to not make a mistake, as evidenced in the student's query, "Miss Fels, are we *supposed* to raise our hands?"

When I asked how many knew that the instructor was in the room, only four had read my presence and performance as an instructor, notwithstanding my advanced age, lack of fashion, and raised hand. Are we, as educators tasked to prepare students for active citizenship in the larger community, unwittingly training our students to sleepwalk into their futures? Maxine Greene and Hannah Arendt would not be impressed.

## Performative Inquiry as a Pedagogical Venture

The invitation of performative inquiry<sup>2</sup> is pedagogical, dialogical, and reflective, as we bring to our experiences in arts activities a reflective lens of curiosity: *What if? What happens? What matters? So what? Who cares?*<sup>3</sup> As a researcher and educator, I am curious about how we perform and are performed by our environment, our relationships, by the professional and institutional contexts within which we perform, and in the ways how our habits of engagement and expectations of others limit or expand the possibilities of who we are and who we may yet become.

When our habits of pedagogical engagement are interrupted, we are called to attention, invited to investigate the institutional and relational scripts that we perform, the contextual and physical environments and practices through which we encounter each other in our everyday living. Such interruptions are not easily achieved in the environmental and institutional contexts within which we engage. When I offer my undergraduate students open-ended assignments, they interrupt to ask, *how many pages? What do you want? Is this right?* trained to perform to someone else's expectations and no longer able to create their own criteria of what matters. The wonder of Peter Brook's (1968) "empty space" that is the drama classroom within which we encounter our students is that we may create multiple possible worlds to explore, and in so doing, surface issues, relationships, ways of engaging that can be questioned, replayed, reflected upon, debated, explored, reimagined. There is, as I say to my students so often, no wrong or right answer, just possibilities within the limits of our imaginations and willingness to engage. Accept the possibilities that are yours to explore; notice and challenge dichotomies that define your understanding; be wide-awake. Just as we learn to engage through improvisation in the drama classroom, we also learn to improvise our lives within the enabling constraints of what is a co-created world of relationships, environments, and expectations, our own and others. Be willing, I tell them, to say yes, and ...

I seek to respond in my work to Hannah Arendt's question to educators: Do you love children enough so as to invite them into the world's renewal, not as you imagine it might be, but as they will come to create it? Thus I engage my students in performative inquiry so that they might learn to bring a critical, creative, and reflective lens of inquiry to the work we undertake together, that they may come to understand how we explore and play together may inform us about our lives, our relationships with others, our choices of action. We engage in role drama, playbuilding, improvisation, soundscape, and tableaux. Throughout the 13-week course, I encourage my students to attend to stop moments—moments that tug on their sleeve, moments that they experience in our work together that trouble, that illuminate, that call them to attention—through writing a series of reflective postcards, which have over time become a generative source for my own learning and understanding of my practice (Fels, 2015).

## Awakening Leadership

*"Let's explore what just happened. Why did some of you raise your hands and then lower them? What were you thinking? How were you feeling? Who asked the question about what to do? You? Bravo! Why did you ask, 'are we **supposed** to raise our hands?' Whose script were you following when you walked into this room? What happens when the script is interrupted?"*

In our dialogue together, as they explained their actions, students shared stories that reflected a diversity of classroom management practices and student-teacher relationships. Many students were trained by teachers to raise their hand in parallel with a teacher's raised hand calling for silence. Others thought I was asking for their full attention, and were sitting patiently waiting for me to begin. Others had been schooled to wait in silence until their instructor spoke first. A few thought I was angry, which dismayed me. *Oh, oh! Here is a stop moment! How might I creatively explore practices of disruption and resistance within a space action of pedagogical responsibility, care and reciprocal respect? A tension that haunts every pedagogical encounter of interruption, within and outside of the drama classroom.* No one wondered if I was asking a question, nor chose, in a playful moment of recognition, to leap to his or her feet and to pretend to be a professor acknowledging my raised hand. Even though my students had entered a drama education classroom, no one recognized that I had arranged the seating and podium in a way to indicate that they were entering a performance space, one of play and improvisation. The script, our course outline, had not yet been introduced, and so they relied on their experience: the expected script of a university

classroom. Like Cage's audience, they anxiously, nervously, impatiently, restlessly, waited for the lecture to begin, not realizing that they were within that space-moment simultaneously performers and performance.

