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Artspeak: Articulating Artistic Process Across Cultural Boundaries through Digital Theatre

Yoni Prior, Manon van der Laaken and Rose van der Zwaard
Abstract: In early 2009, researchers in the English Department of the University of Amsterdam collaborated with researchers in the Drama Department, Deakin University, Australia on a project which brought English as a Second Language students from The Netherlands into the rehearsal studio of Australian students engaged in play-building on Australian themes. The project aims were multiple and interconnected. We extended a language acquisition framework established by the Dutch investigators in previous collaborations with the Universities of Venice and Southampton, and combined this with an investigation of ways to harness technology in order to teach Australian students to communicate with and about their art. The Dutch language students were prompted to develop art-related language literacy (description, interpretation, criticism), through live, video-streamed interaction with drama students in Australia at critical points in the development of a group-devised performance (conception, rehearsal, performance). The Australian student improved their capacity to articulate the aims and processes which drove their art-making by illuminating the art-making process for the Dutch students, and providing them with a real-life context for the use of extended vocabulary whilst making them partners in the process of shaping the work. All participants engaged in the common task of assessing the capacity of the art work produced to communicate meaning to a non-Australian audience.

Keywords: Art-making Process, Art-related Language Literacy, Play-building, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Language Learning

“‘The ability to access and interpret information gained through communication and collaboration with people from a variety of cultures will be a critical skill for success in the 21st century.’”  

Dutch Students Viewing the First Performance of ‘Unsettled Dust’

Between February and May, 2009, the authors embarked on a cross-cultural digital collaboration (the Artspeak project) between students from the Drama Strand at Deakin University in Australia, and students studying English as a second language at the Department of English at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. During this intercultural and interdisciplinary pilot project the Australian drama students worked to devise a performance on the evolution and representation of Australian cultural history while their Amsterdam counterparts served as a critical sounding board, as dramaturges and ultimately as a digital live audience. The intensive communication and collaboration with the Australian drama students gave the Dutch language students in their turn a real-life context in which they were challenged to expand their linguistic range and accuracy, to increase their cross-cultural awareness and to develop their art-related language literacy. Sensitive issues such as troubled national histories and volatile cultural identities were discussed through two modes of digital interface – discussion forums on a digital environment especially created for the project, and live hook-ups through Skype. These discussions shaped the final 45-minute digitally broadcast performance. After viewing the performance live through a Skype hook-up, the Dutch students wrote a review of the performance, reflecting, among other things, on how the Australians had dealt with all the sensitive issues that had come up in the discussions.

As we reflect on the outcomes of the Artspeak project, we are struck by how predictive the title Artspeak: Articulating Artistic Process across Cultural Boundaries has been, and how key aims and concepts – art, speech, articulation (a more rigorous variation of ‘expression’), artistic (as descriptor), process, culture and boundaries – have emerged as complex, multivalent and paradoxical. At the outset of the project we were interested to see how a double perspective (Australian and European) might influence the creative process and end product, and whether our students would be able to communicate effectively and sensitively across cultural boundaries.

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2 This speculative title was first coined when the researchers submitted a proposal to the International Conference for the Arts in Society before the project had begun.
Framework of Collaboration

Communication between these groups was facilitated, chiefly, through two modes of digital interface – a dedicated website which allowed threaded discussions and file-sharing, and live, video-streamed work in progress showings and discussions using Skype. These showings and discussions were also recorded and posted for both sets of students to view, and the first performance of the work was webcast to Holland. Both sets of students also reviewed the work from their respective positions as audience or performer/animateur.

While the framework of the project was focused on the adaption and utilization of existing digital technology as a teaching and learning tool, rather than as a key component of the language or aesthetic of the performance, its design was undoubtedly informed by developments in digital performance in the past decade.

Smith and Dixon define the concept of digital performance on their online Digital Performance Archive (University of Bristol Theatre Collection) as a combination of a “performance activity with new digital technologies - from live theatre and dance productions that incorporate digital projections, to performances that take place on the computer-screen via webcasts and interactive virtual environments.”

