

Performing Social Science



Howie Becker's notes from the class he co-taught with
Dwight Conquergood at Northwestern University in 1989 and 1991
with Dianne Hagaman's photographs from the 1991 class

For Dwight
(1949-2004)



Dwight and Howie walking to their classroom in Annie Mae Swift Hall, winter 1991

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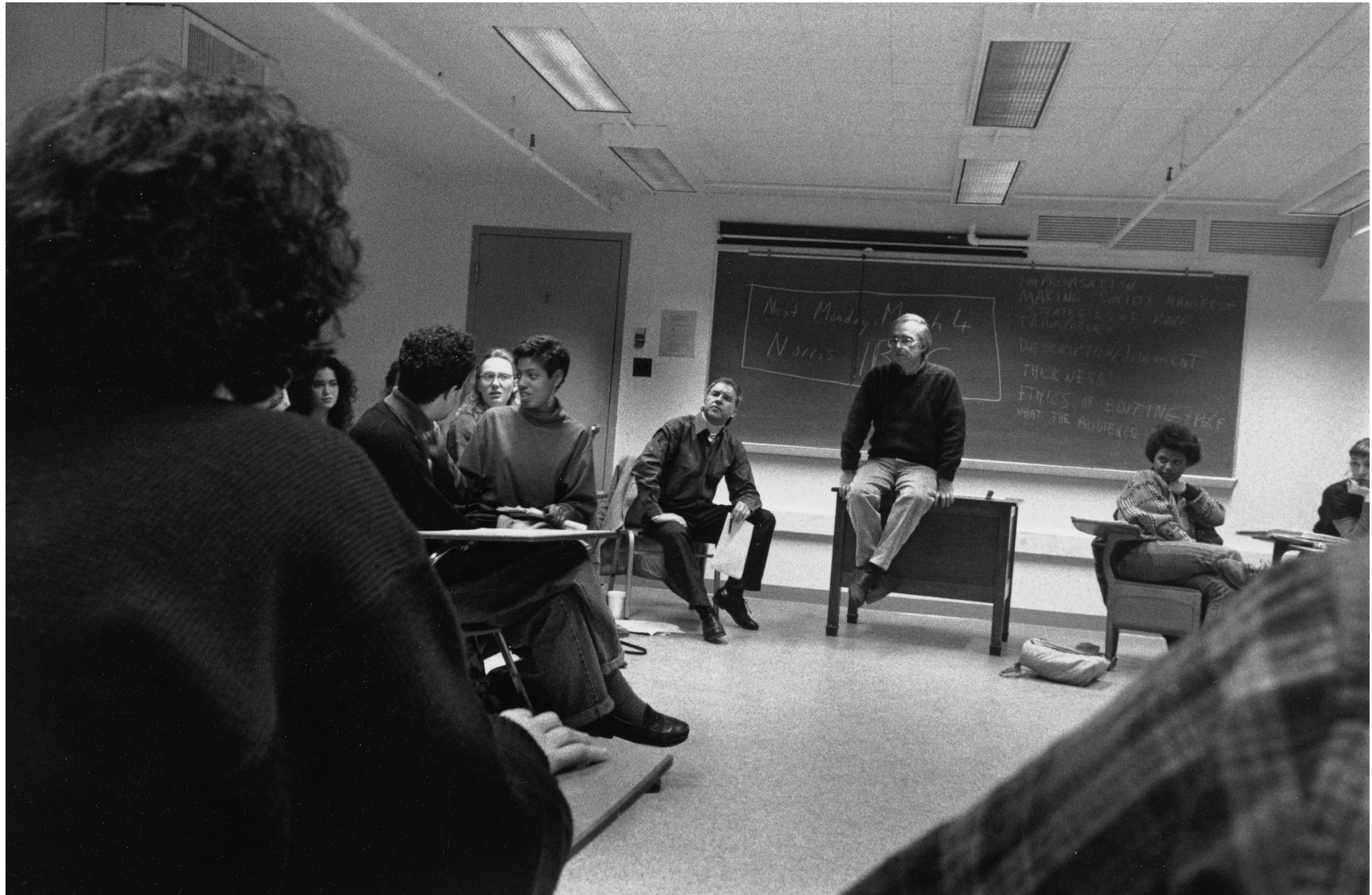
Introduction

“Performing Social Science” was the name of a class Dwight Conquergood and I twice taught together at Northwestern University in 1989 and 1991. Dwight was a professor in the Performance Studies Department there and I was a professor in the Sociology Department.

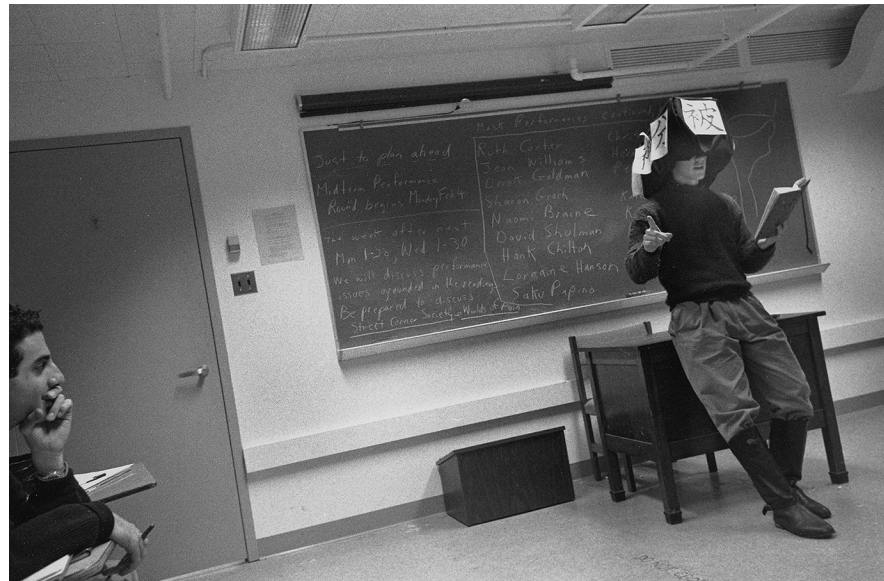
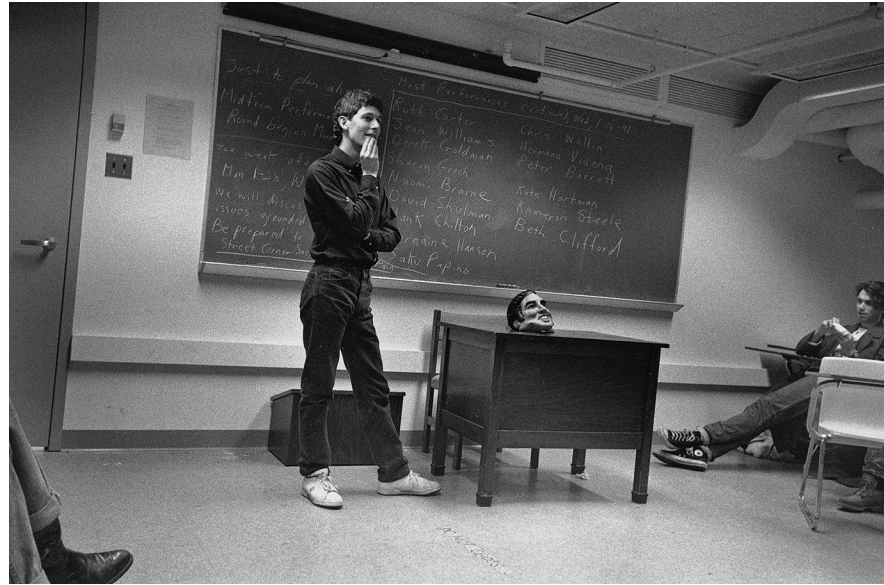
How did the class come about? Dwight received a Ph.D. in Performance Studies from Northwestern in 1977 and became a professor in that department in 1978. He was a leader in studying society as performance and he and I met sometime in the late 1970’s, about the time I became interested in presenting the results of sociological research in the form of a dramatic performance. Once we found each other it didn’t take long before we had the idea of exploring these ideas by teaching together, in classes containing students from our respective fields. We didn’t know what that would let us in for but were ready to experiment and find out.

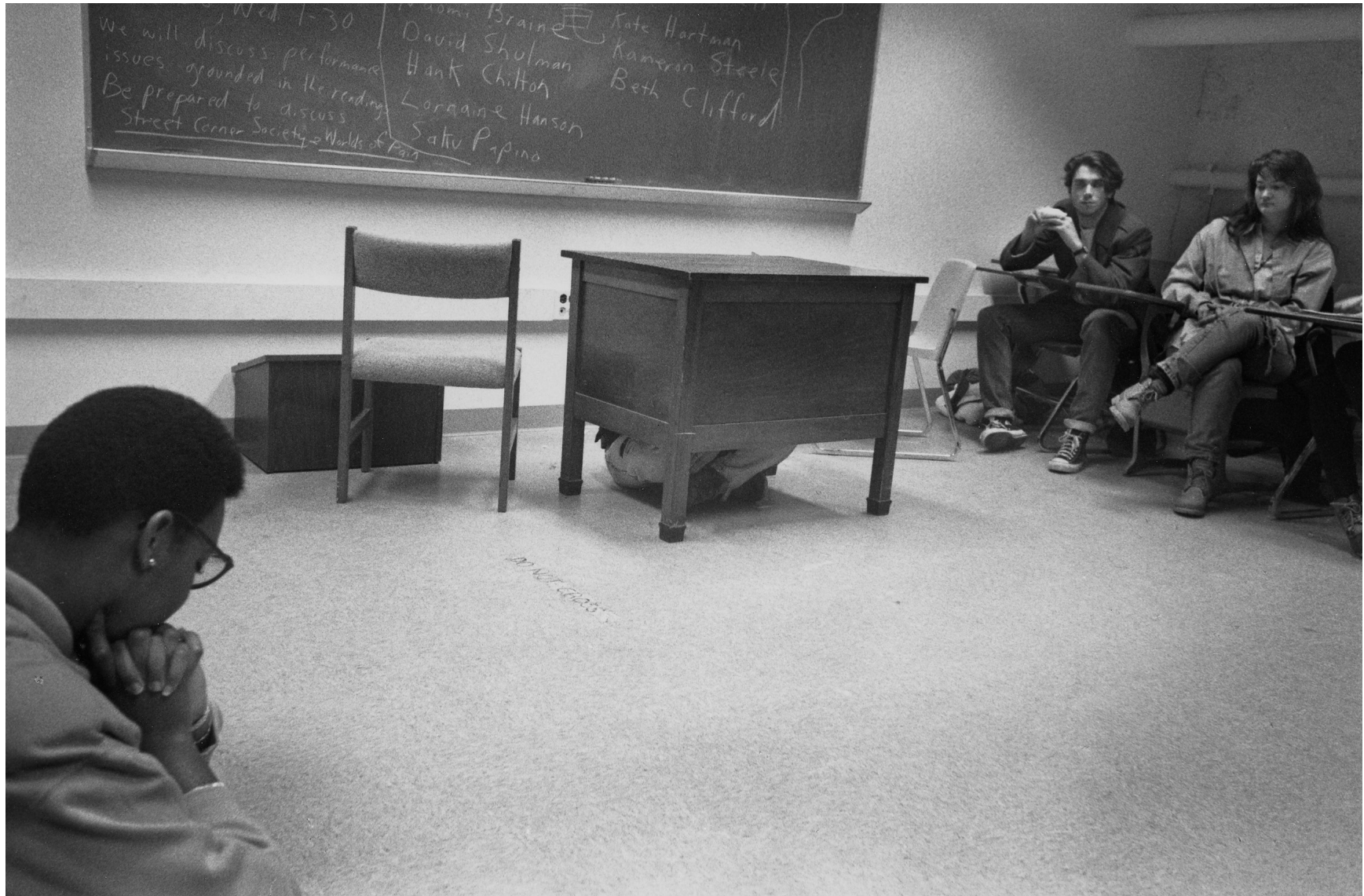
Dwight died prematurely in 2004. I wrote the notes that follow while these classes were happening, and I have left them in their raw form and in the present tense to keep the “of the moment” document they are. I left Northwestern to move to Seattle in the summer of 1991 and so Dwight and I couldn’t continue our collaboration. We always intended to write something about the class but never did, but we learned a lot and it stayed with me.

The second time we taught the class, in the winter of 1991, Dianne Hagaman, my wife, came to all the classes and photographed what went on. She photographed from the perspective of a participant in the class: sitting at a desk when everyone else did and moving around the classroom only when everyone else was up and moving too. Her photographs appear throughout this document.









Notes on the Conquergood/Becker Performance Class, 1989 (HSB)

Dwight Conquergood and I are now about halfway through our performance class. It's time to describe the class, some of the things the students have done, and offer a few modest observations.

The class grew out of our discovery of some strong mutual interests. I had become interested in performance in a number of ways: through my experiences interviewing theater people in San Francisco for a sociological research project I never finished; through a family connection to the founders of the improvisational theater company Second City; through scattered and more or less random reading in rhetoric and the sociology of science which had interested me in alternatives to the standard academic ways of presenting results; and from the experiments in performing our research on theatrical communities that Michal McCall, Lori Morris and I had engaged in. Dwight had a more "legitimate" professional interest in performance—after all, he taught in a department that bears that name—and did work that he described as anthropological.

When Dwight discovered that I was wandering into performance territory we began some serious talks, which ended up in our agreeing to offer this class jointly. We didn't expect so many students to be interested and so didn't take precautions to limit the number who would enroll.

We ended up with about forty students, pretty evenly

divided between graduates and undergraduates and between students in theater and performance, on the one hand, and various kinds of social science broadly construed (that is, sociology, education, history, human development, etc.) on the other. Some of the theater and performance students, graduate and undergraduate, were well-known to their colleagues and teachers as "good actors" or "good performers." The graduate students in sociology and related disciplines mostly had no background in performance and that was true of most of the undergraduates outside the performing arts as well. That's led to a fair amount of fear among the "non-actors," as they contemplate "giving a performance" for their more knowledgeable (so they think) classmates.

The atmosphere of the class has been unbelievably supportive. If you're used, as Northwestern teachers usually are, to competitive students who aren't overly kind to each other, being more oriented to getting praise (and a good grade) from the teacher than helping their colleagues, this class would be a welcome surprise. From the beginning, as the students with little or no experience in "acting" more and more openly confessed their fears, the students with a performance background said that they shared those fears, that they never got over being nervous, that that was perfectly natural. And went on to say that they, the performance students, were equally nervous, since they know nothing about social science, and certainly not how

to perform it. We were quick to say that no one knew how to do that, that the class was really an exploration by all of us, jointly, of uncharted territory.

We spent the first few weeks of the class talking about what we had in mind (though not very well focused or defined) and about some of the readings we had assigned (Schechner, Bakhtin, Becker, Conquergood, etc.). We quickly fell into some predictably ritualized arguments, in which all the students participated energetically. Here were some of the standard problems we talked about and failed to find solutions to (why did we expect to find solutions? no one else ever has):

1. *Truth*. Does it matter whether the material we perform is “true” in some “scientific” sense? After all, the theater students said, what’s the difference as long as you convey some emotional truth, isn’t it enough just to create an effect?

2. *Bias*. And, anyway, isn’t it impossible in principle to ever get away from your own biases, so that whatever you do is, after all, “just your opinion”? If so, why bother trying to do something about it?

3. *Science*. Isn’t it necessary to be as accurate as you can? Won’t it be cheating or unscientific to change even small details of something that was observed or recorded in order to have a “better performance”?