I was troubled by this experience, by the willingness of students to literally sit waiting, while I sat with my hand in the air for such an unimaginable length of time. The absence of leadership in action was disconcerting. Research indicates that leadership programs with arts-based practices positively affect leadership effectiveness (Romanowska et al., 2011), yet arts-infused practices have not yet been significantly implemented in the pedagogy of university classrooms. My students, who come from across the campus, are hungry for engagement, for speaking to what matters to them, for relevance in activities that have an impact on their educational and everyday lives. How might we create opportunities for students to actively interrogate their lives or imagine their worlds anew? As educators, how might we engage students in meaningful experiences of collaborative learning, reciprocal leadership, and reflective practice? How might we prepare them for lifelong learning, successful employment, and meaningful engagement in the worlds that they will co-create? What I've learned through our creative work together is that my students will, if challenged, develop an understanding and practice of reciprocal leadership and collective engagement that is creative, collaborative, embodied, critically and thoughtfully aware, and inclusive.

## Calling Forth a Leader

Creative activities in the classroom require students to be willing to work together, to collectively share ideas, negotiate, and attend to feelings. As the instructor, I never know how much to intervene, when to leap in to resolve conflict, and when to let individual groups learn how to navigate their way through contentious issues. Often, I find, the group that encounters the greatest conflict—if its group members succeed in working through their creative and individual tensions—is rewarded with a performance that its members can be proud of and celebrate. Learning dwells within the journey of creating, navigating, collaborating, problem solving, and decision making. The learning is embodied not only when seeing one's creative ideas being enacted, but also when learning how to surrender, so that something new might arise.

Three weeks into the course, students are creating scenes on an issue that we have collectively chosen. I circulate around the room, eavesdropping as the individual groups brainstorm.

"Hey, listen! I've got a great idea!" His group members nod vigorously, a couple less so enthusiastically, as he outlines his idea of the scene and assigns roles. Collaborative engagement and dialogue is limited as this student brings his concept of the scene to action. It's a pattern that is common in student group work, noticeably so with this particular student, that one student will dominate, and others will acquiesce to his or her particular creative vision. Thirty minutes later, they perform as he has instructed them to applause. After class, I call him aside.

"Listen, you and I know that you have great ideas. Each time you participate in a group activity, the group adopts your idea. And inevitably, whatever you do is a success."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well," I hedge, "No one else has a chance to see their ideas in action. What if you took on the role of a facilitator, and encouraged the other members of your group to make suggestions? See what happens?"

He shrugs dubiously. I too am uncertain. This is the first time, in all my years of teaching, that I have chosen to interrupt a group's dynamic and asked a dominant leader to consider a new way to engage. Everyone appreciates a leader who has ideas, who motivates a group into action, who gets the work done in a timely way, unless one feels unheard, or only one perspective is being constantly considered. However, in any creative endeavour, engaging in multiple ideas, trying out different dialogue, inviting disruptions, scaffolding one idea onto another, throwing out everything planned and starting again, although challenging, often results in creative work that dwells outside the lines of initial expectations, often surprising creators and those who receive the work. And through such a dialogical consultative engagement, everyone has an opportunity to see his or her creative ideas breathed into collective action.

"I'll try," he says.

A couple of classes later, I wander over to his group, a group composed of students from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences, each with different degrees of willingness to participate and/or to engage in anything that might seem risky. I listen in, as they struggle to come up with ideas for the latest activity that I've asked everyone to create, a scene that involves a suitcase and someone going on a journey. I call over the student with whom I'd talked about creating opportunities for his group members to participate in brainstorming.

