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From Embodied Practice to Articulate Scholar: Blended Learning and Reflective Practice in the First Year Drama Studio

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Learning in practical drama and performance studies courses requires an embodied approach to pedagogy. Practical workshop processes lead students on a journey of discovery alongside episodes of reflection, in an iterative process, where in the re-doing they apply what they have learned and see on. Critical writing has become the quiet pre-quo of practice modules in acting, performance and theatre-making as they have found their way from colleges and conservatoires into universities in the past decades or so. This has introduced complex challenges for university tutors working in largely practical courses where a primary assessable end is an individually composed critical essay. This paper discusses the challenges associated with critical writing and reflective practice for first year drama students and examines the incorporation of e-learning into such courses to enable students to develop the necessary languages with which to speak and write about embodied practice critically. It also reports on other outcomes with regard to student engagement, self-responsibility, group cohesion, and learner motivation and tutor effectiveness.

Teaching Contemporary Drama/Performance [Studies]

Drama and performance are embodied pursuits the learning of which is based on practical exploration. Theory and practice in theatre-making are often interwoven; Soule (1986) states that they are "bonded in organic interaction" (p. 39). Critical writing has become the quiet pre-quo of practice modules in acting, performance and theatre-making as universities have responded to this by "performing studies" has emerged as the global organizing term for many undergraduate degree courses. This has seen the conceptualisation of the student in these courses shift from "student-as-person" to an emphasis on the student as an emerging "practitioner-artist" (Bacon & Chambers, 2005, p.180). Implicit in this conceptualisation is the requirement to write and speak critically. Bacon & Chambers (2005) highlights the centrality of the student's development as a critical thinker when they state that "the practice of Performance Studies involves the development of students' critical and creative potential (p.181, my italics). On commencing postgraduate study on her practice, Hongland (2003) acknowledges that the practice of making performance becomes intrinsically linked with the subject matter and with the critical and reflective writing that they do. Where art is concerned, it is not the content of the art itself that matters, but the way in which we come to understand that content and its relationship to the world around us.

Context and Approach

It is perhaps somewhat simplistic to suggest that teachers want their students to experiment and discover as they learn, to develop their own voice, to come to grips with the necessary rigours of scholarly practice, and to have a good experience of university life. Yet there is at times irresistible tension between the ethical and moral demands of the academy and the mandates on new universities for widening participation. The consequence of these agendas coming into contact can be large undergraduate cohorts, larger class sizes and a wider range of learning styles and abilities. The identification of these consequences and the implications of the drama and performance at the University of Glamorgan to facilitate a responsive learning culture initiated the research reported here. The ethos at The University of Glamorgan includes the commitment to widening participation. This translates to a student profile ranging from very high achievers to students who encounter significant challenges at this academic level due to learning disabilities such as dyslexia, and/or social barriers such as poverty and home-related instability. Adopting an action-reflection approach the research set out to facilitate a more incremental approach to reflective practice and to experiment with diverse ways in which to lead students to critical analysis. This has been explored through the integration of e-learning strategies and reflective practice in a first year practical drama/performance module. The ultimate aim has been to investigate the usefulness of e-learning for enhancing students' skills in critical thinking and writing. A secondary aim has been to accommodate diversity by providing opportunities for extension-type exercises for higher achieving students and the additional support and structure for at-risk students.

A mixed method approach that drew heavily on participant observation (by tutors) in the way Taylor (1996) recommends was used. Ethnographic data was compiled through observation and interview and were combined with the systematic (quantitative) measurement of student frequency-of-responding to on-line exercises and a content analysis of the student submission monitoring "level of critical content". Observations were aimed to monitor such factors as:

1. the level of reflective activity;
2. the content of reflective posts and the way in which recommended reading or core concepts from workshops were informing the comments;
3. the degree to which students move from describing their work, to describing how they feel/feel, to critically reflecting on theirs and others' work.

Approximately 70 students across 4 groups were required to conduct elements of their reflective practice and some of the reading requirements of the course via the e-learning facilities. In this project the technology used has been limited to a Virtual Learning Environment software package called Blackboard2. Reflective tasks required students to focus on the activity – the doing – their engagement in the doing, the watching of others' doing in the same context (i.e. classmate), and the watching/reading of others doing in different context in order to make sense of their practice experience and discuss it critically.