4. *Unknowability*. We never know what anyone “really” thinks or feels, because in the end we can’t get into their heads and

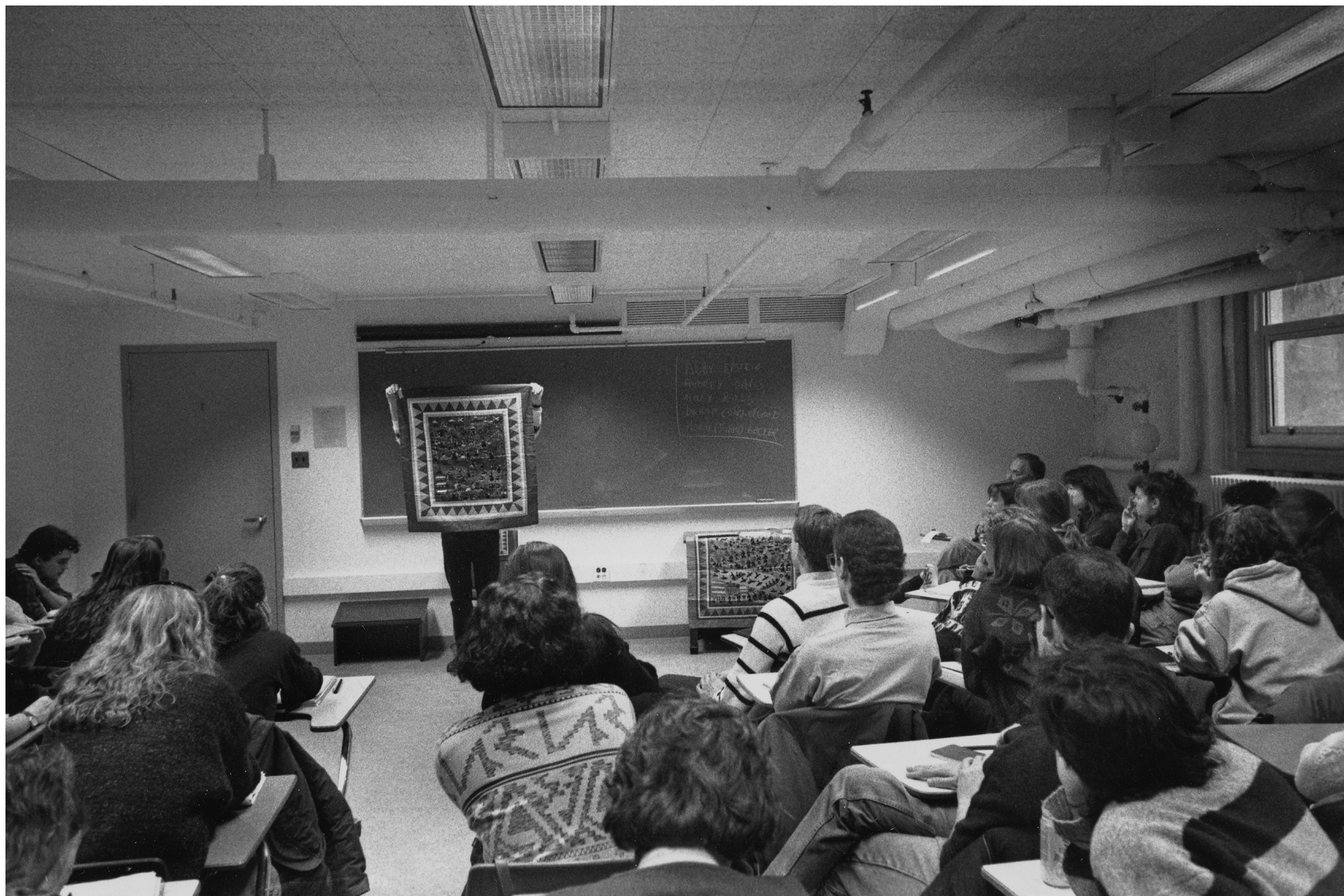
skins. So, we are engaged in a hopeless task if we want to be “accurate.” All that’s left is opinion and personal feelings.

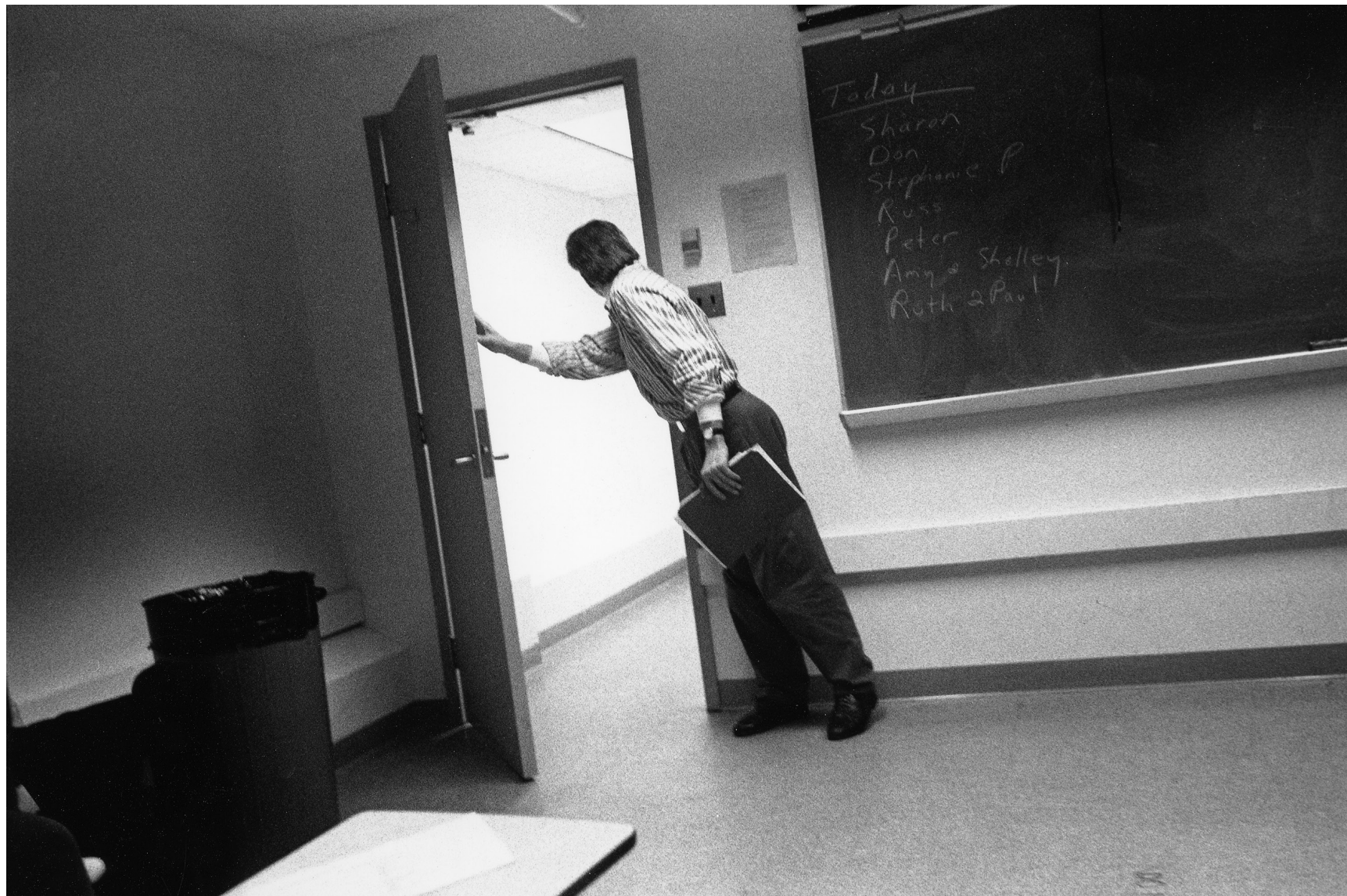
5. *Acting*. Many students, with no training in theater techniques, worried about their ability to perform. They couldn’t, they said, “act.” Some responded that this wasn’t acting, so it was OK, they didn’t really have to do acting. Bernie Beck—a colleague from sociology who sat in on the class, who is also a working actor, kept us honest about this, insisting that it was all acting, just as I had begun by insisting that the driest reading of a paper at a professional meeting or delivery of a lecture to a class was a “performance,” whether we called it that or not, or recognized that that’s what we were doing. “What was acting?” became a serious question for us.

6. *Emotion*. So did the question of what the role emotion had in social science. Were we allowed to have it at all, or would it bias what we did as we gathered data or analyzed it? Should we (could we legitimately?) express emotion in social science work, either in writing or in performance? Was there something rhetorically “unfair” about adding overt emotion to a social science text?

These arguments, as we said, were highly ritualized. Intelligent undergraduates, let alone graduate students, have been over this ground before and know all the attacks and defenses by heart. Dwight argued forcefully against these ritualized positions, for a Bakhtinian dialogical approach, which recognized, indeed insisted, that words and speeches had coexisting multiple meanings, which needed to be







recognized and accepted. I said similar things, from a more (Thomas) Kuhnian position, insisting that there was no neutral observational language to report results of social science investigations in.

During those first weeks, both Dwight and I had to be out of town for two class sessions, and several of the advanced students in performance undertook to work with people who thought they needed a little coaching in reading aloud, so that they wouldn't feel so nervous about it all. We have only hearsay about these little workshops, but they seem to have been useful.

During the third week of class we had some preliminary entertainment. Richard Schechner came from NYU (where he was a professor in the theater department) to observe and critique a performance of one of the pieces Michal McCall, Lori Morris and I had worked up out of our theatre research project. In this piece (published in *Social Problems*) we present an analysis of local theatrical communities and a lot of long quotations from our interviews. We did the piece and Schechner spent an hour and a half discussing what we had done, offering criticisms, suggestions, and providing a large and elaborate context for it. This also let the students see "their teacher" Doing It, whatever It was, and that may have quieted some anxieties. Who knows?

We were spared endless repetitions of these arguments by the arrival of "midterms." We had assigned students two performance tasks: the preparation of a final piece, which we encouraged them to develop jointly, in groups (largely

because there were so many of them that we would never get through with the presentations unless they worked together) and a midterm project, in which students would individually do a three to five minute piece of their own choosing and devising. We hadn't quite realized that this meant that a large amount of the class would be devoted to students performing for us and each other. Since there were forty students, we had to set aside two and a half weeks so that everyone could be seen, at the rate of eight a day, with a little time for discussion of each piece. Dwight and I laid back somewhat in these discussions, as did Bernie Beck, who attended class as faithfully as if he was getting paid (or at least getting credit) for it. We let the students do the bulk of the discussing, although all three of us eventually chimed in, just not claiming any specially privileged place in the talk.

Given the "ambiguity" of the midterm assignment of performing a three to five-minute piece based on some kind of social science materials, the students came up with a dizzying variety of performances. But not so varied as to defy classification in several ways. And not so varied that we haven't found some serious general lessons in them.

Well, what did the students do? We gave them two social science books to use as sources, if they didn't have anything else in mind: *Everything in Its Path*, Kai Erikson's account of a flood in a West Virginia mining valley which resulted in 125 deaths, filled with first-hand accounts by survivors; and *Uncoupling*, Diane Vaughan's analysis of the process of couples breaking up, based on 100 interviews with people who had had that experience. We had imagined that the

social science students in the class would use their own field notes, which turned out, mostly, not to be true. Perhaps half of the students used one of these two books. Others used other books containing first-hand narratives or interviews, other texts from the course, documents they had collected, etc.

Some of them focused on first-hand accounts, while others were equally or more interested in the voice of the social scientist, as that was revealed in what authors said when they introduced and interpreted their raw data, and explained how they had gathered and used it to produce the resulting analysis. For some, the result was a critique of social science, usually implicit. For others, it was making something the social science text reported more “real.” For still others, the exercise let them introduce materials of their own and give them a new meaning suggested by social science.

Many of the performances used props of one kind or another. The room we met in contained the usual stuff: a blackboard along the front wall, chairs, a desk. We imported a lectern belonging, according to the stencil painted on it, to the Department of Interpretation, which had turned into the Department of Performance Studies to which Dwight belonged. Students brought lots of other stuff: tape recorders (quite a few), printed handouts of various kinds, dolls, small items of clothing, and so on. Although we had defined the project as a solo performance, several ignored that and got some of their colleagues to help them.

I had early on told them about a photography teacher (Philip Perkis) who had locked a class I was in in a big studio for

three hours, with no instructions as to what we were to do. We chased each other around trying to make “candid shots” for an hour. Then he whistled through his fingers and got our attention and said, simply, that whatever we had been doing, we should now do something different. Different how? However we liked, as long as it was different. What a brilliant suggestion! I suggested that as a guiding principle to the class, by way of letting them know that they shouldn’t take anything as given or necessary, that they shouldn’t be bound by their own or traditional notions of how something like this might be done. They were very good about that, and one or another broke practically every rule we or they might have thought of.

It would be wonderful, but impractical, to describe every “midterm” project. A number more or less simply read their chosen texts aloud, with more or less “interpretive” coloring (“added emotion” or “acting,” as I think some of them thought of it). Some began with a brief framing statement drawn from the book they were using. So, they might read a short analytic statement by Vaughan about some portion of the uncoupling process and follow it with a portion from one of her interviews.

One student, for instance, who had himself grown up in a mining community of the kind Erikson’s book described and with an accent that might have come from such a place, read his short statement about how he had not edited or “cleaned up” the interviewees’ prose, and then just read several statements about the flood in a soft voice.

Others used a variety of devices to make the analyst's voice problematic, something to be interpreted:

One student handed out pages of a short selection from Vaughan's book, analyzing the way the initiators of a breakup complain about specific behaviors of their partner, but in fact are no longer interested, though the partner doesn't know this, in getting the partner to change. Each page had a different fragment highlighted in yellow. He read the selection aloud and others joined him when their fragment came up. This chorus surrounding you gave a concrete generality (if there is such a thing) to the analytic prose.

Some students looked for ways to make the multi-meanings of the interview materials visible:

One student read an interview quote (Vaughan, p. 217), from someone fearing to tell very religious parents about the breakup of a marriage, three times. Each time he gave it a different phrasing: scared, worried, flippant and irritated. Then he played a tape on which all three versions occurred at once, overlapping and blending into each other.

Some students tried embodying the analysis in "scenes" based on the data in the text: the same student sat at a table and ate a grapefruit while a woman's voice on a tape read her complaints about many things only to be told in a casual tone, (and here he would interrupt his eating), "Oh, I'm sorry, I won't do that again."

The relationship between the performer's voice and attitudes

and those of the voices in the material being performed sometimes claimed attention:

One student, a large young Black man, read a speech on the troubles of the race, by a Black woman from the era of slavery. He began by tying a lavender scarf around his head, covering his eyes, and gradually removed it. He said explicitly, as he proceeded, that first he was reading her words, then (exposing his face more) that he was reading for all Black women. And finally announced that you had heard Maria Stewart's voice, then the voices of all Black women, and finally his own voice, and that all these people shared these ideas and feelings.

Some ingeniously created pieces which produced new "raw data":

A young man gave each person in the room a card bearing the name of "a woman in his life" and told us to ask about any of them we wanted to know more about. People did: "Who was Donna Jones?" "Tell me about Jennifer Goldstein." "I'd like to know about Sarah Miller." In response, he told fifteen to thirty second stories which revealed that, for instance, one was his first date, another a first grade teacher, a third an aunt who (he truly shocked people with this) had had, he learned later, an affair for several years with his father.

Doing this put his classmates in the position of interviewers and, in answer to our questions, gave us the raw material for an analysis of networks across gender lines. I could imagine

using exactly such a technique in all sorts of data gathering situations.

Students added “emotion” to texts which, on the surface, did not contain any such thing:

One student read several paragraphs, illustrated by tables written on the blackboard, from a paper about the effect of race on the number of years of school a person completed and whether or not the child lived in a female-headed household. He started out in a dry academic manner but soon became passionate about the percentages he was citing: “There is FULLY a four per cent difference between the two groups, and in the black group the difference RISES TO EIGHT PERCENT.” By the end, he was in a rage, sweating and shouting, having successfully made visible the emotion that none of us doubted could be found under the research.

Many students felt that the “no emotion” of the social science texts was either phony or, and this was more upsetting for some, callous, that the social scientists were denying the human reality of the terrible stories they analyzed:

One student read from a work on bereavement. First, she read from the section on research methods, which included a statement about how the bereaved people interviewed had or hadn’t found an “acceptable pattern of life.” She looked up and said, angrily and contemptuously, “Acceptable pattern of life?!”, as if to say that such an academic phrase did not do justice to the depths of feeling involved. Then she read, with

great feeling and very dramatically, from an interview with a woman whose husband had died three weeks earlier. The reading, making the emotion she felt visible as a reproach to the statements of the researchers.