“So how’s it going?”

“It’s really hard, trying to get my group to come up with ideas,” he complains. “They keep waiting for me to make suggestions.”

“You’ve trained everyone to let you do all the creative work. Everyone knows you will take the lead if they let you. They have to learn to be responsible too. Maybe they are afraid to make suggestions? Maybe they’re out of their comfort zone doing drama? How might you invite them into the conversation?”

My suggestions have pedagogical intent. He doesn’t know that I’m hoping he’ll learn a different kind of leadership, how to create *with* his group, how to invite and scaffold ideas into a collaborative performance for which all can share ownership. He doesn’t know that I’m hoping he will learn through facilitation to teach the others in his group to recognize that their ideas matter, that they have a responsibility to actively engage in this collaborative activity, that their presence matters. And he doesn’t know that I am learning alongside him, reimagining leadership as a responsibility of opening a welcoming space for others to play.

## Action Through Play Creation

At the end of the second month, I divide the class randomly into theatre troupes of five or six students. Their task over the next three weeks is to create an original one-act play about an issue of concern to them. I tell them that on the last day of class we’ll have a world premiere of all of their one-act plays. As inspiration, I’ve offered them a line from Leonard Cohen’s (1993) poem Anthem, “...there is a crack in everything/that’s how the light gets in” (p. 373). Over the next three weeks, students create their imaginary worlds on issues that matter to them: loyalty, trust, friendship, family relationships, belonging, consumerism, technology, death, unplanned pregnancy, loneliness.

Before they begin working together to create their one-act play, each theatre troupe brainstorms what I call a code of rights and responsibilities, its own set of ground rules for participation. Each group comes up with a different set of priorities based on previous group work in our class and in other courses, and many of the suggestions echo the principles that I have been informally encouraging throughout the term. *Listen to everyone’s ideas. Be supportive. If someone is absent you have to contact the group. Everyone does his or her share. Be creative. Solve problems collaboratively. Have fun!!!*

Their code of rights and responsibilities becomes the template by which they govern how they engage together, how they evaluate their work, and in cases of dispute, a reminder of how they had agreed to collaborate. As the weeks unfold, a number of students come to recognize that they have to learn how to actively listen, how to negotiate, how to compromise, how to encourage, how to be present. Conflict resolution and collaborative responsibility are a hidden curriculum.

On the second to last week of classes, I put on the hat of director, and each theatre troupe runs through its play in the studio. The other troupes are in the hallway, empty classrooms, working on their plays, until their rehearsal time with me. Together we figure out lighting, blocking, tweak individual performances, and address any disconnects in their script that need resolution. During the rehearsal of one play, I am stopped in my tracks as the scenes unfold before me. The play is about a university student who travels to a foreign country to teach English. I wince as she encounters “the natives” and teaches them the “proper ways” of the “civilized world,” from correcting pronunciation to serving English tea—a colonialist vision that surprises me given the steady diet of post-colonialism, cultural appropriation, all the things that I would have thought they would have come across in their other classes, readings, media, relationships with others. It was as if the clock had turned back to another time. This imaginative world created by my students was a troubling world ... *How shall I respond?*

“I’m having trouble with the portrayal between the teacher and the people she is teaching.” The student I had pulled aside during the break sighs with relief. *(Is leadership what happens behind the scenes? Why am I afraid to perform my concerns to the whole group? Why single out this student? Another stop moment to query.)*

“I know, I know. It’s full of stereotypes.” Her troubled eyes reveal her own struggle with the group’s failure to recognize its script’s cultural biases and inappropriateness. *(It would be a great teaching moment—let them perform for the rest of the class, and use their play as a way to speak to all the things that are wrong. But to do so would embarrass and shame, this moment needs to be contained within the group of students.)*

“So how are we going to fix it? Do you want me to speak with your group?”

She shakes her head, “I’ll do it.”

