

# Resisting the Guru Mentality: An Essay on Pedagogies Towards Personal Empowerment in Actor Training

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*This essay reflects on the pedagogies of acting coach Howard Fine and voice teacher Kristin Linklater as alternatives to guru-style actor training. I define a guru as a teacher who assumes an 'all knowing' status in the classroom and is revered by students as the source of all wisdom. In opposition to the guru approach, Social Constructivism situates learning as a dynamic, relational activity, developed through reflective thinking. With a specific focus on the use of prompt questions to invite reflective thinking, this essay shares the author's experiences of the way Fine and Linklater's pedagogies support students' self-efficacy. The essay concludes with reflections on the seductive nature of the guru approach, and the value in resisting this seduction in order to empower ourselves to reach our potential.*

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If you know someone who is talking about their class and the teacher as a deity, there's something really unhealthy about that... Good training should teach and help you develop the tools to do the work on your own (Fine 2009: 180-2).

In soliciting feedback from my students, I try to teach a way of learning that recognizes and tackles a persistent tendency many of us have to be self-denigrating, self-judging, and ultimately more ready to fail than to succeed (Linklater 2006: 62).

This essay reflects on the pedagogies of acting coach Howard Fine and voice teacher Kristin Linklater as alternatives to guru-style actor training. I define a guru as a teacher who assumes an 'all knowing' status in the classroom and is revered by students as the source of all wisdom. As a student in Linklater and Fine's approaches, I came to realise ways in which my own thought processes still clung to aspects of the guru approach. I observed my own desire to please the teacher and for the teacher to tell me if I was 'right' or 'wrong'. I noted my longing for the teacher to lay out what the next steps should be for my own development.

In opposition to the guru approach, Social Constructivism (Vgotsky 1978; Dewey 1910) situates learning as a dynamic, relational and developed through reflective thinking. Vgotsky describes relations between people as an essential part of a child's learning process, commenting that:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)... All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vgotsky 1978: 57).

For Dewey, reflective thinking is the basis of intellectual activity:

The most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for *new* materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur. To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking (Dewey 1910:13).

Dewey also advocates that 'enquiry and the capacity for growth are embedded in the situations and activities that create educational experience' (Heilbronn et al. 2018: 9).

In my experience, Social Constructivist pedagogy can be enhanced through incorporating Dweck's concept of a growth mindset in which students take responsibility for their learning and develop their own strategies for personal success (Dweck 2006: 59). With a growth mindset, an individual views intelligence and ability as

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qualities 'they can develop' as opposed to a fixed mindset in which these aspects 'are believed to be a fixed trait' (Dweck 2006: 57).

I have studied with Howard Fine in a four-day public-facing Masterclass in Sydney in 2016 and have since audited Fine's Melbourne Masterclass in 2018, and online masterclasses and lectures via Zoom in 2020. Having been familiar with the Linklater approach to voice since 2005, I began to engage in serious study of the approach in 2016 with Brisbane teacher Rob Pensalfini and in 2018 learnt from Linklater herself in a two-week workshop at the Kristin Linklater Voice Centre (Scotland). I now incorporate Fine and Linklater's pedagogical approaches into my teaching at The University of the Sunshine Coast. It is important to note that this essay did not arise from a planned research project but is a reflection on my own professional development activities. For this reason, I will focus on Fine and Linklater's pedagogical processes as documented in publicly available information.

This essay will discuss my experiences of Fine and Linklater's approaches in relation to Social Constructivism and a Growth Mindset. I will conclude with reflections on the seductive nature of the guru approach, and the value in resisting this seduction in order to empower ourselves to reach our potential.

