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Performing Academic Practice: using the master class to build postgraduate discursive competences

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Abstract

How can we find ways of training PhD students in academic practices, while reflexively analysing how academic practices are performed? The paper's answer to this question is based on evaluations from a British – Nordic master class. The paper discusses how master classes can be used to train the discursive skills required for academic discussion, commenting and reporting. Methods used in the master class are: performing and creative arts pedagogical exercises, the use of written provocations to elicit short papers, discussion group exercises, and training in reporting and in panel discussion facilitated by a meta-panel discussion. We argue that master classes have the potential to further develop advanced level PhD training, especially through their emphasis on reflexive engagement in the performance of key academic skills.

Key words

Academic practice, Master class, Performance, PhD students, Postgraduate training, Stranger

1: Introduction

In this paper we outline and reflect on an attempt to work with an international group of postgraduate researchers from the UK and the Nordic countries to develop some of the core verbal competences required of academics. The core discursive skills we are interested in are: participating in plenary and group discussions; acting as a panel discussant; and questioning from the position of the informed generalist rather than the expert specialist. In identifying these skills we want to highlight that verbal competence in academia rests as much on synthetic capacities and the ability to relate material to a broader field as on specialist, expert knowledge. Synthetic verbal capacities are at a premium in several academic activities, for example, the departmental research seminar in the UK and conference and workshop plenaries. Currently human geography postgraduate students receive little training in the development of these synthetic verbal skills. Rather, small-scale postgraduate training workshops and conferences typically focus on the presentation and honing of written papers based on original research. Developing synthetic verbal skills requires a different emphasis. Specifically, there is a need to work more with postgraduates to learn to formulate questions and comments in relation to experts working in other fields and to develop capacities to draw links between papers rather than to ‘drill down’ into papers.²

Much contemporary human geography PhD education in the UK and elsewhere focuses on training in social science research methodologies, in the writing and presentation of research, and even on the communication of research findings to broader, non-academic audiences (Demeritt, 2004; Gwanzura-Ottemoeller *et al.*, 2005). Training is therefore almost exclusively research-specific whilst understanding of academic activities is limited to doing research and its presentation in papers, either at conferences or in written form. This is a restricted understanding of the academy, of academic practice and of what it means to be an academic practitioner. Not only is there much that is overlooked here, but verbal competences – if they are discussed at all – are usually restricted to ‘How to handle questions about your research’. Typically, this pedagogy has little to say about how to train postgraduates in discursive skills. Instead, PhD researchers are expected, seemingly, to become competent discursive practitioners just by watching, mimicking or modifying how more established academics formulate and articulate questions, comments and observations.

Given that such learning strategies are now seen to be inadequate for the development of postgraduate writing skills (Aitchison and Lee, 2006; Delyser, 2003; Ferguson, 2009; Larcombe *et al.*, 2007; Lee and Kamler, 2008), it is strange that the development of discursive skills has been left largely untouched within formal PhD training programmes. One explanation for this absence, perhaps, is deficiencies in pedagogic repertoires. Stated more strongly: the pedagogic models used in postgraduate training in human geography and the social sciences not only fail to encourage the development of postgraduates’ discursive skills but also overlook that there are other models which could be used to train PhD students in the development of these skills. One such model is the master class. Around the world, the master class is in widespread use as a means of providing academic training in the creative

and performing arts, for example, in music, theatre and the fine arts, but it is relatively unfamiliar as a model within human geography and the social sciences. Given this, we will say rather more about the master class as a distinctive pedagogic form, and its adaptation by us, later on in the paper. For the moment, however, it is important to flag the connections between this model and performative understandings of the academy and of academic practice.