The earliest entries in the archive are from 1989 and consist of performances that experimented mostly with a combination of live performance and computer-mediated projections on a large screen on stage. The first live parallel performance with a proximal audience through internet is not archived until a decade later. A spectacular example is the performance of Orpheus and Euridice during the International Festival of Streaming Media in 2000, a collaboration between Waag society (Amsterdam) and Audiorom (London) in which London served as Orpheus’ podium, the Amsterdam venue as the underworld and the internet as the transit area. An example of a digital theatre production involving several universities is the mediated theatre production of Elmer Rice’s play The Adding Machine from 2007. This was a collaborative project between Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada and the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida, involving “integrated virtual scenery, avatar performers, photographs, graphics, sound, recorded video, and broadcast video transmitted over multiple advanced networking systems.”

The Artspeak project is one of the first interdisciplinary and intercultural virtual exchanges between performance and language learning on an academic level. It is part of a series of pilot projects carried out by the two participating universities. Deakin University has facilitated, or engaged in, numerous digitally-mediated teaching projects, including partnerships with other Australian universities, and universities in New Zealand, Canada, China, the USA and the UK in the presentation of photographic images through virtual galleries reflecting on Suburb as Site. The current project is the latest in a series of cross-cultural digital exchange projects that Van der Zwaard and Van der Laaken have organised in the context of their English language acquisition courses at the University of Amsterdam. Earlier projects include

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3 Both groups of students had access to research materials which included Australian history texts such as Robert Hughes “The Fatal Shore”, drafts of the evolving script, academic articles pertaining to cultural identity, photographic and representational images, lecture notes, dramatic texts, Australian fiction and poetry and critical writing.
Amsterdam University students and students of Ca’Foscari (Venice) giving each other a virtual guided tour of their respective museums of modern art, and Amsterdam students exchanging their own videos on local architecture with students from Solent University (Southampton).

Educational Context and Student Profiles

Deakin University is situated in Burwood, an outer suburb of Melbourne which is also, coincidentally, the heartland of amateur theatre in Melbourne. Students enter the Devised Theatre unit in the first semester of their final year from one of three streams – those specialising in Drama (Bachelor of Creative Arts), those doing a double degree Arts/Education, and those doing a Drama major sequence as part of a generic BA. As such, they bring a broad range of abilities and aspirations to a unit that is content-rich and very challenging. The department pursues a practice-driven pedagogical approach, though the approach in this unit has shifted in recent years from a process very much driven by the students, to one guided by the director. This involves introducing them to dramaturgical research strategies for locating content, to devising methodologies employed by artists in the field, to developing and shaping ideas on the rehearsal floor, designing and producing, editing and refining and, of course, performing. Projects are developed in two three hour workshops per week over a space of 10 or 11 weeks.

The Amsterdam students are following a course called English Language Acquisition through the Arts. They are undergraduates from a wide variety of humanities programmes, taking a minor in English as a Foreign Language. Most of these students come from very theoretically and politically oriented departments, such as European Studies, history and philosophy. The general level of their English is advanced. What they still need is an expansion of their linguistic range and accuracy. To facilitate this, the course is structured around task-based learning, during which students complete various art-related projects challenging them in a wide variety of linguistic areas.

Aims of Collaboration

From the theatrical perspective, the project was designed to provide students with an enriched learning experience. Our expectations were that the framework would:

- Provide a space for discourse and reflection on issues of cultural identity, and on the links between history, identity and their representations.
- Prompt students to deal with more complex ideas.
- Encourage students to explore more complex options in their performance language in order to express those ideas.
- Enhance the creative momentum of the process by providing opportunities for sustained discussion and reflection beyond the 6 hours per week of class time.
- Create a solid scaffold for the devising process through the placement of webcast work-in-progress-showings at process milestones roughly parallel with three stages of devising: immersion/research; development; editing/shaping/performance.
- Prompt students to think through issues related to the process of making performance work centring on their own culture and history for an audience from another culture.
Create a process of feedback and review which would allow students to assess their aims and intentions during and after the performance-making process.