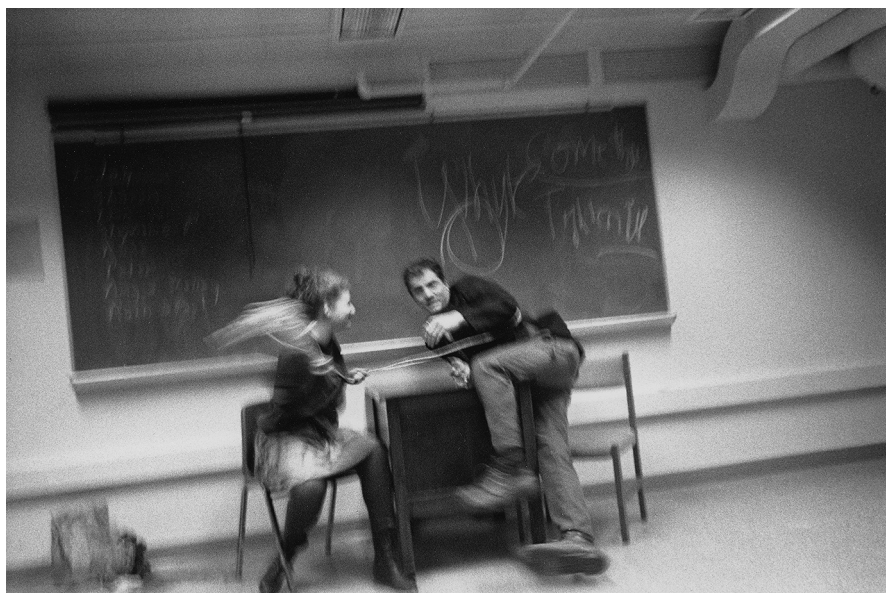
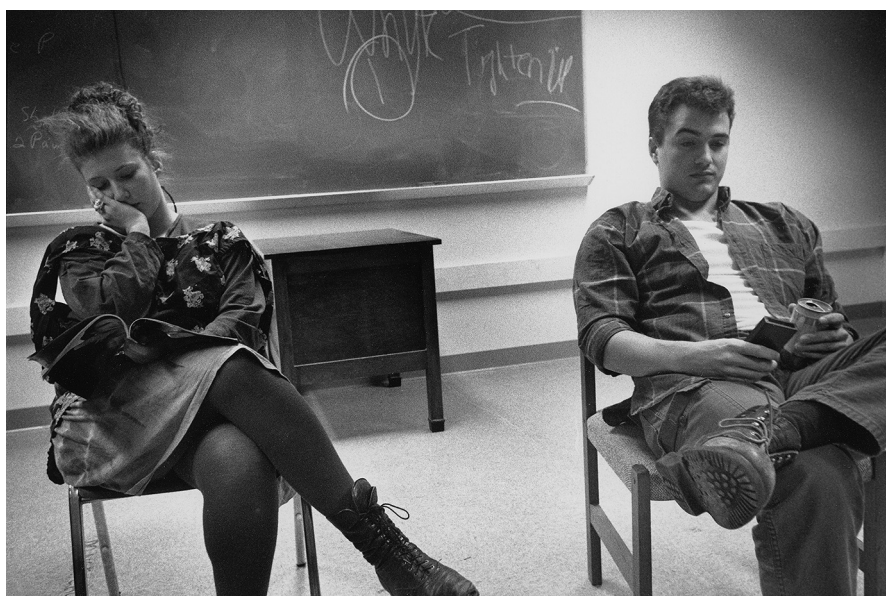
Other students were more sympathetic to the researchers, finding the emotion implicit in their statements:

One student read a series of connected fragments from Vaughan’s description of her methods of data gathering and analysis. By picking out phrases nested in longer, more dispassionate statements, he gave an added weight, importance and dignity to her already candid account of her own emotional response to her research experiences. When he ended, her statements that sociology could help people “recognize their own isolated experiences with the context of the experiences of others” (p. xxiii) and that her analysis of the interview materials “was an immersion not only in the life experience and human vulnerability of others, but my own,” had a new meaning. (p. 310)

Students created visual symbols that embodied the feelings emergent in their chosen text. Some of them took as a challenge Erikson’s repeated statements that none of us could ever feel what the victims of the flood had felt:

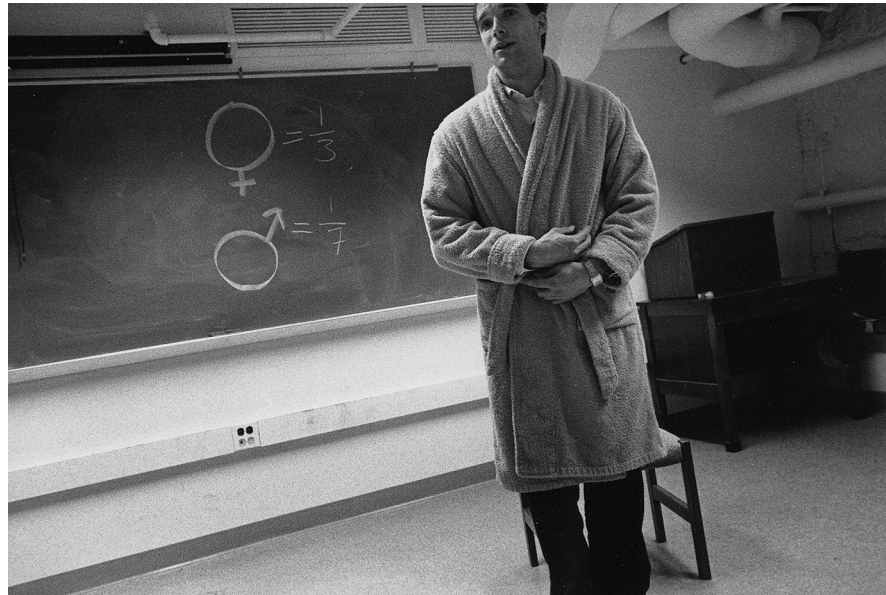
One student laid a blanket on the floor, placed eight or ten stuffed animals at one end of it, tucked them in under a sheet, started a tape recorder, and then lay curled up like a sleeping child, while a man’s voice told of finding several dead children’s bodies after the flood.

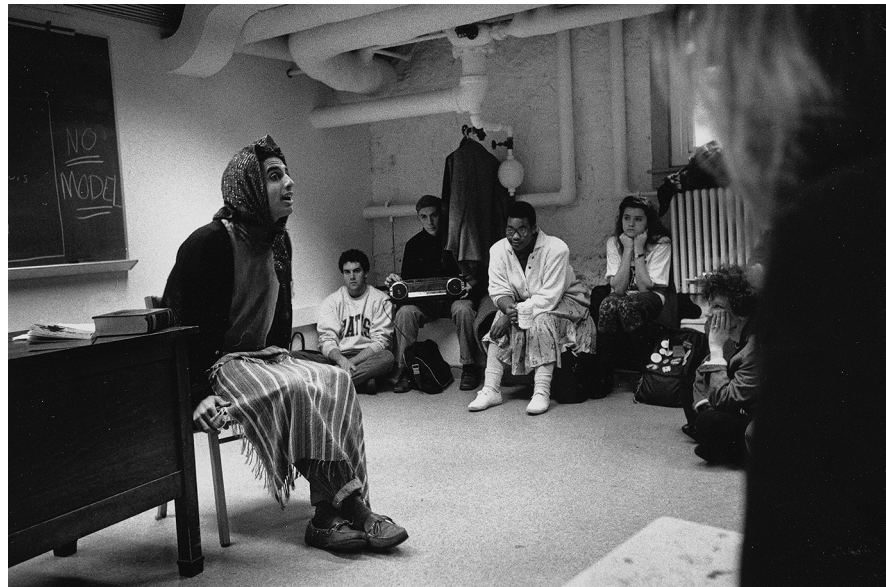














Here are some generalizations we've drawn from what's happened so far [remember that this comes after just five weeks of experience]. For one thing, there doesn't seem to be any appreciable difference between what students with performance training and those without it have done. We imagined that performance training would have given its holders a head-start or, alternatively, that the social science students would do more "amateurish" work. We couldn't have been more wrong. Several of the most polished and emotionally effective acting was done by social science students.

The performances, taken as a whole, made all of us (me, certainly) vividly aware of how many "voices" a piece of social science writing contains. We began to hear the several voices of authors as they talked to various audiences, as they concealed or avowed various emotional and other commitments. We heard, too, the voices of the people they had gotten their data from. And we heard the critical or admiring or puzzled voice of the performers, as they expressed, more or less openly, their understanding of and relation to what they were performing. This was overt and powerful, for instance, in the declaration (by the student who performed Maria Stewart's speech) that for purposes of the performance, he, Maria Stewart, and all Black women were one. This, it should be said, exemplified the kind of courage the students displayed, and the trust they had in their colleagues, in taking such substantial performative risks.

For me, at least, the meaning of "dialogical" had stopped being theoretical talk and became something I now *felt*. It had taken on shape for me in what students had done. My revelation occurred in a discussion I had with an undergraduate (a physics major, as I discovered to my surprise—another stereotype blown!) about the piece described above, in which the student told us about the women in his life. When we discussed his piece, people immediately asked whether the women named on the cards were real people or just names he had made up, whether the stories were what real people had really done or fictions. He didn't want to say, but eventually said that it was all real, that the stories were true, that he had not prearranged stories and then attached them to whatever name had been asked for. In other words, what we saw was what it was.

I had said that, for me, that discussion in class indicated just how the question of truth was integral to any response to materials of this kind, that it made a difference to us whether these things were true, in some possible sense, or not. The physics major denied that, said that what was important were the emotions the performance had created in us. I asked why, if that was true, he had questioned the performer so insistently about the truth of the stories. He said, "Because it was eating at me." And that was when I learned the meaning of "dialogic," because I heard myself saying to him that, first of all, that showed that it did matter to him (which he grinned and admitted) but, more important, we both should see that the best way to respond to this piece was to feel both possibilities (that the stories were true AND not true) in the piece and allow them to remain, to coexist, in

what we had heard. As if we could stop this from happening!

The piece in which the student read the same quotation three times also came back to me: it was not a question there of which reading was the “correct” one, but rather of seeing that such a text could contain, one way or another (which leaves a lot to be explored, to be sure), all those meanings and feelings simultaneously. This, after all, is how we have been encouraged (by literary critics like William Empson, say) to read poetry. Why not read social science that way too? (What a heresy! I can hear my sociological colleagues now.)

But this was exactly what many of the students’ performances had made clear: that there was emotion, ambiguity and ambivalence about precisely these issues buried just beneath the surface of many social science texts. I think especially of the student who gave that dramatic and emotional reading of a very dry statistical paper—he felt that the author was masking her serious, passionate concern with the problem under investigation in that dry prose and all those percentages, and so added the emphasis orally and felt justified in doing it.

The general question of whether social science was, should be or could be unemotional bothered many students, and showed up in their work. There were a variety of interesting positions on this: science is not supposed to be emotional; it is emotional, like it or not; it isn’t but we can make it so. Others were less interested in the theoretical position and more, as some of the projects described show, in making

the emotional content of social science more visible and communicable.

Many of the pieces embodied an understanding of what Schechner discusses in his analyses of the contexts of performance, taking into account what had gone on before they began, understanding that the performance began before they indicated that “now it had started.” And the way the pieces spoke to and commented on each other in completely unexpected and aleatory, sometimes remarkably effective, ways made these effects even more obvious.

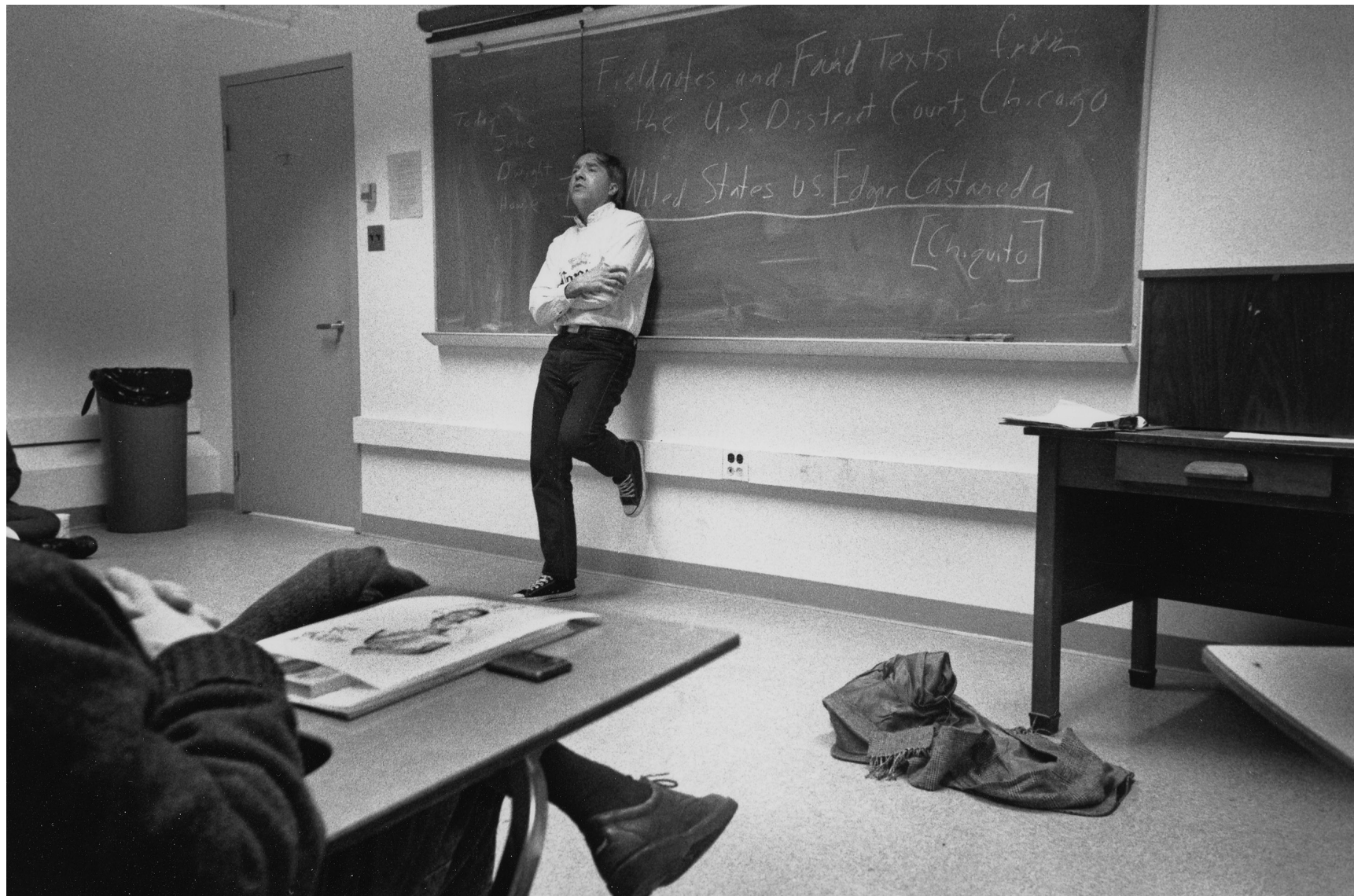
Performance '89 Notes, continued

Now that we have seen forty (!) midterm projects (three to five-minute performances of some text that could, from some point of view, be called social science), there are some topics that clearly deserve to be talked about. I’m sure that Dwight will have a different approach to this, and some different things to say. I’ll put down some notes, certainly not in order of importance, but rather as they occur to me.

1. *Tape recorders.* A lot of people used tape recorders in one way or another in their performances. In fact, it got to be sort of a joke, watching people drag in their boom boxes each day. What did they use them for and what problems are involved?

They used them, mostly, to create, in the most direct way,







multivocality. You put your own voice on tape and then, as it plays, you talk back to it. Thus, one student, in a striking version of this, had her own voice on the tape read from an autobiographical account by a South African radical. As the voice spoke, she worked over a pile of papers, as though she were writing or editing what was being read, sometimes repeating or correcting or querying what was being said. The effect was to let you in on the compositional process, on the writer's thoughts and second thoughts.

Another student recreated her life in letters. Using her own collection of letters dating back to notes passed to her in middle school, she had others read those letters on the tape (schoolmates, girlfriends, boyfriends, parents) while she sat among us, reading the actual letters to herself, occasionally pulling out a prop (a tampon to accompany a friend's story of how she didn't lose her virginity because she was having her period, a bottle of champagne to accompany a letter on her birthday). The effect was of hearing her life unfold.

Others used the recorder to give alternate readings of the same material, like the student who, having read the same passage from *Uncoupling* three times, in three different moods, then recorded all three so that they played more or less simultaneously. Even as you distinguished the separate voices, you understood that all three interpretations were not only possible alternatives, but that all three could be (may well have been) simultaneously accurate.

What are the possibilities with recorders? What are the difficulties?