The paper, and the activities it reports on, is informed by the twin senses in which performance is mobilised in the social sciences. On the one hand, there is the tradition rooted in Goffman's (1959) micro-sociology of interaction, staging and performing the self; on the other there is Butler's (1993) equally influential reading of the performative and performativity, in which acts are citational of discourse. These debates have been well rehearsed in recent years in human geography (see for example: Bærenholdt et al., 2004; Gregson and Rose, 2000; Pratt and Kirby, 2003; Thrift, 2000, 2003, 2004) but the discipline has yet to turn these insights either on itself or on its training practices. Bourdieu (1996) remains the one sustained consideration of the academic subject, but in human geography to think about academic practices through either sense of performance is a project barely begun (although see: Gregson, 2006; Lorimer, 2003a, 2003b). The potential afforded by these approaches is considerable, not least in relation to the development of verbal competences . For example: asking a question is not just a matter of words and their ordering. It extends to include physical positioning in a room, tone of voice, body movements and exchanged glances, the timing of particular interventions, and knowing what to say as well as what not to say. Raising a question in an appropriate way is not only a matter of formulating it successfully in an intellectual sense but about timing and knowing in what tone, while looking at whom, while sitting where, you are going to ask whom about what, or not. Such performances of the academic self are pure Goffman. But citationality is also at work in such moments: the speech acts that constitute academic interventions simultaneously cite. Thus, formulating and uttering a particular verbal intervention is not just to cite particular works, ideas and traditions of thought but to bring into being the discursive format itself. Hence the seminar is reproduced by acts of questioning as much as by the paper given, plenaries by the contributions of discussants as much as by those who give papers. These points indicate what is at stake in discursive competences but they do nothing to develop discursive skills sets. Rather, building and honing individual competences is learnt through doing and reflection. The copying-mimicking tradition may still be one option here but activities organised explicitly around academic discursive skills sets would seem to offer a more productive and transparent way for postgraduates to begin to learn the craft of working with academic speech acts. To this end, the master class, with its emphasis on performative pedagogy, is an option worthy of exploration. It is this pedagogic model and its application to the development of verbal competences which is the primary focus for the paper.³

In the rest of the paper we provide a broad review of the master class model before outlining its translation into the academic setting reviewed here. This setting was an international collaboration involving postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers and academic staff from the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, UK and the Department of

Environmental, Social and Spatial Change, Roskilde University, Denmark⁴. We then evaluate the master class in question, drawing on the varied responses of its participants, including the experiences of this paper's authors. We conclude the paper by reflecting on the challenges and difficulties of working in a master class format; key tips for working productively with this pedagogic form in this academic context are highlighted, and we reflect further on how participation in a master class provides the basis for thinking harder about academic practices and performance.

2: The master class: concept and translation

2.1: The master class as pedagogy

The master class is a familiar and instantly recognisable pedagogic model in the performing arts, the fine arts and in their related academic disciplines. One of its most obvious articulations, perhaps, is in classical music. As Ruhleder and Twidale (2000) outline, a typical master class involves students "...com(ing) with a prepared piece - a flute concerto or song they have worked on privately - and perform(ing) it for an audience of teacher and peers ... [and the learning process]... is driven by a cycle of performance, critique, and modification" (Ruhleder and Twidale, 2000, p.1). Within classical music there are other variants on the format. For example: groups of musicians will come together, often for a residential course, to work on a particular piece – chamber, orchestral, opera – with key 'masters' offering advanced tuition as part of the course. The end product in this mode of working is often a performance of the work involving all participants (Barenboim and Said, 2003). Similar understandings of the master class concept also prevail in others of the performing arts. Thus, in ballet, two principals or soloists might work with a former performer/teacher to explore, perfect, question and develop a specific pas de deux. Beyond the performing arts, there are other variants on the model. Master classes in painting, sculpture and photography, for instance, all feature working on technique in the course of producing the image or the form, whilst another example of the model is the creative writing workshop in which participants work simultaneously on pre-prepared pieces of writing (Antoniou and Moriarty, 2008).

Whilst the master class model is widely used as pedagogy in those academic disciplines closely proximate to the performing arts and fine arts, its format is less well known in human geography and the social sciences more broadly. As such, it is important to consider how the model of the master class might be adapted to these academic settings as well as the reservations that potential participants might have about it. One of the most obvious difficulties in adapting the master class model to working with academic discursive skills development is that there are no canonical works that define these academic performances. So, whilst the seminar, the workshop or the lecture are tacitly understood as formats for academic practice, their content is not determined a priori and often relies heavily on improvisation. Another potential problem is that academics may struggle to see discursive practices as counterparts of the artistic work. A final problem is that the pedagogic style of the master class – with its seeming emphasis on masters and pupil-acolytes – is open to being

read through hierarchical power relations. This last problem is particularly acute in contexts, such as human geography, where power relations comprise a key part of the lexicon. In part these difficulties can be addressed by being more explicit about the parallels that can be drawn between academic practices and the practices of the performing and fine arts. To take one example: as academics we learn how to present and work with certain teaching materials more in the classroom and lecture theatre than in the study or office where these materials are prepared. But what goes on in that teaching/learning space in turn connects back to a refinement of materials in the study or office. As such, teaching and learning materials are worked on and honed, much as a creative writer crafts a piece of prose or as a musician might work on the articulation of a particular phrase. Rather more difficult is to modify the master class format such that it creates the appropriate conditions in which to practice and perfect the skills of academic discursive work. In the absence of a work or an artistic form to perform or create, this requires constituting a focus for academic discussion and the conditions for academic discursive work to take place. In the following section we outline how the organisers of this master class tackled this particular translation.