Integrating Technology into Learning for Drama/Performance Workshops

The e-activities implemented within the research are aligned to the kind of activities that are commonly integrated into a module in which prevails is central. Jenkins, Breen and Lindsey (2003) suggest that learning is made more interesting for students if it is relevant and contextual. This directed the choice to make all on-line tasks relate directly to the shared workshop or performance experience in their first 10 weeks of learning. This was further informed by McIntyre's (cited in D'Andreia & Gosling, 2006) finding that "the most effective way of using online technology... is to focus on supporting the learner's involvement in collaboration, authentic tasks, reflection and dialogue, and to do so in a way which addresses identity and community" (p.132). This was somewhat extended later in second term to include the demands on students to also integrate conceptual material that was made available in the on-line environment rather than in class.

There were seven discrete activities over the two terms plus a final assessment task. These included:

- Reflecting on and writing about own experience/case process;
- Reflecting on and writing about viewing/disguising other classes work;
- Reflecting on and writing about performance – U Huh Dance Co.;
- Reflecting on and writing about writing – Elizabeth Mackinnon;
- Reflecting on and writing about own and others work in relation to designated conceptual materials;
- Documentation and archiving of class/workshop activities for future personal use;
- On-line forum/disussion activity during the four weeks dedicated to assemble devoting toward a showing of work for assessment – this was primarily aimed at monitoring whether reflective discussions occurred between students on-line.

The module culminated with the usual final assessment task that demands students write about their own experience and compose a reflective analysis of their group's work in relation to deinalim referents of their choosing.

Steering a Soft Collision: Computers in the Drama Studio

The integration of the e-learning tools for focused reflective and critical practice activities into the structured studio-based module required a sort of steering by tutors and eventually by students with students. It was a requirement to engage in this cyber (technology) environment from the outset. One immediate impact of reinforcing the e-learning environment
alongside the real time environment was the creation of a new kind of status for outside-of-
class time activities. Another was the development of what I came to describe as "the buzz"
among students on the course. This reconfigured the early engagement of students from
passive recipients of university rules and course information, toward more active yet naive
inquirers and (at times) negotiators. The increase in engagement has also been evidenced by
the number of students attending live performance events in the studio theatre and at cross
class showings (both of which were promoted online) in comparison to previous years and
to their colleagues in the second and third levels the same year. This general increase in the
culture toward reciprocity and engagement is in line with what D’Andrea and Gosling (2003)
report. They claim that technology benefits the learning when it is blended appropriately with
other delivery methods and suggest that the integration of technology encourages contacts
between students and teachers and develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.

Perhaps more usefully for tutors it also enables prompt feedback, communicates higher
expectations, and respects diverse talents and ways of learning. This next section reports
the findings by blending chronological narrative with descriptive and analytic commentary.
The organising themes chosen to frame the findings suggest a developmental progression
from the initial stages of creating "the buzz," through to enhanced expectations in the group
expectations and formation of group identity. The development of students' critical awareness
and increased motivation are discussed as key elements in the establishment of their
"practitioner/theorist" capacities.

Creating "The Buzz": Communicating Higher Expectations
Early promotional-like activities were used to ensure an initial engagement on-line. The
purpose was to guide the students to interact with the software so that easy glitches could
be rectified. This early activity also confirmed the way in which students were made visible in
a different way when on-line. As module convener I could see who did and did not register
and who did and did not access the information. In week four students were directed to
complete and submit an assessable exercise. The "requirement" to submit created a buzz
amongst students with seventy-five percent (75%) of students attempting the exercise, an
increase of forty percent (40%) on the previous week. Fifty-five percent (55%) completed the
exercise, with a further ten percent (10%) admitting to needing assistance in navigating the
e-learning tool. This period marked a change in the students' understanding of the purpose
of the online environment and resulted in a shift in emphasis from "access to Blackboard" to

4 While student submission was not marked externally, through the module outline the students had been
4 informed that the tasks formed part of the assessment activity (known as Continuous Assessment which consti-
tuted 50% of the module grade.)
6 Blackboard is a ULE (Virtual Learning Environment, Through Blackboard, the University of Glamorgan provide student
6 and staff with online access to their modules (referred to as "Course".)