2. *Collage*. Many people experimented with collaging materials of various kinds. At a minimum this means taking materials from different parts of the same source and rearranging them for some effect. Thus, they would use Erikson's or Vaughan's voice in conjunction with quotes from the informants those authors had quoted. Going a little farther, some went through those books looking for materials bearing on a theme, then put those thematic materials together to make a point that the original author might not have had in mind. Still further, some put together materials from various sources, letting the various pieces comment on each other. (This is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's desire to make books that consisted entirely of quotations, their arrangement letting them comment on each other and thus express the author's thought indirectly.)

What kinds of collages are possible? What do you run into doing it? How can we tell a "bad one" from a "good one" or, since that's more judgmental than I mean to be, how can we tell when one "works," whatever that means?

3. *Imagery*. Several people set out to make a visual image that would carry some or all of the thought. I think of the student who, while the recorder played a section from the Erikson book about the death of a child in the flood, laid out a blanket and a bunch of dolls, then laid down as though she were a sleeping child, while the voice told of "her death."

Some created images that were less direct, more "symbolic," like the student who made a "witches' brew" of a variety of materials that had relevance to a woman's life, while the tape

read fragments about such subjects as prostitution, etc.

The creation of visual images like this of course overlaps both conventional stage craft and performance art. What problems and opportunities arise when we incorporate obvious image making into this kind of work? It needs to be said that every single performance, of course, created an image of some kind (just as every reading of a scholarly paper is a performance). So, the simplest performances, which consisted of standing at the lectern and reading, also created an image.

What kinds of images are possible? What do they add to our knowledge or our repertoire of presentational means? What are the limits on them?

4. *The authorial voice.* If you include the author's voice in your performance, you have to handle it some way, take some attitude toward it. A few people have found themselves disagreeing with the author, being critical or skeptical. Others have treated the author's voice as announcing the remarks that gave a kind of general sense to what was being said. Others have treated it as the voice of another character. One student, thus, read a selection of Diane Vaughan's methodological remarks in such a way as to give an interpretation of her stance that I don't think one would quite get from the text alone.

What questions do we need to raise here? If we make the author a character, what choices do we have? What are the effects of various choices?

5. *The performer's voice.* Performers injected themselves in various ways into their performances. Some let us see their attitudes and emotions very openly. (That reminds me that I think we've all taken, at least I have, some attitudes toward the material being done as "natural" while other attitudes were "unnatural." Obviously, it pays to be more or less reverent and serious about the material in the Erikson book; it would be outrageous to be funny about it. The multiple readings of the quote from the Vaughan book, the one about telling the parents about the divorce, make clear that there is no natural anything about this.) Others hid behind the conventional attitudes, although I suppose that "hid" is hardly the right way to say it.

More generally, there's a question about how openly the performers inject themselves into what they do—their ideas, emotions, attitudes, judgments. Of course, it's clear that they all do, the only question is how.

Beyond that, a number of performances raised the question of how openly the performance might be about the performer's life and experiences and, when the performance is about that, what the obligations, risks, etc., are. One thing you can do—a few people did—is make your own life the subject of the piece. That turns the performance's social science character away from open and obvious analysis and makes it more of a demonstration of raw data. As when one student turned the class into a group of interviewers who were invited to ask questions about "the women in his life."

These self-revelatory pieces raised in a very gross way the

question of truth that I had expected to be more of an issue around the social science stuff. But it turned out that, while a lot of people were ready to disclaim any interest in the truth of the social science stuff, or at least ready to say that the effect on them was the same whether it was true or not, many fewer were ready to be that unconcerned about these self-revelations. If we know that the letters that tell the story of your life are all concocted they of course lose much of their value as documents of some social “truth,” but surprisingly (to some, though I must say not to me) they also lose their aesthetic or dramatic punch. The aesthetic act has as one of its dimensions (one that Dwight is very interested in) how much risk the person before you is taking. Big risks get more attention than little ones.

One dimension of this is how much the performers use who they are in realistic social terms. Do you make something of being a woman (or a man, but it’s femaleness that’s marked and has a “special” meaning (or Black or Asian? The Japanese student’s use of quasi-Kabuki conventions was a wonderful example of this.

6. *Context.* So much of the effect of the pieces depended on what came before, what came after, on what effect they were creating depended on it taking place in a class, in a classroom, etc. For instance, to take an obvious one, when one student started a small fire, it had a special effect because it was “in school.”

Other examples: You are prepared to do a piece that involves breaking an egg, and the person who performs before you

breaks some eggs too. It can’t help but affect the effect of what you do. Or someone uses the same quotes you did.

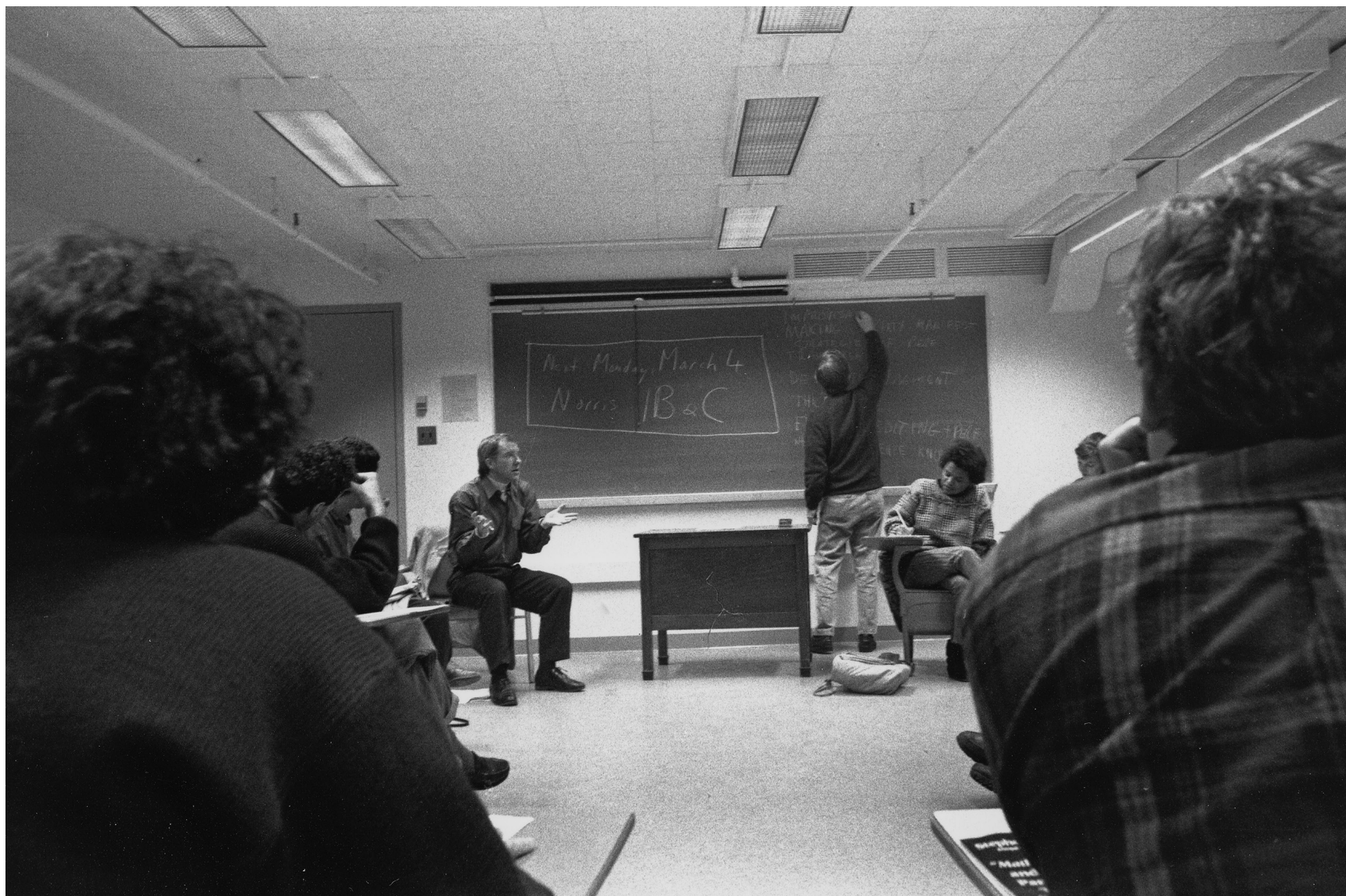
How much can you control what happens around the chunk you are going to do? How do you work with what others are going to do so that they help your piece along or, conversely, how do you adapt what you do to take advantage of what others are doing?

What is the range and variety of contexts in which we might be doing these things?











Notes on the Conquergood/Becker Performance Class, 1991 (HSB)

Notes on the Midterm Performances

We've had two days of the midterm performances in the class Dwight and I are doing, for the second time on performance and social science, and maybe it's time to talk about some of the ideas that have occurred to me.

This is the second time we've taught the class, and there are some differences between the last time and this time. The most obvious is that we've changed the readings. We cut down on the "theoretical" readings a good deal (we should really set the two lists of readings side by side) and, perhaps most important, we changed the two books we assigned as possible sources of material for people who didn't have their own field notes or couldn't think of anything else to use. The two new books, replacing Diane Vaughan's *Uncoupling* and Kai Erikson's *Everything in Its Path*, were William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* about working class young men in an Italian neighborhood in Boston and Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain*, which dealt with the problems of everyday life in working-class marriages, and had a lot of long quotes from interviews.

Whyte's book described less "dramatic" events, more rooted in everyday life, that still had serious consequences for the people involved, like the scene in the bowling alley Whyte described where the social hierarchy of a small group affected their bowling scores. And then, as long as we were

changing books, we thought Rubin's book, could serve much the same purpose as Vaughan's, being about domestic life and full of rich interview excerpts. In addition, both books have a very strong class aspect, Rubin dealing explicitly with the effect of working-class life conditions on family relations, and Whyte talking explicitly about (the book takes place during the Great Depression of the 1930s) being out of work and out of money.

Another difference, I think, is that we have a much larger group of sociology graduate students. A year ago, there were two or three graduate students from sociology and the other students representing social science were from a variety of fields and most of them were undergraduates. This time, a large chunk of the first-year graduate cohort in sociology is in the class, I think (immodestly) because they've decided that, since I'm leaving Northwestern at the end of this year, they better get as much exposure to me as they can before I'm gone. I'm not sure what difference this makes, but while this time we have a pretty cohesive group of theater kids, as we did before, we also have a pretty cohesive group of sociology students. We'll see what difference this makes.

Another difference is that the class is even bigger than it was last year. We had around forty last time, this time we have over fifty. This is a tribute both to the news of my leaving but more so to our inability to say no to anyone.

And this time we have a photographer! After the last class, we kicked ourselves for not making any photographs, and so having nothing to illustrate our narrative (by the end of the class we were thinking of writing something about it). This time Dianne, who wanted to attend the class pretty regularly anyway, has agreed to photograph it.

A final difference is that we began the class with a very short introduction and immediately went into performances, having the students do a mask performance. This is a favorite exercise of Dwight's. Each student makes a mask and uses it to tell a personal narrative (not to be fancy, a story from their own lives).

With so many students, the bulk of the class meetings are devoted to performing. The mask performances took up several meetings. We had two days of talk about them, and then it was time to start the midterm performances, which are supposed to be individual (although group performances are permitted) pieces of 4-7 minutes, this time about something social sciency.

No one has been quite sure what would pass muster as a social science text, even though Dwight and I made it clear that just about anything would do. The way I would say it now, if I had a chance to say it again, is that anything will do, as long as the emphasis is on the social science aspect of the material. That wouldn't be very restrictive either, since almost anything could be construed as being part of that emphasis.

Having seen about fifteen of these midterms and having had time to think about the mask performances, here are some thoughts that occurred to me. We can think of these as topics I think we should write about, as things to discuss with each other in front of a social science audience, or whatever.

1. *"Acting"*. I'll start off with something that has been bothering me but haven't talked about in class yet. I've been trying to think of a nice, tactful way of complaining about something I think is really not right. I guess it's not so much that I want to be tactful as that I want to talk about this in a way that will be helpful and constructive, a way that will not spoil the constructive and cooperative mood in the class. Maybe even more than that, I want to talk about this in a way that will expose some real issues.

Enough mystery. Let's be specific. Several of the students, and not only the theater students as you might expect, have indulged in what I would call "emoting" or overacting, "scenery chewing" as it's sometimes called. Let's be specific. In his first mask performance, Russ cried openly (it appears, since he did it again in his midterm, that he can do this at will), as well as doing some fairly corny religious talk. Peter raved and ranted, shouted, stood on chairs, and in general added a lot of emotion to a story that could have been told in a much plainer way to greater effect. In the midterm, he lit candles, got down on the floor and howled, and added a lot of emotional overtones to the simple bowling story of *Street Corner Society*. John did the same thing in the midterm in his recitation of Allen Ginsberg's "Amerika." Omar did it in both his performances.

I found all three of these—they seem the most egregious examples—irritating. And I was irritated at myself for feeling that, since I believe that one of the things performance can do is bring out the emotion hidden in the relatively emotionally flat prose of social science. I thought that Peter's bowling story did that pretty well, to tell the truth. So, I've been trying to think what has been irritating about them.

Here's a try at understanding my reaction (I know for a fact that I'm not the only one who felt this—Dianne and Hermano (a graduate student from Brazil) both felt the same way). When the actor "acts" in that way, he (the egregious offenders have been men) gets in the way of the voice of the person whose words he is speaking. Maybe this is like interpreting a character in a play (why wouldn't it be?). The principle I seem to be appealing to is that while an actor is certainly entitled to "interpret" a character with whatever means seem relevant, they ought to let the ideas and thoughts of that character come through, ought to make them clearer, however they go about it, rather than obscuring them by (this is a snotty interpretation, but OK) interposing their own personalities and thoughts and problems between me and the character. I want to understand, say, the ideas of the corner boys involved in the bowling competition and not have to fight through Peter's emotional reading of what they had to say.

Another thing is that I have often felt, especially with Russ's reading of the incest stories, that the acting was maudlin, and then I've wondered what I meant by that. I think I mean that it gets to be like soap opera (that's saying the same

thing in different words, isn't it?). The emotion isn't earned, it's more like the signs of "emotion" are a signal to me that I should feel an emotion, it's an order to feel something, not an experience that leads me to feel that way. Edmund Wilson once complained (in his New Yorker book review column) that too much of science fiction told you *what* to feel without giving you any good reason for feeling it (they'd say that the Bug-Eyed Monster from Outer Space was "horrible beyond description, enough to make your stomach turn," instead of describing it and letting your stomach decide if it wanted to throw up or not).

What's the general issue here, the issue beyond my personal taste (which is important only insofar as it points to such issues)? I guess it's what's been hinted at already: whose voice should dominate in the reading of texts like these? Or, instead, of being so prescriptive, what are the consequences of the actor's voice dominating as opposed to letting the words of the character speaking dominate?

Naomi brought this to a head when she criticized Peter openly for putting all that emotion into the voices of the corner boys and said that it was OK to do it when he was reading Whyte's words, but not those of the corner boys; with them he should be more respectful.

I think there's an important point in that distinction, although I don't think I'd put it so moralistically (why should their voices be respected more than Whyte's?). I'd put it this way. To add emotion to a text that is already heavily emotional does not help it in any way (remember, by the

way, how powerful Don's relatively flat reading of the Iranian professor's terrible story was, and his explanation that that, after all, was the way the man had said it). To say it quietly and let the words and images carry the emotional weight, using acting skills, as Don did, to make those words and images clearer, seems to work better, produce a deeper understanding of the actual material.

Conversely, to add emotion to the reading of the flat text of a social science work seems to bring out what is hidden in the material, the more or less unacknowledged animus behind the description, or expressed only indirectly in irony and sarcasm. (e.g., my own writing on deviance is calm and "objective," but the animus behind it clearly isn't.)

You might say, as a rule of thumb, that the reading of these materials ought to go against their grain, adding emotion to what hides it, adding calm and "rationality" to emotional texts. What do you think of that principle? Does it make sense?

Another aspect of my dissatisfaction here is pedagogical. I thought that the theater students, particularly, who did this were not stretching themselves; they were doing what they already knew how to do well, and that it would be much more educational for them to try to subordinate themselves to these texts more than they did. I guess Dwight is not the only puritan in the crowd and you don't need to be Scots-Irish to think they ought to suffer a little more.

