

## TEACHING AS THE ART OF STAGING

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From *Teaching as the Art of Staging: A Scenario-Based College Pedagogy in Action*  
(Stylus, 2019)

**Teaching as staging** is setting up classroom scenarios such that the dynamics of the scenario itself frame and drive most of the action and learning that follow. The goal is to put students into a self-unfolding and urgently engaging situation, and then trusting it and them to carry it forward, with the teacher helping or spark-plugging when needed or desired.

**Scenarios** are unfolding events or situations that enact some tension or opposition: they have an inner logic (dialectic) that may tightly structure but does not dictate the resolution of the situation's movement or tension (if there is one). Model UN, Reacting to the Past, Problem-Based Learning all work with scenarios so understood, but the general model can scale down to short "Step-Right-Ins" – unscripted dramas, cases and problems, or simulations – and scale up to course-long designs.

**Impresarios with Scenarios** are teachers who teach mainly and usually by staging scenarios of this sort. "Staging" so conceived is challenging and consuming work of its own. It's a thorough-going and primary pedagogical orientation.

Here is a schematic contrast to Alison King's iconic categories "Sage on the Stage" and "Guide on the Side":

	students primarily...	teacher primarily...	knowledge is...
"Sage on the Stage"	passive	active	structured and "given"

"Guide on the Side"	active	re-active	constructed and "open"
Impresario with a Scenario	<i>activated</i> task-driven	<i>pro-active</i>	<i>co-constructed</i> structured but open

Among other things, I argue that many teachers who wish to be facilitative and student-centered are actually ill-served by the Guide on the Side model: it obscures their true and necessary *pro-activity*. "Staging" is challenging and consuming work of its own. Whole-heartedly embracing an Impresario role gives you much more room to move, while provocatively raising the facilitative stakes.

**Why teach this way?** Five claims from *Teaching as the Art of Staging*:

- ***Staging scenarios mandates active learning.*** It is through structured student activity that scenarios' dialectics work themselves out. One useful and ambitious pedagogical design maxim is: forbid yourself from telling the students the key points. Instead, design an exercise that ends with *them* telling *you*.

- ***Student engagement is immediate and immersive.*** One prime type of scenario I even call a "Step-Right-In"... and indeed they can be staged so that students find themselves in the midst of them almost before they know what is happening.

- ***Built-ins can be powerful but unobtrusive.*** Scenarios can readily address a variety of specific needs and special challenges, e.g. unequal participation and under-preparation. Impresario-professors can structure different dynamics into the situation from the start.

- ***Scenarios promote highly particularized learning.*** Scenarios and simulations can put students into very specific situations, such as a courtroom trial, medical settings like running a hospital ward (eg. in Problem-Based Learning), climate negotiations, National Security Council meetings, Model United Nations, historical watersheds (as in Reacting to the Past simulations), and many more.

- ***Scenes catch fire.*** Inside a role-play or a dynamically unfolding scenario, passions become thoroughly engaged: there is electricity, ebullience, intensity,

competition (sometimes), curiosity, unpredictability. Everyone is provoked to be take part at the top of their game – us teachers too!

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