From the second language acquisition perspective our expectations were that the project would:

- Develop art-related language literacy.
- Provide a real-life context for the language learning of our students. As stated by Kramsch, to achieve a richer context for language learning it is important to create realistic avenues of communication beyond the four walls of the classroom. This real-life context is here provided by computer-mediated communication (CMC), i.e. by the shared digital learning environments and the Skype hook-ups.
- Expand their linguistic range and accuracy. The students have reached a level of English in which they can communicate about most every day issues. The danger is that their language learning will halt and fossilize. Therefore we need to provide them with a complex and challenging context, such as the arts, in which they are forced to expand their linguistic range to be able to communicate.
- Increase cross-cultural awareness. Language learning is more than simply learning to use vocabulary and grammar. The learner needs to be aware of the differences in culture, and the dangers of cultural misunderstandings. Involving them in a creative process which requires them to communicate about delicate cultural issues would provide the ideal environment for stimulating this awareness.

Bricolage: Prompts for Choice of Theme

Language acquisition and training in performance and performance-making are not best achieved using transmissive teaching modes. Learners must speak, write, perform or make something in order to develop their skills, and both disciplines require an audience or interlocutor as context. John Harrop makes the comparison between the actor and the athlete, not least because acting (and, we would contend, mastering another language) is a skill which can only be learned by doing, by practicing, by processes of testing and refining. In both cases learners need to manage outcomes which are interactive and public.

As we began planning the project, we were looking for raw material which might provide content and/or context suited to the needs of both groups of students. The ways in which Australia’s history has shaped its contemporary cultural identity, we felt, could provide challenges both to the Australian and to the Dutch students. With the exception of the obvious clichés, the Dutch students knew next to nothing about Australian culture. They would have to make an effort to research and understand it, whereas the Australians would have to explore and analyse their own, very involved, cultural and historical backgrounds. In order to achieve

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the necessary depth of analysis and understanding, the students would compare and contrast their respective cultures and backgrounds. We decided that a rich source for reflection, discussion, and ultimately dramatisation for the exchange would be the vast differences between Dutch and Australian history, landscape, and geographical location, as a possible influence on the shaping of the students’ cultural identities. This would be a good starting point to lead them into a complex and layered realisation of what their own culture entailed.

Fortuitously, Baz Luhrman’s film Australia was released internationally in January 2009, and his portrayal of Australian history raised a number of lines of enquiry, not least the relationship of the narrative of the film to its title – which Australia was being represented? Whose Australia? As such, we felt it could provide a key text for both sets of students, and provoke discourse about representations of Australian history and cultural identity. Another starting point emerged when the staff involved embarked on a preparatory field trip to Lake Mungo in Central Australia, a massive inland lake which dried up some 16,000 years ago. This archaeologically controversial site has unearthed the oldest known skeletons of modern humans to be found anywhere outside Africa (Mungo Man and Mungo Woman) which indicate human habitation at least 50,000 years ago. The red earth, and the narratives of the unearthed skeletons which provoke conflicting interpretations of history, evoked a powerful potential combination of conventional representation and contested historical narrative. There was a certain painful irony in the massive numbers of plastic water bottles lying in the red dust along the roadsides as we travelled through the drought-affected Mallee region of Western Victoria. This irony deepened as Victoria experienced its worst bushfires on record in the weeks immediately preceding the beginning of the project.

Given the complexity of the task, it was important to provide the Drama students with solid scaffolding, and a starting point which would not shift even through the vicissitudes of the devising process. This took the form of a predetermined design concept and opening moment designed to provide a conceptual and metaphorical frame - the casting out of the bodies of colonial ancestors from the hot red earth - a large sandpit in the shape of Australia bordered by a fence of empty water bottles.

**Cultural Sensitivity and Diplomacy**

It is not possible, within the scope of this paper, to analyse all aspects or outcomes of this project, so we have elected to focus on a series of related issues which emerged in ways which were sometimes surprising. These provide striking examples of how the content of the performance was driven and shaped by input from the Dutch students and how the students’ cultural sensitivity developed during the project.

In early discussions, both live and online, the Dutch students kept returning to the theme of colonialism (a feature acknowledged as having shaped both cultures) and, in particular, to Australia’s history in relation to the original owners of the land.

*But what is the situation of the Aboriginals who used to live in Australia before the ‘modern, civilized’ people settled there.......?*

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Some of the Australian students would have liked to avoid this issue entirely, and expressed frustration at the long, complex and circular discussions which it provoked. Few had any direct experience or knowledge of indigenous culture or history. Some were clearly discomforted by what they interpreted as an implicit pressure to adopt a negative and critical view of their nation, particularly within a dialogue with non-Australians.