2.2: Operationalising the master class for discursive work in human geography

Step one in shaping the master class was to select an appropriate thematic focus. Organising faculty agreed that the theme identified had to provide sufficient common ground to act as the basis to connect specialist understandings yet not be so overly general that it would force discussion into predictable, well-rehearsed boxes. Moreover, the theme had to be sufficiently rich that it would stand intense scrutiny over two days yet be accessible enough that it could sustain dialogue between postgraduates at various stages (and faculty), from different countries and traditions. The theme eventually identified – meant to be a provocation – is reproduced in Figure 1. It speaks to several current concerns in social and cultural geography, this being central to the interests of the organising research groups and their postgraduates. As will become clear, of the issues raised by the provocation it was the figure of the stranger, rather than that of the visitor or the denizen, that became a focal point for discussion, both in establishing dialogue and for making sense of postgraduate experiences.

Figure 1 about here

Figure 1:

The initial ‘provocation’ opening the electronic announcement of the master class

The stranger, the visitor and the denizen have long figured in cultural and political thought. Inherently geographical, they have served to destabilise and problematise more static notions of citizenship, while also serving as exemplars in their own right of different modes of becoming and belonging. Many approaches are currently in play to grasp these geographies: new theories of being and becoming; reformation of spatial entities of place, landscape and territory; new theories of mobility and technological mediation; identification through practice and material culture; nomadism and the stranger as a way of being in the world; etc. This inaugural master class/conference⁵ will provide postgraduate students, postdoctoral

fellows and faculty members an opportunity to critically explore such geographies of differential belonging— its practice, its performance, and its embodiment.

Step two in working with the master class model was to bring overt practice-based creative and performing arts pedagogy into the learning experience. To enable this, organising faculty employed a creative arts workshop facilitator to work with the master class for the first evening. Starting the master class with this session worked both as an ‘icebreaker’ and to show-case this pedagogy to those participants not familiar with it. It also offered a means to compare this with more familiar pedagogic models. The workshop facilitator was given the provocation reproduced in Figure 1 and encouraged to interpret this in her own way. She deployed various classic creative arts learning strategies, all of them focused around the themes of belonging and a sense of place. In the course of an evening, participants constructed identity maps from masking tape, stretching from Norway and Iceland to South Africa and Sri Lanka, via a large and geographically expansive UK suburbia; sang a song (about a town on a hill, waiting for change – the anticipated US vote for Barack Obama); and made gardens from materials – sand, mud, clays, straw, charcoal, pebbles (Figure 2). Having fabricated these gardens, we then left them (metaphorically and materially), before reflecting on loss and a sense of place in a round, using matches.

Figure 2 about here

Step three in the design of the master class was that postgraduate participants were asked to submit short written responses to the master class provocation as a condition of participation. These responses were designed to act as the academic substitutes for the art form or work in the classic master class format and they were circulated to all participants a week prior to the master class itself. The responses also supplied the raw materials for three closely related exercises. The exercises constituted the core activities of the master class, acting as the basis for training postgraduates in plenary style discussion, small group work and panel discussions. The exercises themselves took place over the course of a day and a half following on from the activities with the creative arts facilitator.

For the first exercise, participants were placed in three medium-sized groups (4-5 participants) according to differences in their provocation response and institutional affiliation. In practice what this meant was that those whose response was coming primarily from a very particular theoretical perspective had to speak to others coming from a very different theoretical tradition and that each group had a mix of British and Nordic participants. Groups were asked to work initially in a ‘round-robin’ format, with a member of academic staff working as a facilitator. Each postgraduate therefore had to articulate questions raised by the written response of one other postgraduate as well as to answer questions on their own written response from another postgraduate. In setting up this exercise, organising staff stressed that as well as finding out about matters of interest and seeking clarification,

questioning should be thoughtful and generous yet sharp and probing. The goal here was to help postgraduates develop a discursive style that is open yet critical, one that the organisers highlighted as the basis for much academic discursive work. In more generic terms, given the differences within the groups, participants were being asked in this exercise to work on identifying and expressing the question/s to be put in relations of difference. There are numerous examples of academic formats in which this skill is at a premium: workshops, conferences, research seminars and roundtables. In the second exercise, two nominated members of the groups reported a summary of their discussions back to a plenary session. Unbeknownst to them, each report-back was to be followed by a lengthy session of impromptu and often challenging questions from participating faculty. The aim of this exercise was two-fold: to give participants experience in synthesising a complex, wide ranging and multi-voiced discussion, and to field a barrage of unanticipated questions, many of them on the work of others. There are obvious practices within academia with which this activity resonates: workshop format and away-day style plenary reporting being just two examples. But what this exercise was primarily aimed at was breaking the identification between discursive skills and individual research and highlighting the very different work of verbal synthesis and speaking on behalf of others. These exercises were then followed by a panel on being a panellist, in which academic faculty reflected on their experiences of being panellists. Some of the key points from this discussion are reproduced in Figure 3. In the third exercise those postgraduates who had not presented at the first plenary session were assigned the role of a panellist. Postgraduate panellists were asked to work as a discussant in relation to both the theme of the master class and the discussions that had occurred up to that point. Panellists were asked to comment, gently provoke, question and open up the field for further discussion from the floor.

