

“Make it Real for Me!”

Performing symbolic interactionism as a tool for critical analysis writing

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Symbolic interactionism (SI) involves the notion that we shape and are shaped by cultural symbols in relation with others. People, actions, and items are attributed meaning with communication symbols (Blumer, 1969). In other words, when interacting with others, we all manage self-presentations and understand communication rules affiliated with our identities in our individual cultures (Goffman, 1959). According to SI, the way we communicate is performative. Consistent re-enactments of performances are assessed by others as contextually appropriate or inappropriate. As a result, interactions provide a basis on which to interpret the suitability of one’s role in a particular situation (Foote, 1951).

To validate the importance (and fun!) of critical analysis writing, SI can be applied to students’ experiences. Being able to see the everyday implications of SI is useful because it makes us aware of underlying processes operating in our daily lives. Students can use SI to recognize the cultural rules in different situations that work to influence why (interaction norms) and how (communication as strategic symbols) we behave as we do. For example, why is screaming acceptable for babies or sports fans but not for teenagers in class? Further, the process of critical analysis writing is valuable because explicitly thinking about cultural norms and communication symbols demonstrates that otherwise “academic” exercises are applicable in the “real world.” As another example, to understand the ways in which culture, social norms, interactions with others, and communication all work to shape (and are reciprocally shaped by) identity, a student can analyze the characters in a film or book through the lens of SI. Just as these factors affect social outcomes for that character, so are we affected by (and affect) our surroundings; the effects are mutual and simultaneous. In this activity, students execute in-depth analyses of social performances and lay groundwork for an analytical style of writing—and more importantly thinking—outside class.

The Activity

Preparation and Lecture

This activity involves a small group script-performance using differing contexts and individual analysis writing. The entire activity, prepared in advance, lasts 40-50 minutes and involves up to 30 students.

Prior to class, prepare the following resources: one *script* (see Appendix example) projected overhead (e.g., transparency or PowerPoint) and about five *contexts*, each written on a note card. Successful context examples include: a family eating dinner, a minister preaching to the congregation, arch-enemies exchanging witty banter before battle, strangers “hitting on” one another at a bar or club, and athletes in a locker room post-game. To begin, lecture briefly (about 10 minutes) on basic SI concepts. I draw from communication scholars West and Turner (2006). However, any basic, quick understanding of SI will work (e.g., the SI summary provided in the beginning of and throughout this article).

Skit Preparation and Performance

After lecturing, create groups (around six students each). Each group uses the overhead-projected script during preparation and performance, which reinforces everyone utilizing the same, exact words (implicitly emphasizing that language is truly just using symbols to communicate). Next, give each group a different context card. I encourage groups to hide their card from others because unknown contexts illustrate that all individuals employ different interpretations of meaning; however, students just think this is a fun, competitive addition. Have groups plan performances based on their context. It is not crucial for students to consider SI while preparing or performing. SI notions of people’s role-taking according to different situations will emerge naturally. Context dictates “ad-libbing,” which is immensely enjoyed by students. However, throughout preparation, underscore “hitting one’s lines,” or saying everything in the master script, as essential. Ten minutes is plenty of time for skit preparation.

After preparation, each group performs with the script (i.e., language symbols) overhead as the class follows along. Each performance ends with classmates guessing the context (“What was going on?”) and enacted identity roles (“Who were they?”). In other words, students are drawing meaning from performers’ interpretations. Five group performances last about 10 minutes.

Analysis Writing

The most important element of this activity is the process of analytic writing. Skits are fun and provide great analysis exemplars, but written assessment of social performance will spur critical thinking. Further, students begin to practice abilities such as rhetorical identification and in-depth social commentary.

Students begin analysis by responding to questions stimulating “textual” (in this case, performance) analysis or rhetorical criticism. Using three foundations of SI, I have

students write responses to prompts in worksheet form, with space for SI postulations, illustrations, and response (analyses questions):

1. We act toward things based on meanings we attribute to them.

- Illustration: The symbols or language used in skits differed according to people's actions toward those symbols and were dependent on specific contexts.
- Response: Why did you decide to portray your context as you did, rather than using opposite interpretations? What do you think caused other group performance choices? How do people (choose) shape their performances?

2. Meanings are created through interactions with others.

- Illustration: Skits illustrated cultures and shared meanings of group members. Words had meaning only when viewed in relation to others' language choices.
- Response: How many different ways were identical symbols (script words) enacted? How were tones, pitches, or body language used to convey completely opposite meanings of identical words across group performances?

3. We modify meaning through interpretation processes based on perception, culture, social training, and role-taking.

- Illustration: Decisions regarding how to perform each context were made via group-collaboration. Group members were influenced by cultural understandings of what particular contexts meant to them. The way we act in daily life shapes our future expectations of interactions, our relationships with other people, and our understanding of self-concepts and role-taking.
- Response: How did you know what words to use to ad-lib the script? There were many interpretations of identical words; what does each interpretation illustrate about who actors felt they were being? What does it say about their real-life societal roles?

In a 50 minute class, there are approximately 20 minutes left for writing analyses. Time can be used solely for individual writing or broken into writing and class discussion.

Activity Appraisal

The ability to see theory applied to real-life aids students in delving deeper into analysis as a useful tool (Darling, 1990). Through this activity, ideas of symbolic language, interactional meaning, and identity performance function as backdrops for all writing assignments during the semester. Further, all students become involved. In past script iterations, the diversity of performance choices resulted in enjoyable and effective writing experiences. Students have fun with interpretation and guessing contexts in the absurdity

of others' identity-performances. Ultimately, students engage in creative thinking and critical analysis early in the term (Shaftel & Shaftel, 1982). Students enact life-long roles as social and critical thinkers and writers.

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APPENDIX

Example Symbolic Interaction Script

Person A: *I had a really rough day today.*

Other People: *Oh really? I'm sorry to hear that...* [ad lib] etc.

Person A: [Ad lib and fill in details about their day]. *I feel like giving it all up.*

One of the Other People: *Yes, I really think you should quit.* [Others ad lib]

Person A: *But what will they do without me?*

Other People: [ad lib response]. *So what we hear you saying is...* [fill in details of what they think Person A should do].

Person A: *Wow, thanks for listening.*