*My own feelings on the colonization of Australia had been altogether cheerier (probably from my determined ignorance), and at this point I started to feel myself opposing ideas and ideologies being presented and adopted by the group.* (Australian student. Production journal)

But the sincere and incisive questions from the Dutch students which came up so frequently in the posts and live discussions were an indication that no reflection on, or representation of, the shaping of the nation’s identity could ignore the matter. A guest lecture from Dr Tiffany Shellam, aptly titled *Unsettling History*, explained the narrative of The History Wars in Australia which, at least, reassured the Australian students that this was a narrative with multiple and conflicting interpretations, even within indigenous communities, and with a persistent capacity to ‘unsettle’ the nation.

Engaging with the Australian students on such sensitive political and historical issues, provided a good opportunity for Dutch students to learn about cultural awareness and sensitivities, which was one of the aims for the language acquisition strand of the project. One of the characteristics of Dutch communication is a certain directness, which outside Dutch culture is often interpreted as bluntness or even rudeness or insensitivity. In the following example taken from the first live discussion through Skype, we see Dutch directness in action:

*I think the big difference is... how your original indigenous of Australia are treated now and how many of them you really know, or what position they have in society, because people from our former colonies have the same rights, exactly the same as us and I have read in these texts that we got that there were these laws that were only abolished 20 years ago.... pretty outrageous laws ... I always had this positive view of the country ... Could you elaborate on that?* (Dutch student. Live comment)

The Australian students were quite taken aback by the content and phrasing of this comment. Once made aware of the issue of tact, both by the Australian students and by the Dutch teaching staff, the Dutch students became more circumspect in later posts and started to use various ways of mitigating the harshness of their messages. As we can see in the following

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13 The Wikipedia site “History Wars” neatly describes the History Wars as “an ongoing public debate over the interpretation of the history of the British colonisation of Australia, and its impact on Indigenous Australians and Torres Strait Islanders.”


15 Here he refers to the White Australia policy, a series of immigration policies established between 1901 and 1973 which acted to restrict non-European migration to Australia.
example, the student softens his comments by stating that Holland, too, has a dark history, so he’s not blaming the (or these) Australians.

_I’m really interested in your views on this: The texts tell a lot about the way in which native Australians have been treated through history and I was really shocked about this. Personally I knew about our own dark, DARK past we now call the Dutch ‘golden age’ in which we traded in human beings and killed off native inhabitants of distant lands to get their spices, gems._ ? (Dutch student. Online post)

In the two following examples the students explicitly state they do not mean to offend:

_I don’t mean to offend anyone with this but I’d really like to hear your opinion on the situation in Australia; do you have any friends who come from native families or know people who do? are they treated in the same manner or still not really part of your society or ... ? _ (Dutch student. Online post)

All in all, the project seems to have generated plenty of scope for the students to raise their cultural awareness and sensitivity.

**Issues of Literacy**

These encounters between the Drama students and the Language students, and these complex and sensitive issues unearthed some unexpected but salutary problems. While the initial assumption was that issues of literacy would be relatively confined to the Dutch students, and would arise in relation to written and verbal tasks, it rapidly became evident that another set of literacy-related issues needed to be contended with.

It turned out that the Australian students at times felt intimidated by the level of intellectual sophistication of the ideas expressed by some of the very politically oriented Dutch students. For example, one Dutch student applied the ideas of the 17th century English philosopher John Locke on possession and civil society to the colonisation of Australia.

_Both the explanations are linked to Australia through the works of Locke and especially his second treatise on possession and civil society.

Basically Locke investigated the rise of civil societies from a state of nature where man is unbound by any social rules and is only governed by the Law of Nature. Locke calls this the Nature State. In the Nature State every man is equal [...] and has the same rights to the land he lives on.