Figure 3 about here

Figure 3: Tips on how to be an effective panellist

- 1: A panel presentation is not the same as a conference paper – don't take the opportunity to join a panel as an invitation to give a full-blown paper. Think about why you have been asked to join a panel – have you been selected for a particular point of view? If so, do you accept this or challenge this? Think about what is unique about your contribution and what you can offer.
- 2: Don't talk off the cuff: take it seriously and prepare. Preparation will give you confidence.
- 3: Think hard about what your key messages actually are. Stick to these. Some people have a magic number (e.g. 5 points, 6 points).
- 4: Add in personal experience and perspectives
- 5: Don't be boring: try to provoke and aim to generate discussion which will include the audience and not just be confined to the panel.
- 6: Listen to others' comments – if they make the same points as you are going to, don't repeat them but either reiterate swiftly or build on them. A panel is not a solo performance; it is more of a conversation that is part of a community of knowledge production.
- 7: Good panels are about good criticism – they are about unsettling knowledge production and moving it on, in productive ways.

3: Evaluating the master class

Written evaluations from participants were submitted after the master class using an email evaluation scheme designed for qualitative analysis (Figure 4). In this section we draw on these responses, as well as our experiences, to provide a critical evaluation of the master class.

Figure 4 about here⁶

Figure 4: Evaluation Scheme (distributed and submitted via e-mail)

Please write down in your own style what you thought about the master class here only a few days after you participated in and contributed to this event. - You should set your evaluation statements up in points, writing a maximum of three positive points and a maximum of three negative points, according to your own choice and feeling. You may write short and long (extend the space between points as you want). Please use full sentences since we might quote the material in a journal article on the master class experience. Please indicate if you are not happy for any of your statements to be included in such an article.

Respondents were asked to indicate academic status (permanent staff member, a post-doc/temporary researcher, a postgraduate student) and to submit their responses via an administrator, thereby ensuring anonymity. The authors of this paper could also respond to the evaluation. The response rate was 11 (six permanent members of staff and five PhD students) out of 24. The idea with these schemes is not quantitative, but more to gain material for qualitative analysis, and to allow for unpredictable themes to emerge. The method has been used for evaluation of Masters and PhD level courses at Roskilde University and the Nordic Research School on Local Dynamics (NOLD), though collected material has not previously been analysed for publication.

The discussion is divided into two sub-sections. We present a summary of the written evaluations and reflect on two broader issues to emerge from the master class - the assembling of the master class and the strangeness of academia.

3.1: Assembling a master class in the training of discursive skills

A key motivation in designing this master class was that PhD training provides relatively few opportunities to develop discursive skills. As one permanent member of staff commented, '[it was] a nice emphasis on the 'practical' aspects of academic work' (Permanent Staff Member C). In what follows the focus is first on how participants experienced the various exercises, and then more general concerns and thoughts about the master class experience.

In general participants agreed that the first exercise worked well. Working in relations of difference challenged people's ideas in a productive way, encouraging the clarification of positions: 'An opportunity to discuss my project and others projects in an international forum – this forced me to simplify, and crystallise, the strands of my argument in order to make it accessible' (PhD Student E). In the second exercise individuals were able to hone skills of communication for an international audience but in this and the third exercise discussion was 'too dominated by the staff' (Permanent Staff Member D) with insufficient participation from postgraduates. This asymmetry may be interpreted in various ways. It may reflect that postgraduates had been more heavily involved in the first exercise and were potentially drained by the time it came to the later discussions. It may be indicative of postgraduates' limited experience and lack of self-reliance as plenary discussants; that is, it may have been withdrawal based on a lack of competence in 'how to play the game'. Alternatively, postgraduates may have used withdrawal as an intentional strategy in relation to the power relations some perceived to be operating. Although timing and the structure of the event limited the number of people who could participate in the panel discussion, those that did participate found:

...this worked particularly well because the prompts we were given by the three experienced panellists, regarding how to approach a panel discussion, provided plenty of scope without being too prescriptive. Their insights not only conveyed that there are no set rules regarding panel discussions, but also that panel discussions are not about what you know and who you've read, but are about applying your own personal perspective and experiences to the panel theme (PhD Student B).