### **Howard Fine: Tools of the craft**

Fine's pedagogy can be described as a distilled adaptation of Uta Hagen's methodology, which can be traced back to Stanislavski's legacy in the USA (Hagen 2008). Fine has established acting schools in Los Angeles and Melbourne Australia and his website includes an impressive list of movie stars he has coached (HowardFine.com 2020). Fine's book *Fine on Acting: A Vision of the Craft* (2009) includes his 'Eight Steps to Role Preparation and Script Analysis' (187–200), a step-by-step approach to developing a realistic character. Fine advocates that actors use these preparatory steps in order to be fully spontaneous in each performance in order 'to be a human being living in the given circumstance of the script, not an actor trying to do the scene right' (Fine 2009: 104). A lengthy chapter in his book describes common mistakes made by actors and identifies ways to address these errors (Fine 2009: 89–128). For example, when an actor makes the mistake of 'playing an idea' or 'concept' of a character, Fine states that this can be addressed by 'finding authentic connections to a role' (Fine 2009: 95–96). After reading *Fine on Acting* I tried out this vocabulary in my classes and noted it was an effective, shorthand way to provide feedback towards tangible results. Previously when observing a student make the mistake of 'playing an idea' I would consider that the student was playing the role

in a very one-dimensional way. I realised that to tell the student their performance was one dimensional would not be helpful or supportive, so I would then spend quite a bit of time trying to talk around the problem and create workshop exercises to provide this feedback. In contrast, Fine's terminology of this mistake reframes the situation in a positive way and offers an immediate solution. Fine emphasises that these mistakes can happen at every level of skill development and experience, for, in his words, 'there are no advanced mistakes, only mistakes of fundamentals' (theStream.tv 2012). In Fine's 2016 Masterclass (Howard Fine Acting Studio, Australia 2016) there was a vast array of student experience and expertise: from novices through to actors who had worked in high-profile Australian television series. In watching other students' scenes, I observed the way Fine's principles applied across all levels of ability and experience.

### **Kristin Linklater: Connecting to a personal voice**

Kristin Linklater, who passed away in June 2020 at the age of 84, was a renowned voice teacher, most famous for her approach to vocal freedom as espoused in her book *Freeing the Natural Voice* (2006). This approach is based on the teaching of Iris Warren at LAMDA (London) in the 1950s; and Linklater shared, refined and developed this approach through teaching at Tisch School of the Arts, New York, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, Emerson College and Columbia University (Mills 2020). Linklater's approach to teaching Shakespearean performance is documented in her book *Freeing Shakespeare's Voice* (2012). Linklater's work is based on the premise that 'tensions acquired through living in this world... often diminish the efficiency of the natural voice' and aims to remove 'the blocks that inhibit the human instrument' (Linklater 2006: 7). The Linklater vocal progression, a method for teaching and warming up the voice, begins with physical awareness and awareness of breath then moves through phonation described as 'freeing vibrations' (Linklater 2006: 87). The next step is to release tension in the channel (the jaw, tongue and soft palate) followed by the development of resonance, breath capacity, range and articulation. A major point of difference between the Linklater approach and other vocal techniques is the instruction to focus attention away from the sound of the voice towards imaginative visualisations and the way the voice feels in the body or, in Linklater's words, to 'shift the job of judging sound from the aural sense to the tactile and visual sense' (Linklater 2006: 65). The first two steps of the progression – physical awareness and breath awareness – support this shift. In other approaches these aspects could be described as 'postural alignment' and 'breath support', terms that can be associated with having 'correct posture' and strengthening the muscles that support breath work. Instead Linklater's terms ('physical awareness' and 'awareness of breath') shift

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the focus towards observation of a personal, embodied experience. This focus on individual experience is maintained in Linklater's approach to Shakespearean text in her comments that:

It is the actor's own raw material that makes a character believable. Out of the actor/person's own emotions, intellect, memories, imagination, tragedies, loves, hates, family history, dreams, soul, voice and body a "character" is forged who is a believable inhabitant of what-ever world occupies the stage (Linklater 2012: 3).

In these ways, Linklater's pedagogy assists students, firstly, to tune into their instincts, then trust and develop them in the service of expressive, personalised performances.

### **Interlude: Prompt questions for reflective thinking**

Reflective thinking is a central part of the Fine and Linklater's approaches. Fine states that 'before I critique any scene, I ask the actors three things: *What worked? What didn't? And Why?*' (2009: 181). Throughout workshops, as documented in *Freeing the Natural Voice*, Linklater asks students to reflect on their experiences by sharing something that is 'fresh, new or interesting... [because] any new experience must be acknowledged if it is to become an agent of conscious change' (Linklater 2006: 62). Dewey (1910: 13) observes that reflective thinking can be uncomfortable because 'it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance...[while] judgement [is] suspended during further inquiry; and suspense is likely to be somewhat painful'. The next sections will explore my experiences of discomfort in considering Fine and Linklater's prompt questions.