[...] Locke thought that by working on the land man made the land his own. By mixing the dirt of the land with the toiling of his hands, man became the proprietor of the land._

This led to both insights and frustration among both the Australian and some of the Dutch students:

_Sometimes we feel you guys are all sooooo smart and research-based and we are just making shows, as we do! _ (Australian post)

“_I think our class has felt a bit intimidated because of the level and sophistication of some of their posts” _ (Australian post)
“The post where you wrote that you felt intimidated by some Dutchies, don’t worry, I know exactly how you feel” (Dutch post)

These comments also led to some insights into other cultural differences between the two groups:

We could also see the difference between the University of Amsterdam students, and the Aussie students. We were more political[ly] or historical[ly] orientated. (Dutch post)

Out of this growing awareness, in both groups of students, of the literacy level required in order to effectively analyze a complex issue, emerged a second literacy-related issue in the context of developing the performance. When presented with complex and conflicting perspectives on themes of history and cultural identity, particularly pertaining to indigenous issues, and asked to work independently to develop scenes which interpreted them as performance, the Australian students struggled to locate a performance language within their existing repertoire which could represent or interpret these ideas. While this would constitute a considerable challenge even for experienced artists, their early improvisations and scenarios tended towards the reductive as they attempted to condense or metaphorise potentially complex narratives within simple representative frames and images such as the scene ideas noted below.

Dreamtime in the sand. Someone building a sandcastle and then a white person comes along and trashes it.
Use didgeridoo as microphone in Centrelink (dole) Office.
I thought to portray our Indigenous Background we could write ‘SORRY’ in the sand without speaking and play Indigenous music/Didgeridoo in the background.

Taking a documentary theatre approach via the familiar frame of characterisation (particular or generic, but based on ‘fact’) was a way of providing access to a broader sweep of the narrative of the nation through the narratives of participants in its making. The documentary theatre approach also steered them towards the expression of culture and history through contemporaneous language. The drama students located characters through primary and secondary source material, looking to the former to find language idioms for their roles. This was noted in the first feedback session, as texts expressed through archaic language also required the Dutch students to contend with a range of spoken idioms.

It’s quite complicated in that there’s a lot of information and a lot of the information is in old English, you know, in old-fashioned language. (Dutch comment. Live discussion)

Nonetheless, even when the students had understood that their desire for condensed and authentic meaning might be met by a mise en scene which allowed a range of conflicting views to be expressed and embodied on stage by the use of documentary theatre strategies, the problems of representing indigenous Australians on stage remained a vexing issue. With
no identified indigenous students in the group\textsuperscript{15}, the director (Yoni Prior) was unwilling to have white students ‘black up’ in order to represent an indigenous perspective. Students found this perplexing.

\textit{Yoni has decided that none of us will be playing aborigines because there is too big a risk that we may misrepresent. But on the other hand she has no problem with us playing people from other nationalities or cultures. This is a bit weird. Because if we are really meant to be treating everyone equal and everything then it wouldn’t really matter then would it?} (Australian student. Production Journal)

As the debates both between the performance-makers, and between the makers and the Dutch students became more complex, it became important to represent that complexity in the mise en scene. Ultimately the Australian students produced a piece in five ‘movements’, the pillars of the piece being two sets of interconnecting monologues - the first from the perspectives of a range of early settlers, the second from their contemporary counterparts or evolutions, in which the indigenous presence is constantly referred to, but never literally seen. The use of fragments of monologue was an aesthetic and a pragmatic decision in equal parts, the isolated bodies in the red dirt expressing a range of perspectives, emotions, attitudes, platitudes and responses to the new land. An unexpected addition to the actual performance came from some of the most engaged Dutch students who contributed a video in which they played Dutch explorers\textsuperscript{16}, and which was played on a loop on multiple screens in the foyer as the audience entered the performance space, adding another layer of narrative, and helping to frame the performance event and content for the live Australian audience.

\textsuperscript{15} At a very late stage in the process of devising the show, one of the Australian students revealed that she had recently discovered that she was “1/16th Aboriginal”, and was prepared to contribute part of that story to the performance, though in a frame which did not directly identify the story as hers.

\textsuperscript{16} The Western coast of Australia was first ‘discovered’ by a series of Dutch navigators from as early as 1598, none of whom found the continent sufficiently promising either to explore, or to propose its settlement.
Unsettled Dust – Opening Scene

Dutch Reviews

At the end of the Artspeak project, the Dutch students were required to write a review of the Australian performance. Having been involved in the creative process from the very beginning, the Dutch students demonstrated a deep understanding not only of the relationship between content and form in the work, but also of the ‘pragmatic dramaturgy’ which shaped the process of its making. They produced multiple readings of the structure of the play, and the way it constituted a response to the content of the work. The Dutch students were able to do this because throughout the project they had been challenged by both their Australian counterparts and their teachers to reflect on, write about and discuss issues around cultural identity, art in general, and performance in particular.