As this comment illustrates, the ability to participate in a panel is about more than knowledge. It is about knowing how to use that knowledge appropriately for the given audience and circumstances. These are clearly skills that can be applied more broadly.

Participants' evaluations show that the event benefitted from the presence of the creative arts workshop facilitator. Her approach challenged any potential hierarchy and divisions: 'I thought [the workshop facilitator] did an excellent job of 'animating' the master class, breaking down the divisions between staff and students and getting us working in an unfamiliar way (singing, working with our hands etc), taking us outside our normal 'comfort' zone of reading, writing and talking'" (Permanent Staff Member F). The art work enabled an interesting combination of academic thought and creative arts practice:

This was the first occasion on which I had worked with such practices in an academic setting. I was really pleased to see that everyone entered into the spirit of all the activities, and the effect that this work had on facilitating cross-group discussion. Making people work with materials is obviously essential! (Permanent Staff Member A).

Not only did these methods contribute to building different relationships between participants but they also took people out of their comfort zones, uniting participants in a feeling of uncertainty. For some this was a little too far: 'Personally I found the group singing and light-matching exercises excruciating' (PhD Student E). Care has to be taken with such exercises which need to balance pushing at the boundaries of comfort without making vulnerable participants feel more uneasy. Overall, though, most participants found these activities to be a thought-provoking take on the provocation. That several participants (faculty and postgraduates) interpreted these exercises in terms of academic divisions and hierarchies – and their reduction – is, however, instructive, raising questions about where such activities are best placed in terms of programming, highlighting just how pervasive understandings of hierarchy are within these academic circles, and showing that hierarchies are part of the baggage at the table, present even when they appear to be absent or not an issue.

Time away from departments was also perceived positively. Several people mentioned the benefits of this. One PhD student commented how 'hosting it in Hebden Bridge meant we couldn't be distracted by the usual avalanche of work' (PhD student A). Another commented: 'a rare 'time out' from the office/desk in order to engage with some meaningful thinking' (Permanent Staff Member C). Time away created 'a relaxed social environment in which to spend time with supervisors and other permanent researchers' (PhD Student E).

The greatest concern expressed in the evaluations was around the concept of the master class itself. A permanent staff member (F) wrote: 'though I have reservations about the 'master class' concept (with its authoritarian overtones of masters and slaves), I enjoyed the new kinds of activities that were included.' This response may be symptomatic of the concern some permanent staff members felt with the master class concept, since this all too easily seems to place them in the role of masters. It might also be significant that a permanent staff member found 'the academic hierarchy which we broke down on Day 1 was already re-

establishing itself early on Day 2' (Permanent Staff Member E). A concern over hierarchy was also noted by postgraduates, for example:

Only postgraduates submitting abstracts made for uneven discussions. Having faculty submit as well would have put us on an even footing, and allowed us to discuss things more comfortably – it seemed that some of the ease gained through the artist-in-residence performance was lost when only the students' work was critiqued (PhD student A).

The obvious counter is did the creative arts workshop actually break down the academic hierarchy? Perhaps all it did was to create the illusion of egalitarian participation, bracketing hierarchies rather than subverting them. Evaluations further remarked that permanent staff members tended to dominate and talk too much in plenary debates. Such only holds if the expectation was that they should not and if talking is regarded as a marker of domination. But the idea of the master class was that students and less experienced researchers should learn the arts of academic discussion from well- skilled, experienced academics. That these objectives were, in a sense, derailed by the concern with hierarchy is again indicative of the potency of hierarchical thinking in human geography postgraduate circles.

More practically, the question this raises is what the most appropriate ratio is between faculty and postgraduates. There is no easy answer to this question, but the evaluation returns show that the balance was wrong on this occasion, albeit for unintended reasons. This raises questions about how master classes are assembled. There are, of course, certain well-tried formats for constituting ad-hoc PhD courses. Attractive sites and star key-note addresses are just two of the obvious marketing tools. Such is all very well when big budgets are available, but this master class was a low-cost venture designed to continue collaborative activities between the two organising departments. Correspondingly, constituting the class tended to fall back on established networks of trust and supervision. Indeed, without these networks and personal relations few participants would have taken the class. As important is that, even within their own departments, academic staff had difficulty in attracting postgraduate students not supervised by themselves. Three unintended consequences followed: the postgraduate participants from Sheffield for the most part knew one another relatively well; the Roskilde participants were more disconnected, including two from Northern Norway and one from Iceland; and the class ended up with a surfeit of academic staff participants – having been planned to take more postgraduate participants.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, three activities worked to assemble the class and to constitute a positive dynamic. The first of these was the set of prior activities, commencing with the initial provocation, running through the writing of responses to the provocation, and then the electronic circulation of these responses. Not only did the responses make for short reading (an imperative for any additional activity such as this) but their circulation also worked to constitute the class as a class in advance of its meeting. The second active participant was the study centre in Hebden Bridge: as with residential field classes, the social, bodily and material aspects of being together in one place worked to forge a positive dynamic. This former Sunday school, now an alternative, basic, shared living accommodation, including meals, worked to build networks across participants. Thirdly, the various exercises