### **What worked? What didn't? And why?**

This was Fine's question to me and my scene partner after we had performed a scene from *My Thing of Love* (Gersten 1996) in his public facing Sydney Masterclass (Howard Fine Acting Studio, Australia, 2016). Our comic scene had been received by hoots of laughter and warm applause from the audience and I was on a post-performance adrenaline high. By all accounts we had performed 'successfully', but I couldn't articulate the reasons the scene had gone well, and I also had no thoughts on how to work to further develop the scene. I remember giving a vague response that I felt 'connected' to the character. But, overall, I felt at a loss. Fine's constructive feedback for me was to further explore my character's psychological obstacles (as per Step 7 in his book). Specifically, this meant to delve into my character's vulnerability as an alcoholic who is meeting

her husband's mistress (yes, it is actually a comic play). To do this, I later worked through some writing and self-improvisation activities. During that first day of the Masterclass, I had the opportunity to watch many other students' scenes and became familiar with the process of students engaging in self-reflection within the framework of Fine's '8 steps' and 'Common Mistakes'. On the second day we performed the scene and I vividly remember my responses to Fine's prompt questions. I took my time and shared 'I felt more present today in the scene... yesterday it felt like a blur' and then I stopped for a moment to reflect. It was in that moment I had the insight and was able to share 'I think I was playing the obstacle'. Howard warmly replied, 'Very good!' (Howard Fine Acting Studio, 2016). I had identified that I was 'playing the problem' (one of Fine's common mistakes) by focussing only on my psychological obstacle in the scene, and thus could address this by remembering to work towards the character's objective (see Fine 2009: 111-113). Fine's terms had given me a language with which to analyse my experience and identify how I could improve. As Fine relates 'I am there as a colleague, to give you as many tools as I can. That is what good training is. It puts the student in the driver's seat' (Fine 2009: 182). This process helped me value the process of development and realise that sometimes an actor's mistake can be an important part of the process. In the first time through the scene my portrayal lacked vulnerability and in finding this vulnerability I then needed to remember to bring back my quest for my character's objective. My scene partner and I had previously performed what I would describe as a 'good' performance of the scene. The audience had enjoyed it and we had received positive verbal feedback afterwards. The second time, as we were both integrating feedback, the scene felt 'clunkier', but I could feel within myself that we were both growing and developing as actors and the scene was developing in complexity. My working process was starting to embody reflective practice and a growth mindset.

### **What was fresh, new or interesting?**

This seemingly simple question can be surprisingly challenging to answer. In 2018 at the Kristin Linklater Voice Centre (Scotland), I took some time to consider this question after an activity exploring breath capacity. My initial thoughts were: 'I need more breath'; 'I need to work at getting better at this exercise'; and 'This can be an area of development for me'. These kind of reflections had been desired responses within my previous vocal training experiences. Previously in sharing these kind of responses, I would be being a 'good student', identifying areas to work on and then the teacher would guide me in the process of developing my skills. However, these kind of responses do not answer the question 'What was fresh, new or interesting?'. Linklater notes that to answer

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her question requires an individual to 'develop an ability to perceive habits and register new experiences' and that this ability 'must eventually be refined to extreme subtlety in order to observe the minutiae of neuromuscular behaviour that serve the need to communicate' (Linklater 2006: 31). This refinement of embodied awareness and new experiences, brings a students' focus in the present moment and develops an awareness that we are all constantly in development. In Vgotsky's terms, Linklater's approach 'dissolves dichotomies between cerebral and embodied activity' with a focus on 'situated negotiations and renegotiation of meaning' (Lave and Wenger 2003: 146).

In Linklater's 2018 workshop, I had worked on Hermione's speech from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (3. 2. 96-121). Following Linklater's process, I was challenged to find my own personal connections with this character to draw from the 'raw material' of my 'own emotions, intellect, memories, imagination' (Linklater 2012: 3). In reflecting on this experience a few months later, I noted in my journal:

When first working on this monologue I think I had a rather limited version of who 'Hermione' is. Then I really started to consider Hermione's relationship with her husband in relation to my own experiences in my marriage – the teasing, bitterness, love, bitterness, pain – and it's huge! There was so much more to draw on. The more I re-read the play the more I found inside myself that I could bring to this character. In Howard Fine's terms I was previously 'playing an idea' of the character which, of course, will result in one dimensional performance. My challenge was not only to find the character inside myself – as Howard Fine recommends – but to actually find how I am much bigger than any idea of myself (Personal Journal, 10 February 2019).