Which ties into yet another matter. We think that performing

these texts ought to give the performer a deeper sense of the meaning of the text. Do you get that if you add so much to it? I guess I'd like to hear the people who have performed talk about what they've learned by performing.

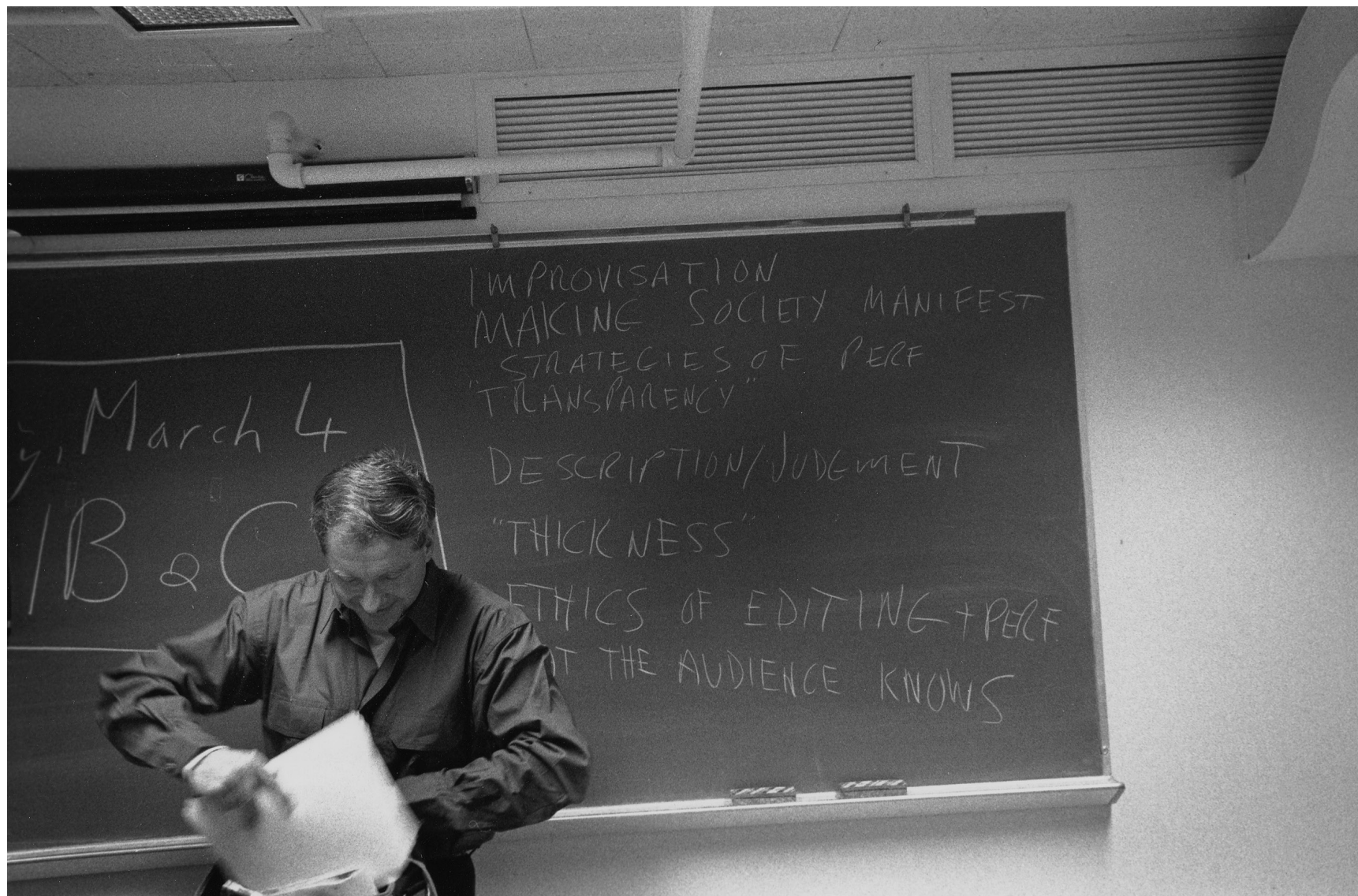
2. *Spectacle*. I'll use this term to cover all sorts of stuff, from the use of props to all the physical elements of the performance, the use of taped music or other voices, etc.

Let's start here by noting that Ruth and Paul not only had us all laughing with their pantomimed versions of some of Rubin's ideas, but that the physical elements of what they did really embodied the ideas of the text. I felt at times that they needn't have repeated the words of the interviews to get the ideas across. That wasn't always true—it was enormously effective to have the story of the ring that was too big told by both parties—but some of what was said about leisure time in the book seemed to be fully expressed by their actions.

Another element of the spectacle is the props. It's almost been a joke to me the way the students come in with bags of props, costume fragments, etc. (I told Dwight that I would do a piece which would start with me unloading three enormous shopping bags full of stuff, on and on, then saying maybe three words about something and that would be it.)

The simplest things seem to be very effective: an item of clothing, for instance. Maybe the important thing is that they be clearly related to, part of, what's being talked about. When Derek set out the books and read from the blurbs,





IMPROVISATION
MAKING SOCIETY MANIFEST
STRATEGIES OF PERF
TRANSPARENCY

DESCRIPTION/JUDGMENT
"THICKNESS"

ETHICS OF EDITING + PERF
THE AUDIENCE KNOWS

March 4

B & C



that worked. When David used the candles to indicate a seance, it worked; when Peter used them for some more obscure purpose, it worked less well. Amy and Shelly had a typewriter keyboard and a tape recorder, the tools of Rubin's trade: great. Matt and Tim had tools, but their intent with them wasn't clear to me, so they seemed a distraction. One of the most successful props was Sharon's wheelchair, because it let her make very explicit and obvious (in her difficulties getting in and out of the room) what the problem that she was studying was about. I guess that if I were using such props, I would ask myself to be specific about what I expected people to make of them and stern with myself about whether they really would have the effect I wanted them to have. Sharon knew what she wanted the wheelchair to do and it did it.

Finally, there's sound and music. That is, the tape recorder. I wonder what the students would do if we forbid the use of the tape recorder. In fact, I find it hard to remember the music anyone used, but I have a feeling that it mostly was there as mood music, that it didn't do much real work, and I wonder if that's a good thing. No one has yet used the recorder to produce another voice, which was pretty common the first year, and that surprised me.

3. *Making the Point.* Is it necessary to make the social science point explicit by stating it as a conclusion? I'm sensitive to this point because I once had a big run-in with my friend Irving Louis Horowitz about it. I wanted *Society Magazine*, which he edited and with which I was associated, to run Hans Haacke's Guggenheim piece; I think it's a wonderful

work of social science analysis. One of its distinguishing traits is that it draws no explicit conclusions—it just “presents the facts.” It's a classic example of the way facts can be selected and arranged to make a point without stating it. I thought that was great. Horowitz, however, was outraged by what he took to be anti-intellectualism. “If he's got a point, let him make it!” Behind that gut reaction, I think, lay a more serious idea, which is that intellectual discourse, as Horowitz understands it, is a serious competitive process, governed by rules which must be respected. If you make a point, you are responsible for it; to be responsible for it, you must have stated it according to the rules. Refusing to make a point explicit is equivalent to denouncing the whole accepted system of warranting and carrying on intellectual discourse.

If you don't treat intellectual discourse as a contest, if you think of it instead as a cooperative enterprise, then this sort of thing isn't so important. You don't have to worry so much about who has to take the rap for saying what, you are more interested in what can be accomplished jointly, and anything that seems to move you along an interesting path is OK. So, if not stating the conclusion is helpful, fine.

In our class, this point came to mind in David's piece about the seance. His detailed description of his own experience, presumably in the role of researcher, said everything that needed to be said. I didn't learn anything beyond what I had already learned about the ambiguities of this experience (which was considerable) from his conclusions phrased in abstract sociological language. I'm not sure that this means he shouldn't have said something; it might be that

what he said could have been said better, could have been a better abstract statement, could have made a cleverer interpretation. But in this case, it certainly wasn't needed.

This was David's interpretation of his own research materials. Do we need to say the point when it is the point made by the person who gathered the materials we are using? Do we need to say Rubin's points or Whyte's? Do the materials speak for themselves?

Well, they might, in the way that Haacke's did. Artful selection and arrangement may be able to suggest all the ideas that are needed. That's what happened with David's materials. Rubin probably says things a lot more explicitly than is really needed. By the time she gets to a conclusion, you know all about it. That's not so true with Whyte, partly because his conclusions are embedded so thoroughly in the story he tells; it's hard to separate them. So, you can leave out Rubin's conclusions, I'll bet (Ruth and Paul did, and so did Carrie, who I'll return to later, at least sometimes), and not lose much, but you couldn't do that (another guess) with Whyte. It's some kind of test of social science writing.

But lots of materials don't speak for themselves or, you could say, they only speak to people who know how to listen to them. You often need to explain the point. It's very obviously so with respect to a lot of anthropological materials. You have to have things explained before you see their point. That's often true with statistical materials too. (I'm hoping that someone in the class will try performing something statistical; one of the most interesting ones last time did that.) But

often it's not a matter of giving you background material but rather of saying some general point that this case just described is an example of. But there's general and general. Rubin's generalizations are about people like the ones she interviewed: "Working class people are like this." David's were very abstract points about the nature of definitions of reality. Rubin's were telegraphed by the arrangement and selection of interview fragments. David's were not telegraphed but, when I heard them, I thought, "Well, sure, but that's obvious now that I've heard about the seance." I'm groping for something here and haven't found it yet.

4. *Social Scientist as Character/Dramatizing "Conclusions"*. Closely related to the above is a question about the social scientist as a character in a performance. We've had this idea all along, of course, but it came to a head for me around David's performance. I wondered why his statement of his social science conclusion didn't "work," when the rest of it worked so well, and decided that it was because the conclusions were not stated by anyone in particular. I mean, David said them, but he just mouthed them, there wasn't any real person behind them. Which, I suppose, is the way it's spozed to be in science, it's the voice of the facts speaking or something like that, nature, the way things are.

On the contrary, when Naomi mouthed a whole lot of social science conclusions, it worked perfectly. I think that must be because in her performance there was a character named "Naomi," who had done this fieldwork and had these problems and was now meditating on them and coming to some conclusions about them. The social scientist character

was a real person who had real difficulties and wasn't just a mouthpiece for nature or the facts, which spoke through her. This is in line with our insistence that social science should be reflexive, should take into account its own status as social interaction and social fact.

Putting the conclusions into the mouth of a social science character like that certainly makes them come alive (whatever that means) and puts some meat on them. They get to be more than mere "conclusions." But what is the more? Can we be specific about that? At the moment, I don't seem to be, maybe something will come to me.

Sharon's performance made it clear that the social science conclusion needn't be in the mouth of the social science character. This is in line with Whyte's incorporation of Doc and the others into his story as fellow social scientists. A lot of the time his people are stating his conclusions, so to speak; he accepts and affirms them and maybe adds to them, but they have sometimes been authored by the others. And I think everyone who has done fieldwork has had that experience, of someone you interview putting the whole thing together in a pithy summary that is just what, you discover, your conclusion really is.

Sharon's character asked why interviewers never asked her "normal" questions. A good point. And not just out of humanitarianism, etc. It's a good point because, I'd say, in general it's not a good tactic to ask people directly about the specific thing you think you are focusing on, in her case, the experience of disability. If you focus on that, you assume

(and may very well be wrong in the assumption) that that thing, the disability, is central to the person's existence, that they never think about anything else, that everything is filtered through it. But a lot of things probably aren't like that, even for severely disabled people: dealing with a bureaucrat probably over the phone, for instance, a common enough experience, or taking a test, or . . . you name it. And that's likely to be even truer for matters that are less compelling than a severe disability.

The general methodological point is that you should see things, analytically, in context, and the context is the activity that is the focus of your attention (e.g., going to school or whatever) with everything that is to be known about the way it's organized. Then, within that context, things like a disability can be understood as things that affect the way that context operates in this case. But, first, you need to know the context. (This is an old point. Franklin Frazier and Everett Hughes made it about race relations, saying that to understand the relations between races you had to understand the institution the races were relating in: a factory, a school, a neighborhood, a street, etc.)

There's another general point in all this, which may on the surface (but only there) have more to do with performance. The question is, when the students perform these works, who is talking to who? How are we to understand the implied situation? Who is Whyte talking to when he makes his analyses? Who is Rubin talking to? Who are these various characters who get quoted talking to? It's clear enough in Rubin that everyone she quotes is talking to her in a private











confidential kind of setting. With Whyte, the settings are varied, sometimes a private conversation, sometimes a report of a public event, he's pretty good about making all that clear (in a way that, for instance, I think I haven't always been in my own research). But, even then, while these people may be talking to Whyte or Rubin, who else are they talking to? Who is in their heads and getting some kind of answer to who knows what ancient question, even though the person in front of them is the researcher? And Whyte's appendix makes it clear, from his account of later talks with the same people, after his book was available, that his description of what happened is not always the same as theirs, or even that he often has good reason not to accept at face value what they said to him or others later (Doc running the book down to people in order to keep his fences mended).

Anyway, the question of who the people the book is about were talking to seems relatively simple compared to the question of who the author was talking to. Authors usually don't say who they are addressing, in part because they want to reach the maximum possible audience and don't want anyone to think they weren't included, but largely because they don't really know (I think this is true, it's certainly true of me). One of the virtues of performance seems to be (see what you think of this!) that the author becomes a character (though the performer doesn't *necessarily* become one, that's a separate issue) and, as a character, has to be speaking to someone, even if it's only to himself in an interior monologue.

So, situating the author as a speaker seems to be a good thing to do explicitly and consciously. One immediate result of doing it is that we are reminded that in a real sense there is no such thing as abstract, "in general" speech, there are only things said on this or that occasion to this or that person. When authors write they are writing on a specific occasion and in a specific historical and social context and that's the meaning of what they write. When we read what they wrote we are reading in a similarly historical social situation and what we make of what they wrote is what it means to us then. That's all there is. Performing certainly can accomplish this or, at least, rub our noses in the necessity of seeing things this way.

5. *Carrie, Amy and Shelly*. I don't know what this point is going to turn out to be, so I'll call it by the names of the people who provoked me to write about it.

Carrie's piece really struck me. I thought she did a wonderful job of effacing herself and presenting Rubin's book in summary. It's an interesting question as to what she left out. I mean that I thought she had pretty well presented everything the book had to say; that's probably an exaggeration, in the sense that I can only say that because I know what was in the book, so that it would be more correct to say that it was a very well-constructed summary of all the main points and, if you know the book, you will be reminded of everything you need to be reminded of. In that sense, you could say that she didn't leave anything out. If that's true, it's an interesting comment on Rubin's book.

I should say that I have increasingly come to think that the book is very sketchy, in an odd way. It has a solid core of points and subpoints, but in some way I can't quite grasp it doesn't seem (I'll use a word Dwight likes) "rich." As a result, you can summarize it and not feel that you've lost much. Carrie's performance was like the outline you'd make of the book if you were taking notes on it and had a sense of completeness. It wasn't, also, very "dramatic." Carrie is a skilled performer and used all that skill to make the meat of the book available in a very short time, using things like space and gesture to make the summary easily intelligible. As a dramatic structure, it had the structure of the book. No, that's not right, because the structure was of someone summarizing the book (the way she erased the chapter headings kept calling attention to her role in it, independent of Rubin.) That's all I can think of on this now, but her performance has come to serve as a kind of touchstone for me; it represents a way of performing social science that I like, and I'm still not clear what I like about it.

Amy and Shelly were much more selective. They focused on what I take to be an unanalyzed concept in Rubin's book, the idea of "having fun." This is one of those things that social scientists necessarily do all the time: you take an idea that the people whose lives you're describing use in their own living and thinking and use it yourself as an explanation or analytic category, as though its meaning were obvious. But, of course, the meaning isn't obvious and, if you were studying a quite different society, it is just concepts like this that you would make the focus of your attention, because they contain some important premises of the culture. A

Martian studying these people would naturally want to know what they meant by "having fun." Rubin clearly thought she knew but, when you think about it, she didn't and we don't, except in the thoughtless way that natives know these things.

I had noticed, reading the book, that this idea recurred several times, and I sort of offhandedly wondered what it meant. But I soon forgot that question, because my native knowledge was good enough to fill the meaning in. Amy and Shelly isolated the uses, first relatively subtly but later blatantly, and made it obvious that "having fun" was being relied on to do a lot of explanatory work without itself being explained. I'm not sure how much that was their intention, but they certainly got that result. I don't even remember now if they called any explicit attention to the point.