organised by the creative arts workshop facilitator made the physical coming together of the class explicit.

3.2: Performing the strangeness of academia

Notwithstanding the emphasis of this master class on discursive competences, discursive competence can never be independent from academic knowledge. Whilst discursive competence is not determined by knowledge, it is, framed by it. With this in mind, it is instructive to note the emphasis written responses and discussions placed on the figure of the stranger, rather than that of the visitor or denizen. The stranger, seemingly, was the most accessible of these figures discussion, no doubt because of its prominence within contemporary social and cultural theory. Indeed, the double understanding of the stranger “as the man (*sic*) who comes today and stays tomorrow” in the classic essay by Georg Simmel on ‘The Stranger’ (Simmel, 1971, p. 143) was a text often referred to by participants.

As important, was that the motif of the stranger was seen by some participants to connect with the strangeness of academia. There is a tendency within academia to embrace the stranger theoretically, thereby making both the figure and the unknown known and more familiar. But strangeness also emerged in the master class as a means of characterising the academy and its practices. Thus, some senior members of staff who participated in the master class, as well as some of the less experienced participants, narrated ‘the strange world of academia’ through a range of manoeuvres including story-telling about engagements with the political and business worlds, and discussions of influencing outside worlds, for example through talking with or writing for the mass media. Through this, a sense of academia’s paradoxical location – acting on, reacting to, critiquing but being critiqued as well – emerged, leading, for some (faculty as well as postgraduates), to feelings of vulnerability and anxiety at a world that fails to value ‘us’ and ‘our’ work, and uncertainties about belonging to such a strange tribe.

As such, the provocation and its further articulation in the master class itself became a powerful lens to grasp some of the problems human geography postgraduates find in participating in academia. As ‘learners’, neither considered as full members of academia in their own right, nor part of the ‘normal world outside’, they encounter a double sense of strangeness. Unwittingly, then, the focal discussion point of the master class added to the overall aim of enhancing postgraduate students’ discursive skills and abilities, by providing the reflexive space to reflect on the academy more broadly. In the course of this activity the structure of academia as a ‘community of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991) became clear, highlighting skilfulness as something defined by some and to be achieved by aspiring new members. It is this perspective that lies behind the arguments of some participants for a more egalitarian organizational structure for the master class. As was noted several times during the master class, an important academic goal is to destabilise seemingly stable categories and concepts. This should include the distinction between learners and masters – perhaps, for such distinctions are founded in experience and not just conceptual ideals. Moreover, taken to its

fullest extreme, to flatten such distinctions is to provide a radical challenge to pedagogy, and to refuse the categorical distinctions on which teaching and training, of all forms, depend. There is probably no solution to this problem but, as a group of authors, we feel it important to articulate differences openly. A point that we can all agree on, though, is that it is as important for ‘learners’, as it is for ‘masters’, to include the question of how ‘masterly’ masters should be and what role they should assume in facilitating skills development, be this in terms of knowledge or competences. It may indeed be part of the strangeness of academia that mastery is not well defined, nor perhaps should it be, in order to recognize that as academics we remain in a perpetual state of learning.

Training in discursive practices is a matter of learning-by-doing. Learners as well as ‘masters’ have to perform academic practices to improve on them. But, to be able to master – or better, with more humility, handle or cope with – academic practices, is a question about self. Following Goffman (1959), the academic self does not exist *per se* but comes into being through the performance of embodied face-to-face discursive practices as well as the more obvious writing practices. It is through these practices that the academic self is performed. Providing training in these practices provides postgraduates with the opportunity to begin to constitute a sense of the discursive academic self. We suggest also that the relative unfamiliarity of the master class pedagogical format in human geography may provide scope for more critical reflection on *how* we perform the strangeness of academia. In this way, the inspiration we have taken from the master class as pedagogy can also provide the space for critical reflection on the academic practices of the social sciences including human geography.