In this journal entry, I was not only connecting Linklater and Fine's concepts, I was also gaining an increased perception of my own identity. Through regularly engaging in Linklater's vocal techniques and paying attention to new experiences I was allowing my perception of myself to transform and develop. This led me to further reflect that:

In many ways we 'play an idea' of ourselves in our habitual lives, and this idea of ourselves is physicalised in tensions throughout our body that keep us in this limited view of ourselves. I'm currently working on releasing my jaw and this is a massively complex process. I'm realising how my jaw has been 'moderating' the air that comes in and leaves my body. I feel that this is a result of being trained in the idea that expressing emotions makes a

woman 'hysterical' and if you are hysterical then you will not be taken seriously. As a result of this, I had been controlling the way I express myself – and this has been held back in my jaw. Also – my jaw has been working overtime to replace the energy of the original impulse of what I want to say with what I should be 'presenting'. I've realised that my voice has previously been forced out of my body with effortful energy from my jaw, rather than trusting my own instincts (Personal Journal, 10 February 2019).

Here my reflection on my own jaw tension demonstrates a developing awareness of 'the minutiae of neuromuscular behaviour that serve the need to communicate' (Linklater 2006: 31). For me, this journal extract crystallises the way that Fine and Linklater's approaches have supported me to trust my personal insights and instincts.

In internalising and personalising Fine and Linklater's reflective techniques I have started to embody Vgotsky's maxim that 'understanding and experience are in constant interaction' (Lave and Wenger 2003: 146). These processes have strengthened my growth mindset and ability, in Dweck's words, to 'remain in charge' of my own learning (2006: 81).

## Conclusion

This essay has shared ways that Fine and Linklater's pedagogies have supported me to develop a practice that is uniquely my own. In Dewey's terms, their approaches form 'a humanistic curriculum' to actively support the development of 'distinctive perspectives' (Heilbronn et al. 2018: 6, 14).

I find it fascinating that having espoused concepts of Social Constructivism since the beginning of my teaching career, I still reverted to wanting a teacher as 'guru' when engaging in professional development activities. On the first day of Fine's Masterclass I felt at a loss to reflect on my own performance, and when working with Linklater I was initially flummoxed by the process of identifying 'fresh, new or interesting' experiences.

I have also observed that the guru approach to teaching is still utilised and even celebrated throughout the arts. Why is this so? Perhaps there is a sense that artistic virtuosity and excellence requires subservience? Perhaps there is something about the status of the elite teacher-artist that pervades our consciousness? I have a theory that the guru sensibility has survived because it offers security and stability: a teacher's confidence can be boosted when students respect their ultimate authority; and for the vulnerable novice, a guru teacher gives them a sense they will be taken care of within a precarious industry. I now believe that as students when

we are focussed on 'getting something right' we minimise our potential because we are trying to fit ourselves into ideas that already exist. This sense of security and stability is ultimately unhelpful because great artists are those who realise their individual personal potential.

By exploring Fine and Linklater's pedagogies I have experienced both the challenges and value of a student-empowering approach. For the teacher, this approach requires the humility to share techniques towards students' self-efficacy. It requires the courage to challenge students to sit in the discomfort of reflective practice. For the student it requires the courage to take charge of their learning and build a unique, personal practice. In unravelling my own predisposition to the guru approach, I have developed greater empathy for my students as I work to support their self-efficacy.

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### Bird Man

I was a boy of ten  
staying in the country  
with my auntie and cousins  
for the summer school holidays

we were going crabbing  
and shot half a dozen galahs  
with a .22 rifle  
to use as bait

as my auntie stacked them  
in the freezer  
wrapped in plastic she cautioned me:  
you better not tell your father

twelve years ago  
my auntie died of breast cancer

on the anniversary  
of her death  
I sit in the coronary care unit  
in a darkened room  
listening to my father  
gasp for breath

galahs stacked in rows  
in the freezer of my mind.

**STEVE BROCK**