They did some other things that were good too, like putting the interview excerpts in the context of the actual interview, so that we were aware of Lil sitting there as the working-class housewife struggled to answer the questions, explain herself to this middle-class lady. That was very poignant for me, because this is, after all, the common situation of interviewing, someone trying to explain themselves to a more or less skilled professional who has trained herself to sit there and be non-judgmental (although Lil was occasionally quite judgmental in her questions and, frankly, I thought that was great, more human). There's something slightly inhuman about the detachment we necessarily all adopt, more or less, when we do our work. Not that we don't all slip out of it at times, or even that we can avoid being

human by this pose (as Naomi really showed us), but this is one of the great tensions of field work, isn't it? And these pieces that remind us of that are great for that reason alone.

They also situated the author, to bring that up again, in several ways: as someone talking to an interviewee, as an author sitting in front of a typewriter, as someone being talked about by two people who are going to perform her work. That made her words more real.

6. *Selection*. At a very simple level, I'm struck by the variety of ways the students have cut up the works they've used, the way they've selected this or that aspect to be emblematic of the whole work or of *something*, who knows what? My guess is that they have not been enormously reflective about what they chose, either out of a whole work or out of the fragment they used. Did Don give us the whole of that interview with the Iranian dentist and, if not, what did he leave out, and what was his rationale? I don't mean this as a criticism. We all know that selection is necessary, etc., etc., but that doesn't mean that there aren't alternative selections possible, in which case the basis on which selection is made becomes interesting and worth talking about.

The worst case, I think, would be choosing on the basis of what you thought would make a "good" performance, which I guess is what I suspect about some of the more emotional performances. The best would be, in the style of Carrie, having some point you wanted to make about the work and choosing what would make that point clearly.

We have, of course, imposed a terrible constraint on their choices, which is that they only have x number of minutes. But that's not as artificial as it might seem, because they will always only have x number of minutes, x, varying with the social circumstances of the performance (such as the amount of time ordinarily available for such events, the tolerance of the audience, the stamina of the performers, etc.). Even with this constraint there have been a number of performances that seemed to go on "too long," that is, to be longer than they needed to be. But how long do they need to be anyway? I guess the answer to that is that they need to be long enough to make the performer's intent clear, and no longer than that. So, it comes down to a matter of what the performer is trying to accomplish, which is probably something we ought to begin to talk about seriously. In fact, maybe that should be the heading for this section: what are we trying to accomplish?

There's a related question about beginnings and endings. Some of the pieces have very definite beginnings and endings, some not at all. I'm surprised by how little difference that seems to make to me, if the piece is good who cares, and if it isn't who cares too? Ideally, again, the beginning and ending would be such as to make the point of the whole thing obvious, but that requires knowing the point.

7. *Truth*. This hasn't been an issue yet, though I think Shelly and Amy skirted it in calling the idea of "having fun" into question. Mostly people seem to take the materials they are working with as obviously true—Don didn't question the truth of the professor's story, Russ didn't wonder whether











the stories being told were true or not, Omar took the woman's story at face value. Well, I take that back, Naomi seemed to be questioning the truth of the materials she worked with.

8. *Comfort*. Some of these pieces have made the audience uncomfortable. Russ was criticized for dealing with stories about incest so openly, on the grounds that since it is a relatively common experience people in the class might have had it and might be upset. Odd that that should be the only time this has been brought up. It's not an obvious point and ought not to go unexamined. Some of us have been made uncomfortable by the open religiosity of Russ's presentations; I can imagine that practically everyone has been offended by one or another of the performances. Is that something to worry about? (We've heard a lot of dirty words used very casually. Dwight, remember that very religious young woman in our last class? What would she have made of that? This is another one of those tensions that can't be resolved in any dogmatic or definitive way.) I'm almost inclined to think that a performance (just like a piece of research) that doesn't make people uncomfortable may not be doing its job. Does that mean that I think that there's no such thing as good taste and going too far? No. But it does mean that we have to go quite a way in that direction and that we ought to have very good reasons for saying that something went beyond the bounds.

In fact, I think the problem in this class is just the opposite. Should performances (and social science) make people feel comfortable? If anything, what we've seen so far has

gone altogether too far in catering to the conventional pieties of the liberal audience the class provides. There's also quite clearly a kind of rule, among these students, of letting everyone say whatever they want and praising them no matter what the content is—well, that's excessive, but you know what I mean. For instance, I'm sure lots of people were not too crazy about having to repeat a Jewish prayer, any more than the Jews in class would have been crossing themselves, but there wasn't any discussion of that. No one (including me, who was offended) said anything to Russ about his religious stuff. We have a good reason not to do that, because we want people to feel free to do whatever in the class.

What would happen if someone did a pro-war piece that was as effective as Stephanie's George Bush imitation? That would certainly make everyone uncomfortable.

Well, I'm not sure why this set me off, but it did.

Enough, already, you say? You're right. Someone else's turn.

Performance '91 Notes, continued

I'm writing this during the last week of the performance class. Before I began writing I read over the first notes I wrote, a month ago. What a difference in my mood! I was kvetchy, unhappy, worried, when I wrote the first notes. Now I'm elated, excited, even a little hyper, as well as relieved. I've

told Dianne, and it's true, more or less, that the turnaround we've experienced would happen, that it's what you have to have the stomach to wait for—but, you know, maybe it wouldn't happen this time? Who ever knows for sure?

The turnaround I'm talking about is in the class. It all happened during the one week our crowded schedule gave us for discussion. I wish I had taken better notes, and perhaps Dwight has (I hope so!), but I was so taken up in the process I didn't think to, and probably couldn't have.

The students, or some of them, had gotten bitchy and discontented. I think this was especially true of some of the undergraduates (the most vocal one was Saku who had already impressed me because of the dispute she had gotten into with Hermano), who increasingly wanted to know what the point of the course was, what they were supposed to be learning, what was the connection, if any, between social science and performance, why wouldn't we tell them what we thought social science was, how it could be performed, etc. Dwight was, I think (he'll tell us), a little embarrassed by all this and made apologies for them: they are, after all, undergraduates, they have a low tolerance of ambiguity, etc. One day, I remember, Saku got after me in class and wanted to know, "All right, Howie Becker, can you tell me just what you mean by social science?" and other questions like that. I did my best to answer her, but felt I was getting pushed into giving fixed definitions of things I didn't think could be defined so neatly and weaseled some.

Anyway, what happened was that some of the students

started answering these complaints, giving the results, it seemed to me, of their own hard and painful thinking on these questions. Some of it came down to some version of "You gotta have faith," but they had at least the glimmerings of answers, and had gotten the point that these ideas shouldn't be defined simply. It may have been here that Dwight introduced the very helpful notion of "contested ideas," that some ideas were never going to be defined clearly because it was exactly how to define them that was at issue.

What was wonderful was that the people who spoke up at this crucial time were sociology people and performance and theatre people, all three, and that they were, finally, talking to each other, not to each other through me or Dwight. I continued to sit on the table in the front of the room, but people did not talk to me, they turned to talk to the person they wanted to address. That went on for a long time, maybe, I don't know, an hour. At the end of it, some sort of real progress had been made in the way we understood the problem collectively, and I felt that we were at last working together on something, that the class was now what Dwight had been calling us, more in prospect than in fact: a "performance community."

Dwight and I did something this time we hadn't done the first time we taught the class and that must have had some impact, though I don't know what it is. We both "performed," both in the mask series and in the midterms. In the mask series, Dwight recited a Hmong escape narrative, speaking from behind one of the Hmong *pandau* (story cloths) he

owns. I told about not knowing how to draw and what a trauma that had been for me as a kid. I'm not as skilled as Dwight, who was wonderful, but I did know some tricks—you can't teach all these years and not know some tricks—such as asking the class how many of them couldn't draw (better than half, to my surprise) and then actually drawing the way I had as a child (stick figures, etc.), which got a laugh.

Our midterm performances surprised everyone because they seemed to have been planned to go together, though they weren't. Dwight did a wonderful piece about Chiquito, one of the young guys he has worked with in Little Beirut (a local name for the corner of Lawrence and Kedzie Avenues on the North West Side of Chicago, the geographic home of the Latin Kings), made up of various official reports about him, his own story (told to Dwight in the courthouse during his trial) of how the police planted an informant in his cell, and a recitation of the Latin King Credo or Oath or whatever it is. I followed by reading, from David Matza's *Becoming Deviant*, his three fables about three theories of deviance, and trying to make some kind of moral about bringing the various theories together. Although I had no idea what Dwight was going to do, and vice versa, my piece came across as a comment on the subject matter of his. They worked very well together. I think the students were awed by Dwight's work and appreciative of my willingness to do what I was asking them to do. (They also found some of what I did interesting, but weren't sure I knew what I was doing—e.g., Shelly asked me if I had deliberately, in erasing the blackboard after Dwight finished, left "The United States vs. . . ." there, as a comment on what I was going to say.

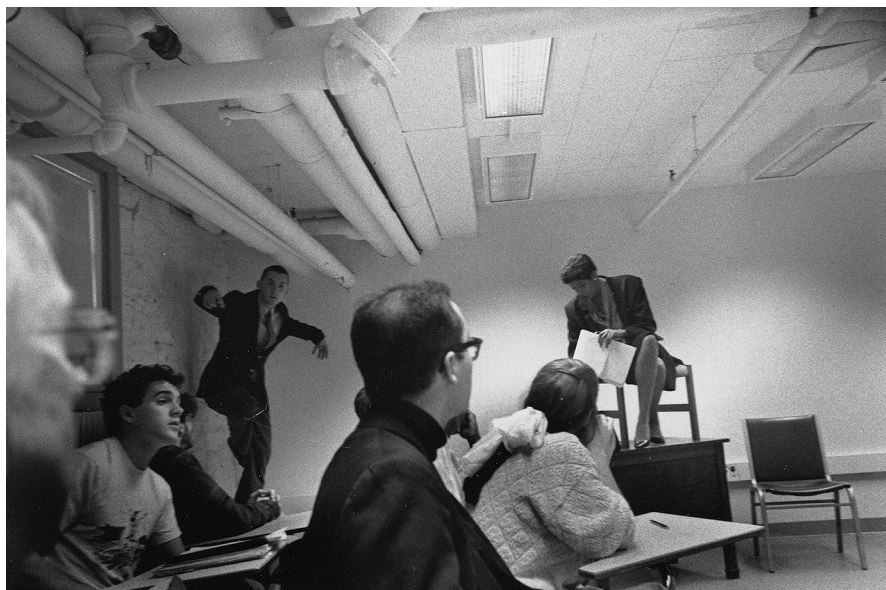
When I said I had, which was true, she said she hadn't been sure and that I ought to have made it more obvious that it was intentional because that would have had more effect. I took that to heart, as an extension of the general advice to make gestures and meanings bigger and clearer, and was able to put the lesson to good use shortly afterward, when the people in the garage we keep our car in complained because we had locked them out of the car when they needed to get in. One old guy started *nudging* me and, to Dianne's astonishment, I jumped out of the car, threw my arms and head up and began shouting, asking what he wanted from me, I apologized, wasn't that enough, etc., and kept it up until the guy started to laugh. "Make it big!" Right. The appendix to this story is that Shelly was shaken up when she realized she had said all that to "Professor Becker" (even though I insist that they call me Howie) and consulted Dwight as to whether she had done the wrong thing. So, I got to tell her that it was OK and the wonderful use I had made of her advice.)

That's a digression. In any event, from then on, from the time of the big class discussion breakthrough, everything went right. The discussions were serious explorations, for the next two days, of serious issues. People spoke to each other and there was a strong sense of a collective exploration of things that were complex, of problems that were not easily soluble.

Then, in the breathless schedule that the size of the class had made necessary, we were into the final projects, group projects that involved four to seven or eight people collaborating on something. In a perfectly hilarious session,









Dwight “massaged” the groups into existence and got them to volunteer for specific days. The time was short, and I certainly sympathized with people who didn’t want to “go first,” because they would have so little time to prepare.

Russ, who had been such a nuisance with crying and emoting, had an idea he was dying to do, and he was able to recruit a sizable group very quickly and so offered to go first. To our relief, this group and the other groups that formed later, were mixed, undergraduates and graduates, sociologists and theatre/performance people. The scene as the groups got together had enormous excitement. The room was just filled with energy, some of it no doubt nervousness at the thought of what was coming. They formed groups, planned meeting times to work out their ideas and rehearse their pieces, and got down to work. The atmosphere did not reveal any more nervousness, though, about what they were doing or how they would do it. It seemed like they had the idea now and were ready to go with it, taking whatever chances that entailed.

I won’t try here to describe the performances we’ve seen, recognizing that when we write this up, we will need to do that. But there are other things I want to get to and there may not be enough time to do all of it. The performances haven’t all been equally good, but they have all been intensely serious, clearly thought out, well-rehearsed, filled with serious ideas about society (that without question merit the label of “sociological,” if we’re going to regard that as a good thing) and staged and theatricalized in ingenious ways that for the most part really furthered the ideas, expressing

them in ways that couldn’t have been done better or as well in print or in a conventional format.

What I want to talk about now are some other things, at various levels of importance. This may be scattered, but it will serve to get some talk going.

The Performance Community

Dwight has used this phrase all along to refer to the class and to the developing sense of community among its members. I’ll comment on some specific aspects of it.

Demeanor. At the most elementary level, the class developed a level of politeness and civility that was pretty remarkable. I learned when I first began teaching that a teacher needs to protect the students from each other, that they are only too ready to destroy each other rhetorically and otherwise in order to get a grade or look better, and that you have to be pretty heavy-handed to keep that from happening. I suppose that the most important influence in this direction in our class has been Dwight’s setting the tone by always looking for what can be praised and appreciated in what someone says or does. We all pretty much followed that, and it has paid off.

Because the danger in doing anything else is that people will not take chances, because what’s the point of taking chances if you are going to be punished for it? And the

class asked everyone to take chances. The sociology students, people who had never had any real performance experience, were scared silly at the thought of getting up and doing anything that might be conveyed by the idea of “performance.” They didn’t know what it was but were pretty sure they didn’t know how to do it and that they would probably make fools of themselves. I’m not so sure what the theatre/performance people were afraid of, but there were enough questions about what was and wasn’t social science that that probably is what was bothering them.

So, the atmosphere of the class was such that people would get up and do these things, trusting to their colleagues and to me and Dwight not to embarrass them or punish them, and they were right to be trusting. It gave the class a little bit of a Pollyannaish cast for a while, but the result was worth it. It has allowed, in the end, some pretty heavy discussion of matters that stir people up—race, gender, oppression, etc.—in a way that let people’s emotions be stirred up without anyone getting hurt.

Authority. Dwight has talked often about never having given up so much authority in the class as he has in this class. He generally says this in a tone of slight wonder, as if wondering how he could be doing it or, perhaps, why he hadn’t done it before or doesn’t do it all the time; I don’t know. This doesn’t surprise me so much because I do it a lot of the time, in fact, as often and as much as I can get away with it. I refuse to take on responsibilities students would like to thrust on me, as well as those my colleagues and bosses want to thrust on me. I understand my minimal responsibility to show up

and to sign the grade sheet but, beyond that, I’m prepared to shove as much of the responsibility for what goes on as I can on to the students. They usually don’t like this, preferring to be told what to do and grumble about it (how’s that for a biased statement?). But I’m usually pretty firm about this. It shows up as irresponsibility; e.g., when students ask me about requirements (the department, the graduate school, the university) I tell them I don’t know, that it’s their problem and they better find out and not expect me to be helpful.

What I prefer is to treat the class as the joint responsibility of everyone there, mine to be sure, but no more than theirs. And our joint responsibility is to pursue something of mutual interest in a mutually agreeable way, while putting up enough of a front to satisfy the university that what we are doing is OK. But, to be specific, I don’t think it is my exclusive responsibility to provide entertainment (lecture or whatever) for every class session, nor do I think it’s my responsibility to maintain standards of demeanor, at least no more mine than anyone else’s.

So, the class has had to find its way, not completely on its own, but a lot more on its own than is usually the case. When they got snotty with each other, we did not intervene, even though we felt as embarrassed and nervous as everyone else, and probably more so because we knew, “in our hearts,” that we *were* responsible and should do something. Not surprisingly, when we did that the students ended up taking care of it. A nice example was when Tim offended Saku by saying something “improper” about race. The atmosphere got very heavy because Tim talked right

back to her, unrepentantly. Dwight and I both felt very uneasy, as though someone were going to have to step in but, fortunately, we didn't, and Lydia (who I suppose is more mature and responsible than we are) did, in a very reasonable and firm way.