they "decoded" the performance. He reports:

They were all very articulate about Uh Huh and felt confident decoding the
physical vocabulary used in the performance. The people that were in my
session were very mixed in their opinions, some really enjoyed it and others
found the repetition used a bit dull. No one was offended although one
volunteered that she is Christian, she thought it was an interesting starting
point for a debate. (Tutor 2, 20/11/07)

The idea that students were developing a shared language from which to write and
discuss performance suggests that the learning process had begun to address the value of
the critical language alongside the artistic languages of developing in the module.
This development transpired to an increase in tutor confidence and a shift toward expediting
students to develop competencies in critical thinking and expression. One tutor responded by
initiating a more direct activity regarding critical reflection. In a shared email to all tutors she
wrote:

I left them in a structured discussion exercise... followed by an exercise
where we identified language that could express what they were saying more
formally in a written assessment. It took a bit of a chunk out of class time
but they responded really well and said it had helped them a lot. (Tutor 1,
27/11/08)

Emergent Critical Skills: Synthesising External Referents
Students' awareness of their developing competencies in critical thinking and expression
ruffled their confidence as learners. The way in which they began to apply their reading
to the evaluation of the live performance suggests a growing understanding of constructing
external points of reference for critical reflection. This was explored more specifically in week
5 of second term when students were given a conceptual diagram from Mock (2002)" and
asked to apply it in their analysis of their own and others' work/experiences. The principle
objective in this task was to challenge the students to begin to use conceptual language
alongside the material language they were developing from class. It was noted that all
submissions used the Mock's phrases within their constructed sentences. Mostly this was
mainly by transferring the key phrase into their writing. E.g.


"Access to the required work." This shift that was reinforced when the requirement to submit
was further linked to a task requiring students to seeing a live performance. Significantly,
of the 25 students who could not or would not come to the live performance around which
the task was set fifty percent (50%) actively sought information about the alternate task and
completed the task in a useful and relevant way. That students pursued the extension
work could be attributed to the buzz amongst the students and the way in which the online
activity consistently communicated tutor expectations. Finally, the extra emphasis on the
requirements to submit resulted in a small number of students (10%) emerging as "at risk"
in written work due to their consistent non-submission. Identifying these students as needing
additional tutor support came a full 4-6 weeks earlier than previous years.

Shared Expectations: Establishing a Group Identity
By week 7 first term two key epiphanies in student experience reinforced expectations
and began to consolidate a broader group identity. The first was the opportunity to view
the working process of the three other class groups and the second involved viewing live
work from a visiting dance theatre company. Over sixty percent (60%) of students attended
the programmed performance and all of these students submitted written critical work in
response to provocation set on blackboard within a tight deadline of 5 days. Watching each
others' work and presenting their reflections online built continuity and began to consolidate
broader group identity for the large drama cohort. This can be seen in some of the resultant
class discussions about the shared experience of seeing the live performance work. For
example, tutors report on the class discussion following the performance on 27 November
2006:

Had a really interesting discussion with my group this morning about the
show. They were incredibly passionate about their feelings towards it and I've
never known a show spark such a response. Only one person was prepared
to speak in favour of the show and defend it. A few others were indignant,
but the majority of those who saw it were vitriolic. They used words like
offensive, boring, amateur, insulting and, even, blasphemous. It was great
that it provided such a response and led to a fascinating discussion. (Tutor 2)

Interestingly all but one in my group liked the show and one really loved it!
(Tutor 1)

The good attendance at the event enhanced the capacity for there to be live group
discussions in class. One tutor speaks about the confidence he witnessed in the students' as

I can definitely see elements which I think would come under the "process of
development section." (Student name withheld, 03 March 2007, 20:56PM
GMT)

Some also elaborated on the phrase in order to demonstrate their understanding of
the concept. E.g.,

The "process of development" to me is the most critical part of the process.
It is the point where you begin to devise a piece, and find difference ways
which will improve or add... (student name withheld, 09 March, 16:09PM
GMT).