Taking leadership in the week between rehearsal and performance, she engages her group in a thoughtful critique of what they had created. Together, they transform their

play into a rich exploration of the liminal space of inter-cultural meeting, and what we may learn from each other. While I could have taken the lead role, she was willing to embrace the challenge, and her group was willing to renegotiate what it had created in ways that offered a valuable lesson for us all. Leadership is taking ownership and responsibility of working through challenges to create anew. Behind the scenes, leadership is not easily monitored, nor witnessed, other than among those who are sharing the experience. I received glimpses through conversations with her post-performance, and also from the reflections written by her group, that spoke of the challenges of surrendering what had been created, and working together, to reimagine a new possible world of encounter and learning.

Throughout the course, what I call e-postcards arrived weekly from each student that shares his or her learning. As I begged them on the first day of class, "Please don't regurgitate everything that you did in class. Choose one stop moment, something that tugged on your sleeve, and reflect on why this moment mattered, what you learned and how it might apply to your everyday life." Reflecting on our drama activities together, identifying key learning moments that occurred during our creative activities, whether during group conversations or in writing, developed within my students a practice of noticing, reflection, and emergent awareness of their own learning in relationship with others. The postcards along with individual informal conversations during, before or after class, became a dialogical pedagogical space, as I responded to their concerns, their questions, their insights, their words shaping my own learning and understanding.

And curiously, another stop moment occurs during the writing of this article: I learn from my students what leadership is, through our conversations, our problem solving, through reading their postcards, through reflecting on my own stop moments that arise in my relationships with my students, in attending to the tugs on sleeves that awaken me.

Leadership, explains one student, is stepping back so that others might step forward to offer their ideas, skills, expertise, imagination. Leadership, writes another, is being a facilitator, and encouraging others to actively participate. Students write about how they valued another student's leadership in their group, or how they were learning to collaborate, to compromise, to integrate each other's ideas into their play. Several write about feeling more confident in offering their ideas. Others are surprised that despite being shy, and initially afraid to participate in the early performative activities, they amazed themselves by undertaking starring roles in their play. "I never thought I would be the lead actor!" says one to me on the last day of class.

They write that they learned that leadership is a shared responsibility: everyone has something to offer if we are willing to listen. But, complains one student, *the guy who had all the best ideas in our group is no longer participating. He keeps asking us what our ideas are!* Yes! I write excitedly in response. "He is learning how to facilitate. So what ideas do you have? What ideas or contributions have you offered to your group?"

I am learning how to understand and embody leadership through the insights and experiences of my students. Reciprocal leadership is willingness to share what matters to us in meaningful and creative ways within a co-created space of hospitality (Wardrop & Fels, 2015); to collaboratively welcome challenge, opportunities to explore beyond the script and known environments, to learn what we do not yet know; to witness, to listen, to be present, to offer guidance and patience to each other and ourselves.

## A Journey Travelled

While I have been teaching a long time, it is only now, as I sit here typing, that I recognize the gift that this particular class has offered me, lessons that I seek daily to relive with my new students. I have learned to trust that others will learn to initiate responsible action, to step forward when I stumble. I have learned to enact a reciprocal leadership, which encourages student voice and agency, as students draw upon each other's experience, stories, expertise, leadership, and creativity. Acquiring a performative lens of inquiry as we engage in drama activities together encourages my students and I to creatively and critically reinvestigate our lives and the roles that we perform within and outside the classroom. Together, we explore how reciprocal leadership might be enacted, and how theatre in education may be a vehicle for asking the difficult question posed by poet scholar Carl Leggo (2008), "To what have I given my heart?"