One result of our not taking the teacher responsibilities was that we were expected to take the community member responsibilities. Now everyone knew, of course, that there was a limit to this, that when the chips were down, we *were* the teachers, so if we had said we didn't want to perform then that would have been that. But they leaned on us a little to perform and we both felt (well, I should speak for myself here, I felt it) both the moral responsibility to do what we were asking them to do and the interest in trying it and seeing what it was like. I was glad I did, because it gave me a new understanding of what the problems really were, at the level of practical detail, of what we were asking of them.

As community members, we were also exposed to what every other member was exposed to, namely, the possibility of being made a community object for comment. So, there was sort of open season on the teachers in the performances, which I'll return to below.

Community "traditions." The clearest sign of community has been the ability of its members to refer to shared experiences, to those events we have lived through together (it wouldn't be hyperbolic to say that the references were in part to things that we had "struggled through" together). The main such events have been, of course, earlier

performances and the characters or reputations that people have developed in the course of the class meetings.

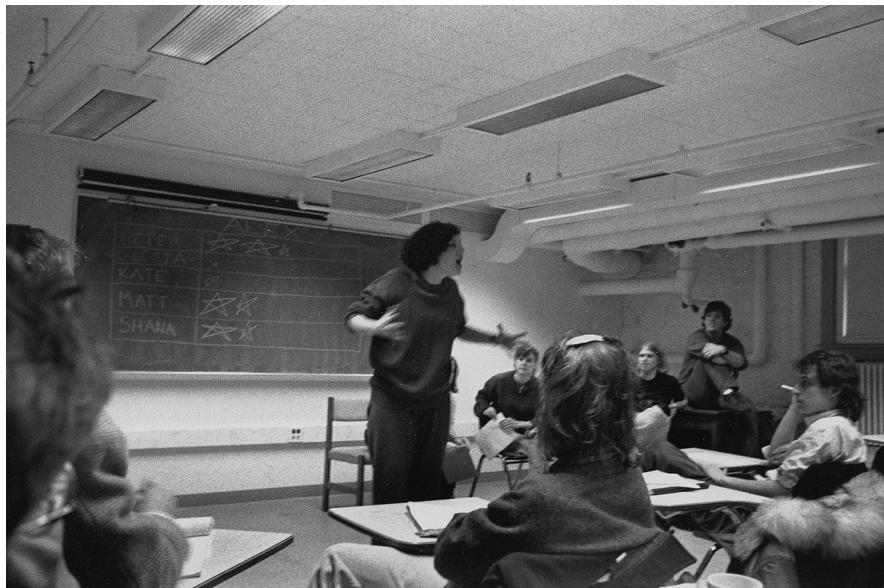
The later performances increasingly referred to what had occurred earlier in the class. I spoke of this, in one discussion, as "opportunism," and I'll refer to that again later, because it's an interesting problem in its own right. But I'll start with something simple: the stage settings. The basement room our class meets in has some simple furnishings: a desk, a couple of regular chairs, a blackboard, and a large number of regular classroom chairs. It has a door, several windows that look out on a light well, overhead lights controlled by a switch. The performances came, very quickly, to use these resources in highly stylized ways; only rarely did someone find a new use.

For instance, the desk. A few people sat behind it, especially when they wanted to portray an official person: a bureaucrat, a doctor, etc. For the most part, however, people sat on it. I think I may be responsible for this tradition, though that might be taking too much credit; it's a natural enough thing to do. But I almost always sit on desks and tables in class, and from the first days, when Dwight and I were addressing the class, I very often parked my butt on the desk. When the first performances started, I noticed that many of the students did that: they started their piece by walking to the front of the room and sitting on the desk to begin; they finished by getting up from the desk.

Similarly, many people followed someone's early lead, and used the light switch and the door to reproduce in a simple







way the resources of a conventional stage: lights on to denote the beginning, a blackout for the end; the door for entrances and exits. I think it would be too easy to dismiss these just as obvious choices, that anyone would make under the circumstances, and that we're better off to take them as choices that needn't have been made (no need for entrances and exits, after all, and other ways to indicate them if you do need them) and which eventually became stylized as a performance language everyone understood. Enough so that variation from them could be seen and appreciated as variation, as when Beth ingeniously sat under the desk to do her mask performance. So, all these simple devices became part of the class "culture," the ways we had devised and learned from each other and come to accept as an OK way to accomplish something a lot of us needed to accomplish, whatever that something was.

Later on, this process became more obvious as, in a kind of speeded-up parody of what goes on in conventional art worlds over periods of years or even centuries, works began to refer to earlier works in the genre or style. So, in one of the last performances, the participants self-consciously referred to things they, and other members of the community, had done in earlier performances. They relied on what everyone knew about what had come before for part of the effect they were expecting to get (and did in fact get). This had, among others, the consequence of making the same works or fragments take on multiple meanings as they appeared in different contexts. "Alex," the name of the final performance which started with Peter as a parrot named Alex being taught to act like a human being, was an

extended comment on the class and school in general, with its device of awarding stars to people for their individual performances

Similarly, the people in the community acquired "characters," characteristics expressed in or inferred from their behavior in class. So Hermano and Saku, each in their way, expressed a profound skepticism about what was going on in class, and those expressions became essential parts of their reputations, to be referred or alluded to. In a nice touch, for instance, the final performance of "Identity at Mashpee," in which Hermano participated, introduced Hermano as someone who had finally resolved his lifelong struggle to reconcile art and science (or something like that), and everyone laughed at the allusion to his earlier complaints about what he spoke of as the failure to give full weight to serious social science concerns. Gloria, a voluble *Brasileira* who expressed herself colorfully, similarly became a well-known class character. Lydia (this is a personal perception, but I'm sure it's shared) became a kind of conscience for the community, she was so obviously honest and fair-minded and compassionate. "Alex" played on this by having the other students in the group complain about Peter overdoing it, wanting to be the star, the big cheese.

As I mentioned earlier, Dwight and I became "characters" of this kind, and were used a few times as well-known, "traditional" figures of fun, as when Peter did his imitation of Dwight, or Audrey parodied my reading of Matza.

A community has standard ways of doing things, and

rules about what goes and what doesn't. Our community, deprived of the standard teacher-student rules, had to invent its own and those rules are part of the community's "traditions." They have been pretty rudimentary, and I really only have one example in mind. but I'll describe it to give the flavor of what I mean, and maybe we can think of others.

In his mask performance, Derek told a blood-chilling story about almost losing his life in a mountain climbing accident. It was quite moving—he's a good storyteller—but at the very end he said almost casually that, in fact, none of it had happened. People were extremely angry at having been taken in and complained a lot. Molly or someone said that that had *really* happened to her (or maybe it was to a friend of hers) and she did not think it was funny; it was a heavy rebuke. Personally, I was tickled that he had done it, because he made a point for me that I had tried unsuccessfully to make earlier, about the way our belief that what we were being told was true (or not) affected the way we reacted to it. Many of the theatre people hadn't liked that, and Derek had provided incontrovertible evidence of what I was talking about.

After Derek did this, and got soundly rebuked for it, it just didn't happen again. Derek, I guess, had a long session with Dwight in which he talked about feeling very bad for having done it. I don't know how much the students talked about it among themselves. Dwight and I were not at all appalled by it, but I guess they were. No one did it again. When Gloria told a wonderful story about going to a big political meeting in Brazil and getting arrested (it was a wonderful story in what we were coming to see as a specifically "Gloria" style),

I was really curious (because the story meshed so well with prejudices of mine about the role of coincidence in social life) as to whether it was true. Everyone acted as though I was asking a foolish question, that of course it was true, even though Derek had lied to us just a few days earlier. That is, Derek's activity had not defined a possibility that could be used in future performances (the way, say, my sitting on the desk had). On the contrary, it had (in the way Kai Erikson describes) defined a limit, a thing that constituted "going too far" and thus was specifically not available as a resource in future performances. This definition of a limit stuck, everyone accepted it.

Collaboration and "getting it done" under pressure. Reading Lorraine Hanson's process paper and listening to some of the class discussions after the final performances and to other talk has convinced me that part of the development of the class as a community came from the intense pressure of having to collaborate with other people with whom they don't agree to get something ready for performance in a very short time. I'm convinced that this is an absolutely new experience for a lot of the sociology graduate students. They are used to writing papers under pressure, to turning out all by themselves something that will get by and maybe even further their own interests. But they really aren't used to collaboration very much; one evidence of that is the edginess of almost all sociologists I've ever known about the allocation of credit for collaborative work, the hurt feelings over the order of names on articles, and all that. They think of scholarship as an agonistic activity, where you assert your idea, your "point," against the ideas and "points" of others,

and where you do best when your idea wins. You can see that in the typical framing of a sociological argument, in which you show that other people have talked about your topic but have either said something wrong or (I hate this locution) “failed to take account of” the point that you are now going to make a big deal out of. I sometime ask people why, instead of saying that “Jones failed to take account of my variable,” they don’t say that “Jones has opened up this area for exploration and now I’m going to add the following to that wonderful beginning.” They look puzzled, as though I’d suggested something silly.

Anyway, sociologists don’t know how to collaborate and, apart from the experience of term papers and exams, really don’t know how to do serious work under severe time pressure. They never have to do it. They have to finish theses, to be sure, but not really—that is, they can just not finish the thesis and pay the price of that. In this class, they didn’t have that option. They *had* to finish the work because on a certain day they had to get up and do this scary thing, ready or not.

Furthermore, they had to work with people they didn’t know well, people who couldn’t necessarily express their thoughts in the language and style sociology students are used to, and who often didn’t, in any event, agree with them about some pretty serious matters. So, preparing the final performances turned into an exercise in learning to compromise in the interest of getting it done. I’m sure some of them found this dreadful, an experience of giving in on points that they didn’t want to give in on; we’ll see if that’s right in the final papers, (maybe they will be so turned

on by the experience that they will not say anything like this). What happened is that they found ways to express difference in ideas and opinion without getting combative about it, ways of talking that let conflicting ideas co-exist, which I take to be (now that I think about it) one of the things we have wanted them to understand: that complex ideas are filled with conflict which can’t be resolved simply and may (probably will) have to be lived with as unresolved tensions. Concepts like “heteroglossia” express that thought and they learned, of necessity, to find ways of letting multivocality happen in performance, of literally giving voice to conflicting ideas.

One interesting aspect of community, then, was that it arose in part out of the necessity of getting all this stuff done under this intense pressure, and getting it done in ways that involved necessary compromises.

Style and Content

Collage and comparison. A number of performances made use of collage as a technique for putting together. The performers selected a variety of small texts or small pieces of larger texts and put them together in various ways. (I’m specifically not talking about pieces in which fragments of a text were put together to create a narrative, which was another common form.) The texts I’m talking about could be seen to have a “family resemblance,” they were more or less about the “same thing,” though not literally the same thing.

These collages were a form of comparative analysis. The piece done by Naomi and company illustrates this. They collaged a great variety of pieces, all having to do with instances of oppression and exploitation: racial, sexual, etc. The effect was exactly that of a good comparative analysis. You saw the underlying similarity, the generic process so to speak, in the various expressions presented. You also saw the specific versions and could see how things that were more obvious in one version might be found in less obvious form in the others. That's what a comparative study does—it lets you see the generic and how it varies under varying circumstance.

Intuition vs. thought. I've made it a point to ask the groups doing the final pieces how they made their performance decisions. It's striking how non-specific they are. They say, with feeling (so they obviously think they are saying something important, and I guess they are, even if it isn't what I'm after), that they had to argue a lot, that discussions went on all night, etc. That is, it wasn't easy. But what criteria did they use? How did they decide that this order for the pieces was better than that? When they decided, after long argument, to drop something, what were the considerations?

It can't be that they didn't have specific reasons—if they didn't what did their arguments consist of? But they prefer to say that, in the end, it was intuition, that the bases of the choice can't be made explicit. I don't believe that. In fact, quite the contrary, I know that they can be explicit because when they are pushed, they start being explicit.

More important, the decisions reveal important choices about what kind of thing to say and are not just little technical decisions about what will “work better.” The choices of collage bits that constitute a comparison clearly involve theoretical choices—if I compare homosexuality with race that means that I want to call attention to something they have in common. I'm not so clear about what is implied by choices about the order, although those are obviously important.

Getting society in. A characteristic feature of social science analyses in general, whatever differences there may be between them, is their focus on “system” concepts, their insistence that social events and outcomes do not arise out of the characteristics or intentions of individuals, but out of features of the social organization they occur in. If you take that seriously, any event involves a large number of people, organizations, communities, etc. (My notion of an “art world” is exactly about this. But so is the labelling theory of deviance, which says that “deviance” involves not just “bad people,” but also police, prosecutors, law makers, moral entrepreneurs, etc.)

So, if you are going to present some kind of social analysis of a phenomenon, you need to invoke the presence of this system, of all these people, differentiated by function and in all the other ways people are differentiated and connected to each other in all sorts of complicated and interlocking ways. Well, whether you're talking about a performance or a written text, that's hard to do and, in some fundamental sense, impossible. It's impossible in that you











can't literally reproduce the entire thing. If you did, you'd be recreating society (which is one thing I have against people like Norman Denzin, whose judgments of social science are measured against the ideal of reproducing the "lived experience" of people in society).

If you can't reproduce the entire system, you need to choose which parts you will reproduce and what you will do to, to repeat the phrase I used above, invoke the rest of it. How will you make sure that you get your awareness of the whole system in?

This came up very pointedly for me in the performance about Alzheimer's Disease by Wellin and Co. People criticized it, with some justice, I thought, because the characters of the old women who were resident in the Home were much more fully alive than those of the staff (which was odd in itself, because you actually got a lot more information, in some sense, about the staff than you did about the residents, but that's another question). As a result, most people found themselves "blaming" the staff for "mistreating" the residents, and a lot of the discussion had to do with redressing that "injustice," with making it clear that we knew that the staff were also underpaid and put upon and as deserving of our sympathy and that, if they mistreated the residents, it was understandable. The performance solution many people offered to this problem was to somehow get those other people, the ones in the system whose actions "forced" the staff to behave as they did, into the act, show them acting too. I pointed out that if you did that someone would be sure to say, correctly, that those people in turn were at the mercy

of still other forces, which would then need to be embodied on the stage, etc., etc.

I generalized that to say that there were two extreme possibilities for solving this dilemma. On the one hand, you could take the "Nicholas Nickleby" approach and in fact literally get everyone in, even if you needed to have thirty or forty actors and the show took eight hours (with an intermission for dinner). At the other extreme is Arthur Kopit's solution in "Wings," a show about a woman who has a stroke. She is center stage, in bed, the whole time, and you essentially know whatever she can get from what is going on around her; you see a lot of people, but mostly behind a scrim, dimly, and hear no more than fragments of conversation. So, you become aware of a social organization, a system, but only as the main character does, and with only the abilities her stroke has left her to gather information with. So, it's system-as-a-problem-for-a-character.

Most solutions will be somewhere in between, I suppose. They will, in varying degrees, show you some things so that you can see them for yourself, independently of any of the characters; show you other things as they appear to one or more of the characters; and just tell you about some others, by having someone tell about them or using other devices to make them apparent. Dwight thought that the texts in the Wellin piece—the charts, brochure, and records of the Home—invoked the bureaucracy and legal system that impinged on the Home, and did it in a good, minimalist way. Conversation of both residents and staff invoked absent relatives (the residents' children who didn't visit, the staff's

children who needed care and food); I was reminded of a wonderful radio show of the '30s and '40s, "Vic and Sade," in which four characters, just by talking about them, created an entire small town of people. Finally, the researcher was invoked by actually appearing.

Other pieces brought in different parts of the world in different ways. Can we make a little inventory of those ways out of our notes?

Point of view. From whose viewpoint do we see the action? Whose interpretation of things are we getting? The Wellin piece seemed very obviously to be the viewpoint of the residents of the Home. I feel odd saying that, not sure I can justify it by observations, but feel equally sure that it's so. We didn't, after all, have any privileged access to their minds, any more than to the other characters. They talked about how they felt, but so did the staff (not the sociologist, though, who was pretty much a neutral voice asking questions). Maybe it was the metronome ticking away that made you feel you were experiencing the interminable life in this place, from which the staff (but not the residents) could escape.

