
Citation:

Daly, D (2025) Questioning feeling and feeling through questioning. Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, 16 (1). pp. 136-139. ISSN 1944-3927 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2025.2445942>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/11609/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution 4.0

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Questioning feeling and feeling through questioning

‘The quality of life depends on the questions you ask.’ The dramaturg Suzanne Bell has this August Wilson question on her wall and says that it acts as ‘the driving principle of my work as a dramaturg’ (Bell, 2021). There is magic in a question. There is wonder in a question. A question often points toward an answer or the need for one. I use them often in my work. What I have come to discover, or recognise, is that the questions I ask, more often than not, contain the word ‘feel’.

Feel and feeling are, however, slippery words; simultaneously anchored and unmoored to/from common understanding. Feeling(s) are analogous to emotions for some, but phenomenology suggests experiential subjectivity which can be couched in the senses.

Whatever the definition, feel and feelings are intrinsic to the human experience. They are an essential facet of storytelling, itself an exploration of what it means to be human. If the aim is to always tell the best version of whatever story is to be told, the humanity of the story – and the humans telling those stories – need to be central. Here are some of the ways in which I use ‘feel’ in training. Hopefully some of this thinking can be incorporated into your work.

How do you feel?

At the beginning of a session with actors in training asking this question allows for us all to find what neutral is, to understand where we are and how where we are will impact on the work that we will do together. The answers are always as varied as the people in the room and definitions of ‘feel’ that they feel. Reducing the answer to this question to a single word, I have found, allows actors in training to really think about themselves and give answers that are as much for them as they are for the room. It can also highlight the diversity in the room and challenge homogenic

thinking. I encourage them (and myself) to ask this question of ourselves at the very beginning – be that of the day, of the session or of the project.

Psychologists call this ‘checking in’, and in therapy sessions use it to ‘gain information on each member’s state of mind, [...] to balance the member’s participation (so that talkative and quiet members start the group equally), and to produce a sense of mutuality and group concern’ (Gordon, 2008, p. 367). When working with actors in training, playing characters and thinking about their characters’ psychology and subjectivity, it seems a good idea to ‘check in’ on ourselves before we begin.

How did that feel?

After a scene has been run, often the temptation is to give notes from the vantage point of lecturer/audience member but asking actors how they felt often elicits more nuanced and self-reflexive commentary and pinpoints where the character is held – sensorily, emotionally and/or subjectively. It allows actors in training to own their development as opposed to trying to find the theory or technique that they have been taught. Asking this question also allows for two key things to happen and/or be brought into view. Firstly, questioning opens a space in which to decolonise and decentre acting theory – it allows the actor to bring themselves to the part in all their intricate and interesting intersectionality which theory can often not take into consideration; individualised training. Secondly, it debases hierarchy in the room – the expert on any individuals’ process is the individual at the centre of it, they are the feeling beings, the trainer should act as a conduit to that, and those, connection(s).

How will you feel if...?

In giving notes, phrasing them as questions opens a dialogue, an exploration. After all, dialogue and exploration is what is happening between the writer, their words, the actor, their (sensorial, emotional and experiential) feeling and the audience and their understanding – albeit in different ways. Sharing ownership of the notes, through questioning, creates a deeper connection, more thought and therefore a more nuanced performance. ‘[Q]uestions drive our thought underneath the surface of things, forcing us to deal with complexity’ (Elder & Paul, 1998, p. 297), allowing us to explore metaphysically and metaemotionally.

How would you like to feel?

Creating space for potential choices gives the impulse for action and therefore something to drive toward. Asking this of the actor and then the character helps to maintain psychological separation as well as allowing for the linking of real human thought and feeling to imagined thought and feeling; a magic ‘how?’ which could lend to a myriad of possibilities extending from (and controlled by) the actor: In this situation how could/would the actor feel? In this situation how could/would the actor like to feel? How are these answers applicable to the character? Why/why not?

What do you want to feel?

This makes the ‘how’ in the previous question more tangible. The ‘what’ here gives space to offer words, descriptors, actions. Having those words gives reason for the feeling to exist and a route to find it. It also incentivises a ‘self-confidence to develop and refine [...] choices continuously’ (Caldarone & Lloyd-Williams, 2004, p. xiv). Again, asked of the actor and/or character, this allows for the character’s conscious objective – their want – to be clarified, and for the actor to find reasons that the character might not be cognisant of – the need. The want and the need of the

character made clear through this separation of the two allows the depth and nuance in playing to be magnified purposefully, giving the actor a greater range of choice(s).

Why do you want to feel it?

Simply put, this question offers space to make and consider a value judgement. For the actor. And of the character. Why does the actor want to feel powerful (and what interpretation of 'feel' is that rooted in)? Is that the character or the ego of the actor? Why does the character want to feel powerful, is that the actor or the imagined ego of the character? Again, offering a space to contextualise and think through the reasoning for the choices made gives more tools to the actor allowing them to create the character that they wish to and not have a character foisted onto them.

In looking through these questions there is a logical order, but does it need to be that way? Sometimes I will use some questions and not others – is that a pedagogical impulse (what information do I want to transmit?), a relationship impulse (how can I foster a relationship which is productive?), a situational impulse (what is needed right now?), an experiential impulse (what types of 'feeling' are present) or is it something else?

When used in professional contexts, the reasoning(s) is/are much the same.

How do you feel you will use these questions?

References

- Bell, S. (2021, September 15). Keep asking questions. *dramaturgsnetwork*.
<https://www.dramaturgy.co.uk/single-post/cta-suzanne-bell-keep-asking-questions>
- Caldarone, M., & Lloyd-Williams, M. (2004). *Actions: The Actors' Thesaurus*. Nick Hern Books.

Gordon, R. M. (2008). The Two-Minute check-in at the beginning of psychoanalytic group therapy sessions. *Group Analysis*, 41(4), 366–372.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0533316408098289>

Elder, L., & Paul, R. (1998). The role of socratic questioning in thinking, teaching, and learning. *the Clearing House/the Clearing House*, 71(5), 297–301.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00098659809602729>