Maxine Greene calls educators to wide-awakeness, to engage in our own learning with mindful awareness. She cites Thoreau: "To be awake is to be alive ... We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep" (as quoted by Greene, 1978, p. 42). To be wide-awake is to take responsibility for our actions, to attend to possible implications and consequences, to engage in reciprocal leadership through creative and critical collaboration, inquiry, reflection, and compassion. To be wide-awake is to be aware of the stops that tug on our sleeve, to understand that

stop moments are catalysts for new learning to be shared in communion with others, so that we might learn together. Hannah Arendt (1961) invites us to consider education as a meaningful endeavour that offers students experiences that will prepare them for action in the world. I would like to invite my students to reengage in their learning in new ways; my hope is that we might come to stop moments that will startle us awake, to learning that will, as poet scholar Rishma Dunlop requests, astonish us.<sup>4</sup>

“So, how did it go?” I ask my student during our final class, as the next group sets up the stage for its one-act play, after his group has performed.

“It felt good,” he says, “encouraging my group to work together, bringing in everyone’s ideas. They were so happy when their ideas ended up in our play. It made me feel proud.”

“I’m proud of you,” I tell him. “You became a leader, one who listens, who opens up spaces of opportunity for others.”

I hope in my writing, in my work with students, in my research to create dynamic learning spaces, where we may creatively and critically learn how to engage collaboratively and compassionately together to create something new, something meaningful, that those who so often learn in silence might feel welcome to come forward with their ideas; that their ideas would be embodied in collaboration and action with their fellow classmates; and that collectively we might reflect on what we learned, and why being mindfully awake to our learning matters. I seek in my teaching to enact Arendt’s natality so that my students might recognize themselves as active learners who have something of value to offer. Gordon (2001) best explains,

Natality stands for those moments in our lives when we take responsibility for ourselves in relation to others. In this way, natality initiates an active relation to the world. It signifies those moments in our lives (and there are many) in which we attempt to answer the question that Arendt argues is at the basis of all action and that is posed to every newcomer to the world: “Who are you?” (p. 21)

My students have taught me what leadership might be, and how to embody leadership. Investigating curriculum and ways of being in learning through performative inquiry encourages students to look at the scripts they perform in their own everyday lives, and to ask: *who is performing whom? For what purpose?* Learning how to engage with others through performative inquiry highlights the importance of attending to the relationships, the language, the contextual and physical environments that perform us,

so that we might learn to critically and creatively interrogate and accept wide-awake responsibility for our choices of action.

By being wide-awake and attentive to the tugs on the sleeve that stop us even as we leap forward in action, we may come to a reflective, responsible practice of relational engagement. Encouraging students to take thoughtful action and nurturing a willingness to respond with creative agency to those events which surprise or disrupt them—a solitary hand raised in the air, “like a wavin’ flag” (K’naan, 2009)—prepares young adults and ourselves to fully engage in our lives as active compassionate citizens.

*Two years ago, I attended a performance of John Cage’s 4’33”. The audience present knew the history and intent of the composition. We dutifully sat as silently as we could during each movement, the pauses between filled with suppressed coughs and shifting bodies. We listened to each other listening. What would happen, I wondered, if I interrupt this expected performance, and slowly begin to raise my hand?*

## Notes

1. John Cage’s 4’33” was first performed by pianist David Tudor on August 29, 1952, at Woodstock, New York.
2. For articles introducing performative inquiry, see Fels, 1998, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015.
3. My gratitude to Dr. Karen Meyer for these questions along with my son who piped up with the answer, “Who cares?” when Karen introduced his grade four class to scientific inquiry and shadows and asked what questions do scientists ask.
4. In conversation, date unknown. Dr. Dunlop, a noted poet and scholar, in reply to her students’ questions about what she wanted for her assignments, would say that she wanted her students to astonish her.

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**Lynn Fels** is Associate Professor at Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada. Lynn was Academic Editor of *Educational Insights*. She co-authored *Exploring Curriculum: Performative Inquiry, Role Drama and Learning* with George Belliveau (Pacific Educational Press, 2008), and has written numerous articles and chapters about performative inquiry, arts across the curriculum, arts and leadership, and curriculum as lived experience. Lynn is also a co-editor of *Arresting Hope: Women Taking Action in Prison Inside Out* (Inanna Press, 2015). Lynn is one of six co-investigators in a major five-year Canadian SSHRC Partnership Grant, researching arts for social change in Canada.