Unsettled Dust’s mosaic structure of separate monologues perfectly embodies the fragmented Australia, the multifarious character traits of which cannot be forged into one singular identity. But then again, which nation can be defined completely and comprehensively? (Dutch student. Review)

The choice to portray history themes in personal stories does not come from a desire to shy away from a more direct approach but from a desire to give a voice to the

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17 Here we meld Gad Kaynar’s definition of pragmatic dramaturgy in relation to repertoire selection with the concept of bricolage to identify the ways in which artists assess and utilise available resources to shape the form and content of their work.

They show the smaller wrongs done to each individual life to underline the great atrocities. (Dutch student. Review)

They also had sufficient confidence in their judgment and taste to offer considered criticism, an indication that they had acquired the relevant linguistic tools to describe and interpret performance.

Secondly, I must say I was quite disappointed by the amount of interaction between the actors, for there was almost no interplay at all. From the second act onwards, Unsettled Dust is built up on monologue after monologue. Quite good monologues, one must reckon, but still only monologues, which gave the performance the character of being a lecture. (Dutch student. Review)

Student Responses to the Project

All students who participated in the project reported being ‘challenged’ by it, and felt that they had to extend themselves to meet those challenges. Not all were happy with that, some feeling that it raised the bar too high. Some complained that it meant extra work. Some found the challenges to their political views, or views about what constituted ‘good’ theatre at best discomforting, at worst disabling and alienating. This begs the question whether the same material delivered without the exchange framework would have a similar effect on these students, though the public nature of the encounters - the fact that each group acted as an audience for the other within the process - was certainly an added stressor.

In our evaluation of the project, we recognise that we had assumed that working with digital natives, i.e. the generation that has grown up with the computer, using a digital exchange framework would enliven and democratise the learning process and encourage greater participation from both engaged and disengaged students. In this we had probably overestimated the attraction of digital technology as a novelty. Students who regularly use Skype and social networking technology were relatively blasé about the opportunity to interact with peers on the other side of the globe via digital means, and able to give us pointed and detailed feedback about how the technology might be better managed in future.

Conclusion

Having brought this pilot project to an end, and as we commence planning for the next iteration in 2010, what can we conclude?

From the point of view of both groups of students we can say that having to tele-collaborate and interact with a group of students from, in this case, another continent demands an extra level of consciousness and complexity. Both groups of students emerged from the process with greatly expanded vocabularies in their own discipline. Both groups of students had to locate and use language (written, spoken or performative) which could represent and articulate

ideas in a nuanced and sensitive fashion – particularly in relation to darker and unresolved aspects of their respective histories.

The Australian drama students were challenged by their Dutch peers to deal with complex and paradoxical material, having them looking over their shoulder during the devising process, challenging them about who they were and forcing them to think about and include parts of ‘their’ history that they never really considered ‘theirs’ to begin with. They had to develop a performance language which had the capacity to respond to the rigorous, articulate and informed questioning offered by the Dutch students. The opportunity to view and interrogate one’s own history and culture as if from without its boundaries, through the eyes and questions of those from another culture prompted them to fill the gaps in their knowledge of Australian history, and locate themselves, and their assumptions, within that narrative. One of the responses to a question from a Dutch student about how working on the project had altered their views of Australian history was that they had felt that history was something which had happened to other people, and in the past. At the end of the project, they felt that they understood better what they had inherited from that history, and that they were writing new chapters.

Equally, for the English as a Second Language students, there was a substantial difference between writing a paper to be assessed and marked by their teacher, and tapping new sources of linguistic range in order to write an eloquent review based on a performance they had helped create. For both the Australian and the Dutch students, then, the digital interchange project continually pushed the boundaries of their regular academic framework and demanded that they negotiate with intellectual and cultural areas they would never have come across otherwise. Computer Mediated Communication opened up both the rehearsal theatre and the classroom, and introduced new undiscovered worlds. Or, as one Dutch student wrote in his evaluation: “Sitting in a classroom on the other side of the world to see the play is an experience I will brag about for many years to come”.

About the Authors

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