4: Conclusions

Can the master class model provide the basis for the learning and development of complex academic practices in human geography? Ruhleder and Twidale (2000) speak of this pedagogic format as a setting where you perform again and again, modifying your performance as you receive feedback from others present and as you experience how your performance works. At the Hebden Bridge master class, the organizers emphasised the co-participation of faculty and postgraduate students and hence provided a setting for the kind of interactive learning that prevails in this format. Nonetheless, feedback from the evaluations shows that some participants saw the master class through hierarchical power relations rather than through the competences and know-how of practice. At one level these differences may be indicative of exposures to and immersion in different academic research and pedagogical literatures. At another, they are about the different encounters that each participant had with the event itself. Certainly, both the setting and the use of a creative workshop artist encouraged thinking of this master class as an egalitarian situation but, at the same time, other activities reintroduced the presence of hierarchical relations. Recognising such issues is important as it affects the academic performances of each participant, and the possibilities for learning from such situations.

Further difficulties were encountered in adapting the recursive nature of the typical master class to discursive academic practices. Discursive academic practices rely on one-off interventions. As such, to benefit fully from any attempt at learning through doing almost certainly requires access to visual recording technologies, which we did not utilise on this occasion.⁷ Nonetheless, the Hebden Bridge master class achieved its objectives in relation to one specific genre of academic performance, that of panel participation. The written evaluations tell us that this part of the event was particularly successful. That it was so is perhaps because it managed to establish a meta-focus on one practice, but also an opportunity to perform and comment while having this particular practice in focus. As important, is that the two other activities were less successful in this regard. In retrospect, to be successful probably required the use of visual recording technologies, and an explicit focus on particular discursive interventions, but another possible reason is that the skills at stake were not preceded by as explicit discussions, as happened with the panels. Our experience, then, suggests that it would be wise to address in considerable detail how discursive skills are to be worked on and improved through performance. An explicit focus on ‘what’s at stake’ could contribute to greater reflexive awareness and hence to enhanced learning for all participants involved. Nevertheless, we would not underestimate the difficulties here. To articulate how to work on ‘the question put’ and how to act as a plenary rapporteur would demand that all participants - faculty as well as postgraduate students - exposed their reflexive awareness and individual strategy of how they play the game. An open question is how such topics could be addressed through a master class event without forcing participants into positions where they become too exposed in a vulnerable sense.

To answer our question, then, the pedagogic model of the master class works, but only as a partial translation. The social science’s ambivalent relationship to the notion of the more experienced ‘master’, together with difficulties in readily identifying who should take a master class, and its extreme reliance on context-dependent improvisation are particularly intractable problems. Yet, the capacity of the model to focus attention on practice and performance is clear. As such, the master class has undoubted potential, notably in relation to advanced level teaching and learning for postgraduate researchers. In Figure 5 we provide a set of key conditions which are necessary to create a successful academic master class in human geography.

Figure 5 about here

Figure 5: Key tips for creating a successful academic master class

Academic considerations:

- 1: Think hard about the skills you are centring in your master class. How amenable are these to explicit articulation by ‘experts’? How easy/difficult will it be to give general and individual feedback on the performance of practices in situ?
- 2: Both articulation (of skills and know-how) and feedback require high levels of self-reflexivity from staff performing the role of ‘masters’, as well as from students. Think hard

about who does what, and remember that staff may feel as vulnerable and/or anxious in this type of exercise as students.

3: Be explicit in ‘what’s at stake’ in terms of the skills being performed – this is likely to take more than a quick oral resume. Pre-circulated materials may help.

4: Recruitment to master classes is not straightforward – targeted invitations may be necessary.

5: Explicitly address issues of hierarchy and power, and their relation to competence, know-how and practice.

Practical considerations:

1: Allow enough time for a variety of different discussions and activities, but not so much time that people are concerned about other work deadlines.

2: The class should be residential and full board to ensure that participants both come together and are not faced with competing pressures.

3: Begin with activities which take all of their participants out of their comfort zone

4: Allow time for social interaction – this will provide the necessary ‘down time’ and networking opportunities.

