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Four Handouts

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This article explores how writing occurs within pedagogical practice and examines the possibility of the handout as an experimental genre.

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BETWEEN STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Four Handouts

Ethan Philbrick

How does our teaching relate to our writing? For some scholars, teaching is thought of as a preparation for writing—a kind of workshop space to develop a bibliography and hone ideas in conversation with students. For others, teaching is a space to return to what we’ve already written—a space to share our process retrospectively with students and reengage with our formulations. I’m curious about exploring a different relationship between teaching and writing. Rather than thinking of writing as something that happens either before or after teaching, I want to consider the ways that writing is internal to the practice of teaching and meditate on genres of writing that occur within the scene of pedagogy. In particular, I’m interested in revitalizing a concept and practice of the handout. Often thought of solely as a dry, instrumentalized, and bureaucratized genre (i.e., a list of things to make sure that students know, a series of instructions, a prescriptive guide, etc.), the handout also poses the potentiality of being a more indeterminate and intimate space to explore modes of writing alongside and for our students. In what follows, I will engage in a brief reverie on the genre of the handout before offering four examples of handouts from my own teaching. I want to investigate the nature of the handout while also seeing what happens when writing meant for students circulates beyond the classroom or, in other words, when the handout is handed out more widely.

The noun handout has two primary meanings: first, financial or material aid given to a person in need, and second, a piece of printed information provided free of charge (Oxford English Dictionary 2021b). While this second meaning of handout is the version we typically evoke in our classrooms, part of what I’m interested in exploring here is how the residue of the first meaning—sharing out, giving gifts, redistributing material resources—might stick to the second meaning and how an acknowledgment of this signifiatory stickiness might reinvigorate our teaching practices. Handouts are a way to give material freely; they are offerings offered without indebtedness, gifts operating beyond the logic of exchange. In addition, the noun form of handout carries with it the verb form of hand—to hand in, to hand down, to hand back, to hand off, to hand over, to hand out. Handouts imply a haptic transfer, a taking hold, a moment of touch, a passing between hands. They suggest a kind of corporeal generosity akin to giving someone a hand—to help someone up or down a step, into or out of something (Oxford English Dictionary 2021a).

How might these definitional resonances vibrating around the sign “handout” invite us to write differently in and around the classroom? How might we free up our hands to write more imaginatively with students in mind? How might our writing offer a hand to readers inside and outside of the classroom? These are some of the questions I have followed in my own practice. In doing so, I am falling into conversation with recent handout analyses and handouts made public by scholars such as Roy Perez (2020) and Kayla Wazana Tompkins (2016). In September of 2016, Tompkins published “We Aren’t Here to Learn What We Already Know” in the *Teacher, Teacher* forum in *Avidly*, the short form criticism off-shoot of the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Tompkins’

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piece took a handout about how to encounter theory as a starting point for meditating on the politics of reading and knowledge practices. In a similar vein, Roy Perez tweeted a handout in September 2020 about reading theory as a thread (it begins: “theory is an effort by writers to make sense of phenomena for which we don’t yet have sufficient language”). Perez’s tweets circulated widely, clearly being used in ways that exceeded their initial engagement in the classroom. Both of these instances of making handouts and their analysis public took place in September, demonstrating an impulse from each scholar to begin the school year by opening the classroom beyond its institutional enclosure, encouraging more handing out beyond the walls that often delimit our teaching. With the hand that these handouts have given me in mind, I include the following four handouts from my own teaching as hopefully similarly inciting experiments.

I.

In the fall of 2020, I was teaching an online performance studies course in a theatre department, and my students were running into interpretive walls when we were engaging with works that were farther afield from the disciplinary habits of theatre. They asked for some tools to help them encounter these pieces, and the following questions were what came out:

Questions to Ask Art

Ethan Philbrick

question formally: What are the foreground-background relations? What are the margin-centre relations? What is inside or outside of the frame? What is perceivable, and what is imperceivable? How does it navigate the relationship between representation and abstraction? How does it navigate the relationship between order and disorder? How does it look, sound, smell, taste, feel?

question materially: What are its materials? What kinds of technologies does it utilize? What are its processes? What are its contexts? What are its conditions of possibility? What are its modalities of spectatorship? Or in other words, how is it produced, circulated, and consumed?

question historically: How is it disrupting or confirming genre or medium expectations? How is it relating explicitly and implicitly to other artworks (contemporaneous or historical)? How is it going with or against an inherited idea of art?

question personally: What surprising feelings emerge in relation to it? What idiosyncratic associations does it evoke? What not quite articulated memories does it elicit?

question hermeneutically: What does it mean? (and what doesn’t it mean?)

question performatively: What does it do? (and what doesn’t it do?)

2.