Some were also able to provide examples and to use their own words to demonstrate
about how such concepts emerged in their own experiences. One wrote:

Developing an idea can be seen as the most exciting part of theatre because
you have a white canvas which will slowly grow and develop into something
potentially really good. One thing I liked about the piece I saw was that
they/they attempted this before but in a less developed state and they
went back to it to see how much potential it had, they never gave up on
their idea. (Student name withheld, 02 March 2007 16:38PM GMT)

Submissions also revealed the ways in which the reflective discussions in class enabled
the shift from doing to watching and then to reflecting on doing and watching. One student
wrote:

Listening to Joel's class talking about their work I realised that the
development of a single idea to an end product is amazing. (Student name
withdained, 19 April 2007, 12:39PM GMT)

Now while the student's use of the word "amazing" does not necessarily suggest
critical analysis this excerpt captures the spirit of discovery that the process facilitated
and the student's wonder at her insight. This was confirmed when a small number of students
extended the process; their comments suggest a growing awareness the iterative nature of
the reflective process. One wrote: "how will this help me", and another: "how to use this to
influence the audience"; demonstrating a growing ability to apply their learning to their doing.
One very thoughtful submission cited the online entries by his peers from another class in
order to discuss the "process of conception" of their work. No vector.

For example, the Wednesday morning performance studies group's stimulus and motivation was to do with: ... fear, identity..., they then went about exploring these ideas... In my opinion, the conception of the piece... unlike all your ideas and allows you to develop and create the devised place. (Student name withheld. 04 March 2007. 21:14pm GMT)

Two students also began to demonstrate a reflexive edge to their writing. One begins:

Over the past five months of performance interviews my thoughts on the development stage of a performance has changed; I now feel more compelled to look deeper in the reasoning behind the choices, not only the aesthetic components or performance but the audience as a whole. (Student name withheld. 04 March 2007, 14:32pm GMT)

Interestingly, when asked to write in response to a piece of "performance" writing by Elisabeth Mackinon, Getting There is Being Here and Now: notes from an improvised performance, students seemed to move from a personally reflective to a more analytical register in their task more readily. One example follows:

While reading this extract it took me a while to become comfortable with it... once it began to make more sense to me, it conjured up the images of a stage with a desk and a computer... I think it is a very intimate piece, not only the relationship between the dancers, but also between the dancer and the audience. (Student name withheld, Sunday 3 December 2006, 12:58pm GMT)

Many papers demonstrated this shift in register and moved between speaking about the writing, the performance the writing had captured, and their own experience of both.

Developing Self-direction and Motivation: Peer-led Interaction Online and Real Time

As students demonstrated a growing engagement with the blended learning environments a parallel process was tried with just one group.\(^8\) In addition to the prescribed e-learning activities these students were instructed to use the online space to continue discussion that had commenced during class-time. Once again tutor modelling was used to demonstrate the potential of these spaces. During the first four weeks of second term, the tutor used the "discussion board" facility to reflect on the previous class. This then moved to using the online space to establish the pre-planned for the upcoming class requiring students to prepare/respond in a material way (Appendix 2 provides a sample of a thread initiated by the tutor). By the end of second term students had begun initiating "threads" of discussion, often these had to do with the logistics of outside class time meetings to work on their group devised assessment piece or motivating and encouraging words about the group as a whole, or about members of the group as individuals (Appendix 3d provides a sample of a thread initiated by the students). The informal tone of the student-initiated threads could indicate that the students have moved beyond self-consciousness in this transparent environment. The obvious ownership of the online space suggests that the practice of blended technology in the Performance Studies module has nurtured a hunger and confidence in the young learners. The momentum they experienced in the overly structured pralued framework has encouraged "the shift to greater student autonomy and independence" that D'Andrea and Gosal (2005, p. 139) predict.

From "Craftsperson" to Emerging "Practitioner/Theorist"

As first term progressed the "ideal" of critical reflection and critical writing became part of the ethos of the module thanks in large part to the tutors' persistence with the use of this terminology, their promotion of the extended online environment, and the facilitation of feedback. By the end of the academic year students were beginning to demonstrate their shift from "craftsperson" to emerging "practitioner/theorist" in the way Bacon & Diamond (2000) claim is central to the effectiveness of learning in performance studies. As students experienced their growing authority in the learning dynamic they began to experiment more with what critical and reflective thinking might mean and what this might look in writing. By way of making a final investment in the students tutors provided an additional class to reinforce the need for the kind of structure that the practice of critical writing had taken throughout the year. After which students depersonalised to their writing task in isolation.