5: Consider the use of visual recording technologies

More broadly, the Hebden Bridge master class can be considered as part of the wider fabric of academic life and hence as subject to the regulative discourses that mark academia. Three points are particularly pertinent here. Firstly, through the international encounters that took place, the event provided the possibility for reflecting on how academic life is regulated according to different sets of rules within different parts of academia. Hence, a good academic performance may be different in a British, Nordic and international setting. Secondly, as some evaluations state, whilst the master class disturbed, these very disturbances became a source of learning. Thirdly, through its disturbances, the Hebden Bridge master class emphasised how human geography tends to neglect the performative aspects that are central to its practices. In opening up the space for consideration of these practices, the Hebden Bridge master class provided the opportunity to reflect still further on these practices – something we have each done in coming together to write this article. In more general terms, this article suggests that the master class format, with its twin-pronged understanding of performance and the performative, can benefit postgraduate training in human geography in at least two ways. First, the literal inspiration provides the imperative to learn-in-practice through providing training *in-doing*. Secondly, master classes provide the scope to reflect critically upon existing practice. This relatively unfamiliar pedagogic model offers the chance to reflect on the *hows* involved in the making of ‘strange’ academic selves, and provides the opportunity to shape agendas for *changing* ways of performing academic practices. In this way, master classes have much to offer to the pedagogic repertoire in advanced level training in human geography.

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List of Captions for Figures (with authors / photographers identified):

Figure 1: The initial provocation for the master class

Authors: Eric Olund, Nicky Gregson, Kirsten Simonsen

Figure 2: Creative arts workshop:

Photographer: Nicky Gregson

Figure 3: Tips on how to be an effective panellist

Authors: Peter Jackson, Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt and Tariq Jazeel

Figure 4: Evaluation scheme – distributed and submitted electronically

Authors: Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt and Nicky Gregson

Figure 5: Key tips for creating a successful master class in human geography

Authors: Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt, Jonathan Everts, Brynhild Granås, Nicky Gregson and Ruth L. Healey

¹ The team of authors emerged during the last day of the event discussed in this paper, and in the week after. Authorship was deliberately drawn to reflect the diversity of participants. Authors therefore include both organising staff and participating postgraduates and reflect the international nature of the master class. Two of us (NG, JOB) are from the organising staff; one (JE) is a postdoctoral researcher, and two (BG, RH) were, at the time of writing, PhD students. Two of us (JOB, BG) are Nordic (Danish and Norwegian), two of us (NG, RH) British and one (JE) is German. It is important to acknowledge that writing the article has involved not only negotiating between writers writing from different positions but also with different experiences, expectations and involvement in the master class reported on. These differences are manifest in the structure of the paper and in the degree to which it is possible to effect closure on all lines of argument.

² A related issue, which we do not explore in the paper, is how such competences connect with teaching and learning oral communication skills at undergraduate level. In both the UK and the Nordic countries, oral presentation is a standard component in the assessment of many human geography degree programmes, whilst discussion-based teaching formats (tutorials, seminars, field classes) are universally used. The style of discussion and questioning in such formats, however, is different to that encountered in research forums – a point acknowledged anecdotally in conversations with many postgraduates meeting these styles for the first time. A number of potential consequences follow: postgraduates may lack the confidence to make the kind of interventions that are seemingly required and formal conversations involving faculty and postgraduate students become dominated by staff, thereby perpetuating a discussion style in which postgraduates are silent participants whilst faculty are vocal.

³ A point to emphasise here is that the master class model is not one that should be seen as particular to building discursive competences. It would extend to include, for example, the sorts of activities that occur in residential postgraduate training courses focused on writing skills and their development – provided, that is, that the mode of training addresses iterative learning through doing.

⁴ The idea for this master class emerged during a workshop at the University of Sheffield, Department of Geography, in May 2007 organised by the Social and Cultural Geographies Research Group with three invited guests from Roskilde University (Kirsten Simonsen, Michael Haldrup, Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt). The planning of the master class, held at Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire, 4-6 November 2008 was undertaken by Nicky Gregson, Jessica Dubow, Eric Olund and Kate Schofield in Sheffield with Jørgen Ole Bærenholdt in Roskilde and numerous others.

⁵ In retrospect, the eliding of the term master class with conference in the provocation was confusing. In part this elision reflects the imperatives to attract funding for international travel and the availability of funding for conference participation. In part it also reflects doubts on the part of the organisers about the purchase of the master class as a widely understood model of academic activity in the social sciences (see Section 3).

⁶ It is important to note two points about this evaluation scheme: that anonymity made it impossible to differentiate between postgraduate students at different stages and that respondents were free to comment on whatever they chose to comment on. It is therefore difficult to say much about how different kinds of students evaluated the exercises or about how much in general they felt their discursive competences had improved (or not) as a result of the exercises they had worked on. Rather, students commented on this as they saw fit. We use these comments in what follows.

⁷ We did not use visual recording technologies for two reasons: (i) pragmatics, to do with both the basic nature of the venue and the need for several people to act as recorders, thereby opening up another line of potential division between participants; and (ii) anticipated apprehension, based on experiences garnered from both teaching and media training events.