When I teach performance-making studio courses, I want my students to find their own languages and impulses, but I also want to offer them shortcuts toward making works that feel rigorous and alive. In addition, studio courses are so much more enjoyable to teach when students are bringing in work that feels exciting and surprising to me, so selfishly, I wrote this with the hope that it might help me have more fun in the classroom.

Performance Composition Guidelines

Create from the conditions of your existence and work with what is at hand: your body, your feelings, your voice, your objects, your ancestors, your friends, your enemies, your stories, your obsessions, your curiosities, your texts, your images, your screens . . .

What are the political stakes of your work? What is the world you want to critique? What is the world you want to make?

Be in conversation with artists who have come before you—adapt, translate, cover, remix, cite.

Make work that makes you want to practise. Make work that makes something happen.

No skits or sketches. No nudity, blood, or fire (in the classroom). No performances that consist solely of you or your audiences writing on your body (unfortunately I've seen this too many times).

Technical difficulties are no excuse.

3.

I struggled for a long time to find a first-week reading for a freshman introduction to theatre studies course. I wanted something that posed big questions in challenging ways but was short enough to encounter quickly. I wanted something that would initially disorient their thinking but that we could then return to at the end of the semester to measure how their engagement with these questions had grown and developed. Eventually, I stopped looking and wrote the following axioms with my students in mind.

Theatre + World: 10 Axioms

1. There is no one theatre. Theatre means different things, takes different shapes, and does different things in different times, locations, and from different points of view. Understanding historical, geopolitical, and social contexts is necessary for understanding theatre.
2. That said, a few things we might be able to say about theatre in general: Theatre takes place in space and time. Theatre is an appearing before others. Theatre proposes a novel relation between bodies, texts, objects, and spaces.
3. Theatre is not political only if it is explicitly *about* a political issue—all theatre is political. Relatedly, politically engaged theatre is not only politically engaged if it depicts a political struggle or makes explicitly political statements. It can also be politically engaged in terms of how it was made (its mode of production and division of labour) and its formal disruptions (making something new perceptible, thinkable, and feelable).
4. Some say theatre is a mirror that reflects the world, some say theatre is a hammer that changes the world, some say theatre is a hammer covered in shards of a broken mirror like a disco ball, spinning in the light of an empty room.
5. Theatre is sometimes a space of fascist control and insipid diversion, sometimes a radical enactment of a more just world, and sometimes all the above.
6. Honour your pleasures, likes, and attachments but beware of sentimentality: just because something makes you feel something intense doesn't mean it is good.
7. If theatre confuses, disorients, or makes you uncomfortable, take that as the starting point of inquiry. The puzzles hold the keys. "I don't get it" is not a place of arrival, but of departure.
8. When you read a script, read it as a brilliant and yet indecisive director. Imagine all the ways it could be in space and time, and pay attention to details—read closely, deeply, and associatively.
9. Understanding theatre is a critical window into understanding the complex theatricality of everyday life and power relations.
10. Take the polysemism of the verb "to act" seriously. To act: take action; do something. To act: perform a fictional role. Blur these two meanings. Let acting training become action training. Confuse stage and world.

4.

I recently taught a more experimental course called "Groups, Collectives, and Ensembles." Here's an excerpt from the course description:

This class is a hybrid scholarship and studio course that explores the political and artistic significance of collective authorship, ensemble performance, and group processes. Along the way, we will attempt to get willfully confused between form and content, between research methods and research objects. Or in other words, we will not just study groups; we will work

as a group. We will not just investigate collective processes and ensemble performance but attempt to make ourselves into an artist collective and a performing ensemble.

To start the class off, I wanted to provide a text that could become a shared conceptual ground for our experiments, and I wrote the final handout included below to do the job. In addition, the conceptual and aesthetic concerns of this course overlapped broadly with a monograph I'm currently writing, and this handout, composed with my students' hands in mind, has become somewhat of a compass as I make my way in my own work.

Groups, Collectives, and Ensembles Axioms

1. To be an individual is to be always already a member of a group. Individuals are part of a grouping before they are individuals. Any group formation is a complicated process of regrouping.
2. Groups are both material and immaterial, both physical assemblies of subjects and the idea of the group, the feeling of affiliation.
3. The ground of the group is difference and finitude. Togetherness and belonging are potential side effects, yet dissensus and differentiation are of more value than consensus and cohesion.
4. Becoming more than one (forming a collective, initiating an ensemble, joining a group) is not a liberatory act in itself—it matters what you do and how you do it.

* * *

I hope these handouts can help encourage a broader tendency to write more loosely within our teaching practices; to give our hands out more freely. I also hope they can become part of an assembly of texts by scholars, artists, and teachers, such as Perez and Tompkins, who circulate the writing they do in and for the classroom beyond the classroom's walls. Let's keep passing things out.

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