Other pieces more deliberately brought in other points of view and made them equally dominant. Examples from our notes?

Props. Dianne pointed out to me how the use of props and costume pieces has been decreased as the quarter went on. The final performances used much less stuff than the earlier ones. Chris and Laura brought in all sorts of furniture and stuff for their first piece; the final performance had almost

nothing. Shelly and May had a lot of stuff (computers, etc.) for their midterm, but the finals they were in were much simpler. People picked up a lot of tricks for minimal, but effective, staging as the quarter went on. Dianne reminded me, too, that I had threatened to do something where I came in with four shopping bags full of props, spent twenty minutes setting them up and arranging them, and then turned to the audience and took a bow. We were sure that everyone would have gotten the point.

Consequences

I really wonder what will become of this cohort of sociology graduate students who have survived this thing. Are they going to try to do things like this anywhere else? What will happen when they do? It's one thing for me, a full professor who doesn't care what happens (and why should I?), to fool around with this. What will happen to some poor *shnook* of an assistant professor who tries it? Or a graduate student who decides that he wants (Tim told me this is his intention) to present at least part of a thesis or job talk in the form of a videotaped performance? Or a graduate student (someone told me David Shulman has this idea) who wants to do performances instead of term papers for all his classes?

The experience has been important for them. Naomi hasn't said it to me so much, but she has spent a lot of time talking to Dwight and it's obvious this has been important for her. Audrey Davis is older than many of the other first year

students, but she is a very nervous student, worried about passing her courses, and scared to death of statistics in particular. She told me that she never would have gotten through this quarter (statistics! with Charles Ragin) if it hadn't been for this class.

Hermano and Gloria have been interesting cases. They both came here from Brazil especially to "study with" me. And the only thing I'm teaching is performance, so they signed up for it, little realizing what they were getting into. Hermano has been openly ambivalent (Gloria too, for that matter, but I don't see so much of her and am not as aware of her concerns). But he's a good sport and has an experimental mind, so he went along with it. The things he said in class, he told me, he really meant, although he also meant other things at other times. Just before the final performance he told me that it wasn't at all what he wanted, and indicated a lot of ambivalence about it, even though the group (which had come together because of Omar's concerns about mixed identities) had ended up doing his choice of James Clifford's text on Mashpee. Afterward, however, he said that he was very pleased with the result and was really glad that he had participated in the class so fully. They had been rehearsing almost all night; he had had three hours sleep and had ended up sharing a bed with Omar and Kameron because it was too late to go back and forth home. He said that he had thought to himself, as he was laying there in the bed, "Did I come all this way from Rio to do this?" In the end he was glad that he had.

(The last day of class both of them were quite jubilant and

pleased to have been involved. Gloria told Dwight that she didn't think she had learned much about anthropology in the class, but that she certainly had learned a lot about teaching. And we bumped into Kameron on the street later, who said that they had had quite a time with Hermano, who didn't want to learn or do the dance number, but was finally coerced into doing it; Hermano himself told me that he really had a good time and had learned some really good things.)

I think the class is important for the students because a lot of them come in (and it is particularly true this year) with political and social concerns on their minds—whether it's feminism or race or gay issues—and they find themselves up to their ears in the usual stuff of first year graduate work in sociology: statistics, theory, etc. It may be necessary but it's not inspiring, and it certainly doesn't make you feel that you are doing anything about those political concerns. This class has given them a place to express those concerns in ways that are emotionally effective. It makes them feel like they are doing what they came to graduate school for.

Well, that's a speculation. The other thing I'm thinking about, and I'd like to meet with them to talk about it sometime next quarter, is what they are going to do now. What use can having done this possibly be? It's fun, but when are they going to get to do it again? I suppose one thing is that, if nothing else, they have learned something about performing that ought to be a help in the performances—teaching, speaking at conferences, etc.—they will give the rest of their professional lives. I thought, and still think, that the performance of the regression equation by Russ and Co.

ought to be done on the first day of every stat class that is ever taught. It makes so many nice points.

But I guess that what lies behind this is my concern that after I leave this spring, they are going to be very disappointed in the rest of what they have to deal with and will end up getting in trouble for trying to reproduce this experience. Now that I say it out loud, it sounds grandiose and a little silly. They aren't fools, they'll know when and how to use it, and when to put it on the back burner.

Afterthoughts

After writing the above, I had a chance to look at the pictures Dianne has made of the class and to have her remind me of a lot of things I had forgotten, and also to remember topics Dwight had talked about that I haven't touched on yet.

Social scientist as performer. Dwight has always talked about doing ethnography as being, in the most literal sense, a performance. You have to play the part of the social scientist in the field situation. That has several implications, many of which were made explicit and detailed in one or another of the student performances.

For instance, "social scientist" is a part in a script. Who writes the script? Well, in part, we do. We know what we want to accomplish and how we think we are supposed to

behave to accomplish that. We aren't always clear in our minds about these things, however. It's always true that what we want to accomplish is not just to make some valid social science findings. We want to make findings in a form and style our social science colleagues will find acceptable and that often leads us to do things that may be more than a little bizarre in the actual research setting. With those other people looking over our shoulders, we ask questions and act in ways that are unnatural for normal social intercourse, that have a ritual character. The "Regressions" piece highlighted this ritual character, but so did Sharon's piece about why we don't ask handicapped people "normal" questions, and Naomi's "What do you know about AIDS?" Other pieces as well called into question notions of what a social scientist was, what it was OK for one to do, and how they might look to the lay people who had to deal with them (e.g., Shelly and Amy doing Lillian Rubin interviewing someone) or to any outsider who caught them in the act (I thought "Alex" did this very nicely for experimental work, better than the Milgram imitation, which was too heavy-handed for me).

This was all wonderfully reflexive, meditations on what it meant to be doing this kind of work, and on what was actually going on, as opposed to the fantasies of scientists about what they're doing. In a way, performance forces this. The minute you introduce social scientists as characters, they can't just sit there, they have to act. The performance format doesn't allow for a theatrical equivalent of the passive grammatical constructions that allow the social scientist to just disappear (as in, "questionnaires were administered"); someone has to administer them and that

someone becomes *someone*, a real person with whatever socially marked attributes (like race or gender or age or class) they have. And then you can see that the data gathering encounter is a real social encounter between real people and can't be as cut-and-dried as the methods texts make it seem. "Regressions" made that very clear; you knew that it was a black woman that was asking your race. Other aspects of the encounter were important too, in various of the pieces: many of the performances based on Rubin's book made clear the embarrassment of working-class people in the face of this educated, well-dressed woman.

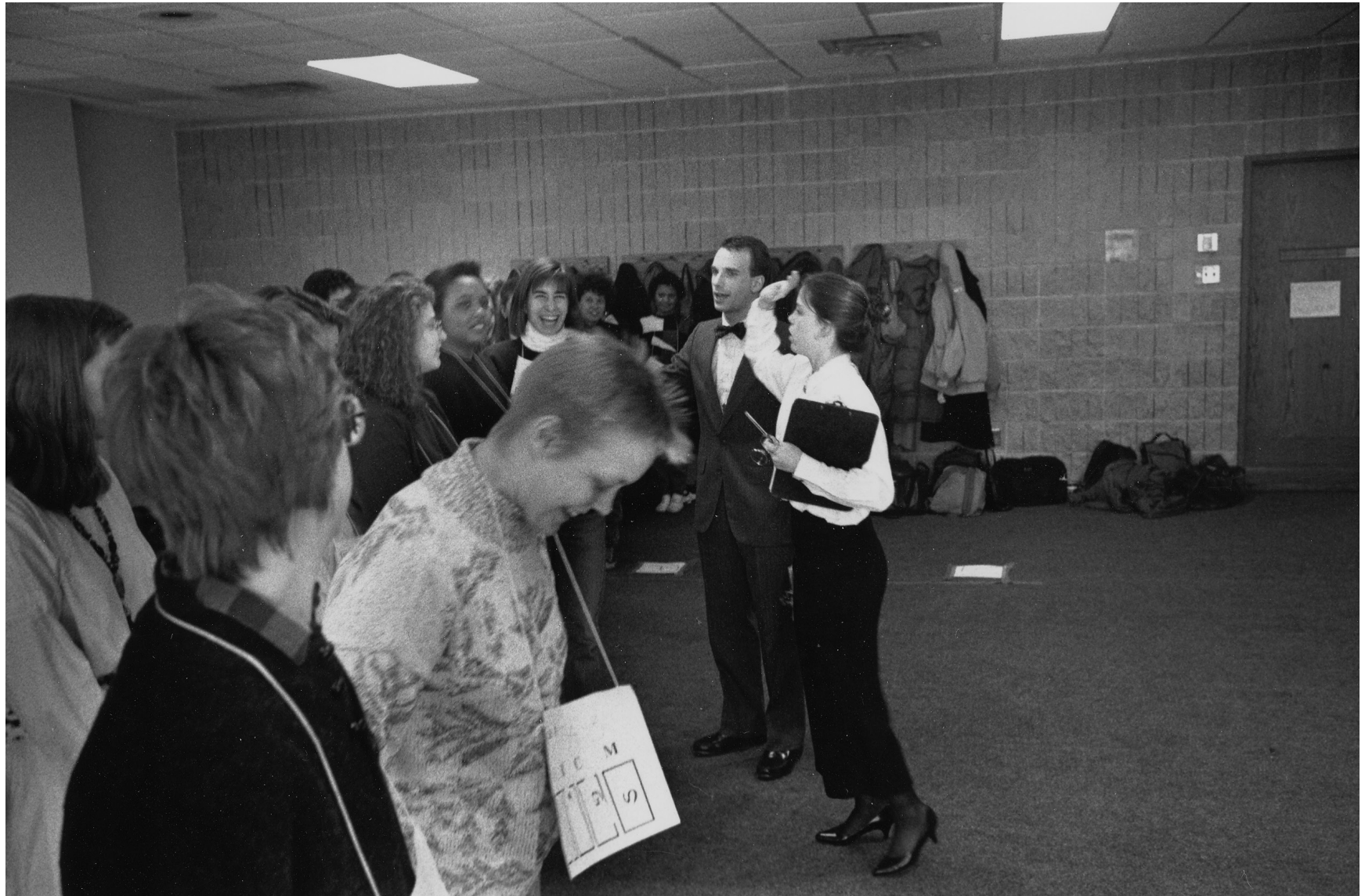
Conversely, pieces that deleted the social scientist (who just had been there) were less successful. That was what bothered me about Audrey's recitation of Indian stories: where did those texts come from? Who had told them to who under what circumstances? They were being treated as pristine entities, the products of an immaculate conception, which we know is not where these babies come from.

Another aspect of the social scientist as actor is something Dwight likes to insist on, the necessity of improvisation in field work. Many of the pieces, as I've said, show how social scientists force people to play their parts in already written scripts. But people often won't do that, they don't do what we planned for them to do, don't answer questions the way we want, don't do the things we expected. And we have to respond, to deal with their unruliness, on the spot, invent ways of handling it so that we can get our work done even though they have just fucked up our plans. The "Regressions" group spent a great deal of their rehearsal time planning

for such contingencies: what will we do if one of the gay people objects to the gender question, or one of the black women (as predicted) insists on being African American? A lot of practical social science planning is like that, especially in areas where the scientists are trying to keep things under control. Another approach to this, of course, is what ethnographers tend to do, up to a point, which is to define the places where things don't go according to plan as places from which you can learn something. i.e., if something doesn't "go right," that means you had an idea about that thing which wasn't correct, so now the world has given you a chance to learn something new. Take it!

Closure. This really goes under style and content. One obvious difference between performances was that some of them really came to an end. You knew they were over without anyone having to say, "That's it" (which otherwise was pretty standard) or turning the lights off or walking out of the room. The most stunning example was Joanne breaking a board, after using a video tape to set up the problem of whether a woman could do that or not; when she appeared in her martial arts uniform and Chris held the board up, everyone held their breath for the eternity that she waited (I would never have guessed that she would be able to get away with such a long pause for suspense, but she did) and cheered when she did break it. But, as several people pointed out, if she hadn't broken it, that would have been an ending too, though it would have made a different story of it.

I talked about this using Barbara Herrnstein Smith's notion about poetic closure as an analog. A poem (or dramatic





piece) is done when some conventional means of indicating ending is used: in poetry it might be that a well-known form like the sonnet is completed; or a dramatic action is concluded; or a question answered (Joanne's case); or an argument concluded. To end something this way requires that you know what you were trying to say, and that was the problem for some of the pieces. They didn't know what they wanted to say, and therefore couldn't find an ending. In another sense, of course, however you end it does decide what it's about.

Opportunism. I said I would talk more about this. What I mean by it is the way students took advantage of whatever came to hand in constructing their performances. Here are some further examples.

In "Alzheimer's," Chris set the stage at the end of the room opposite the door, where what you looked at (as audience member) was the institutional pink paint on the wall, marked with dirty spots, and other touches that looked pretty much like what you might imagine such a place would look like (I judge, from what he says, that the ranch house this home was in does not in fact look that bad). In "Uncle Soc," the group made brilliant use of those funky windows that look out on a light well, by having Paul appear in that window trying to get in. Lorraine says that the use of the room divider in "Regression" was an afterthought provoked by finding themselves in a room that had such a divider; Russ immediately thought of a way to use it.

Another kind of opportunism was the use of personal

characteristics of the students as resources. This was nicely done in "Mashpee," where they introduced the topic by introducing each other in ways that called their identity into question ("What are you, Julie? You must at least be a WASP or something!"). They also did that in "Alex," where Peter's showboating came in for some ribbing, which could only work because Peter had created a reputation for himself.

"Alex" went a little farther, by using the whole framework of the class as something we would all know and something which therefore could be joked about or even made the object of serious analysis. Their game of giving stars (Gloria: "I want a star, where's my star?") brought into serious question the whole game of praise that went on in the class.

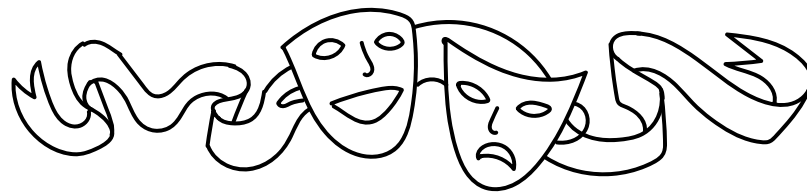
Audience Participation. I remember a few times when I thought of the maxim I have lived by for years in going to contemporary theatre, which is just not to sit in the front row because, if you do, either they will throw something on you or, worse, make you get up and be part of the show. Even with this built-in caution I got stuck a couple of times, most notably in "Mashpee," where I was suddenly called on to give a definition of culture (I guess I surprised them by being able to do it impromptu, but they shouldn't have been surprised, any experienced teacher could do the equivalent). The biggest audience participation stunt was in "Regression," where we all played the part of data in ways that really got us involved. I doubt that they knew they were using a theatrical trick that goes back not only to Julian Beck and Judith Malina and the Living Theatre, but even farther to Olsen and Johnson and "Hellzapoppin!"

Student abilities. By the end of the class, Dwight, Dianne and I were all astounded by the kind of abilities students had revealed. I suppose it was no surprise that a few of them, like Jenny and Kameron, who were experienced theatre people, were able to produce high quality work. What was more surprising was the way the sociology students came through, not only with inventive ideas but also with skilled, technically sharp performances. And the way undergraduates who had seemed to have no particular spark came alive and did wonderfully interesting, daring, and competent things. Not only that. The level of discussion was surprising, in two ways. First of all, everyone got into it. It was not a class in which you had to fight to get students to talk. They talked a lot, they talked to the point (for the most part, let's not exaggerate), they talked to each other rather than to the teachers in the front of the room, they continued talking after the class was over. Second, they talked in a sophisticated way, again not just the theatre students talking theatre or the sociologists talking sociology. They got to subtle points in what was going on and explored them intelligently and imaginatively. People like Shana and Krista and Julie, undergraduates who seemed kind of so-so, if that, came to life eventually with a lot of interesting remarks, and held their own in discussions. Shana and Krista did performances we would never have thought them capable of, and Dawn and Audrey revealed substantial talent for recognizing how to do theatre and for being able to execute what they understood.

I have a theory which ties a lot of the above together. It's about how the development of a community produces talent and good work and creativity and is of a piece with the thought that discussion is a collective accomplishment.



Howie draws stick figures for his midterm performance, winter quarter, 1991



Text written by Howie Becker (HSB) in 1989 and 1991

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