The question that remained at this stage was: are the students capable of transferring what they had learned to the task of writing a critical essay?

7 The decision to focus on one group was guided by circumstances outside the reach of the research. One group had tutor fall ill which resulted in a number of consecutive weeks with a substitute teacher. Another group had a change of tutor from first to second term, this demanded transitional time in the building of student/teacher relationship that precluded the implementation of the additional online activity.

The submissions revealed that students had succeeded in gaining insight into the requirements of critical writing. All but one student submitted their paper. Unlike previous years there were no submissions that demonstrated a misinterpretation of the requirement of the task. That is, students used appropriate language and resources for a scholarly paper. However, work was not always grammatically advanced and there were still instances where the language adopted a similar level of familiarity to the online entries as the following example shows:

Influences for the piece, for me personally, would be the theatrical works of Steven Berkoff, where exaggeration plays a massive role in his plays. Also theatre like Sean Tain John's "Kill the Klowns" (sic), and television like "The Fast Show", for its expertise in comedy through hilarious exaggeration (George)\(^7\)

Despite his register the student is clearly confident with his capacity to express his influences in his own words. Others referred to the shared terminology of their workshop group as a way to try to move beyond everyday vernacular, for example:

As the rehearsal process began we kept in mind our experiences of working with Mike (poto) ... drawing on the concept of "building a scrapbook of ideas" ... (Sils)\(^8\)

Students undertook to include a description of their experience of the process as instructed. Some were not able to separate this from the description of the narrative implicit in their devised piece. Many constructed the description by referring to the reactions they received that led to certain images, rhythms, text, shapes, etc in the piece. Perhaps most impressive in the context of the assessment tasks was that students did not defend the quality of their work, nor did they tend to fall into the trap of over-explaining the meaning the audience was meant to get. Rather there was a consistent attention to the idea that "this kind of work" is open to interpretation and that the key to learning more about making "this kind of work" is to apply what you have been learning. The following words from a student essay states:

I look into consideration previous performance studies class who used the audience by moving them around - making them "active", I personally wanted to experiment with the role of the audience and the use of their

8 Name has been changed.
9 Name has been changed.
Don’t let Blackboard get in the way of doing the work – email me, or drop by my office and collect a hard copy of the task...

After the Christmas break there appeared to be a fall in commitment to the e-learning aspects in one particular class. Observations confirm that this class lost faith in the e-learning tool due to the experience of two separate students in this group of submitting/learning work only to find it was no longer there when they returned. The tutor also expressed a loss of motivation in the group of students' concern with the online requirement.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of integrating e-learning was the out-of-class time demands on tutors’ time to ensure both quality of and quantity of responsive feedback to student posts. At the start of the project this was almost unmanageable. Yet this was somewhat alleviated with a more concerted effort to integrated the content and process of the e-learning activities into class. This had two additional outcomes: 1) the class developed a sense of what the “work ethic” is in their group beyond what happens in response to teacher supervised work, and 2) that students were able to expand on their early reflections and experiments with their emerging knowledge as they applied their learning in class. For example, one tutor extended the e-learning activity findings for her group by focusing on “what to write” and “how to write” in the next practical workshop. She then followed this up with a further referral to an e-learning task. She reported:

We then did a group exercise where people would read out what they’d written, then we’d identify key aspects of the performance they mentioned – these were sub-divided into categories: content, themes, form, structure, devising process, group dynamics, audience response, and performance methodology. These were written on tiles on paper on the floor and under the tiles people wrote a sentence, and also we started picking out individual words to put on groups of paper to build a group vocabulary. At the time I was prompting to clarify, specify, explain and evidence these words, so for example one said the performance was “powerful” and from this we identified that actually the piece had generated a powerful emotional response for the audience, and why that had happened. With this pool of words and statements everyone then individually wrote 4 or 5 sentences about the performance and read them out. We then watched a section from DVM’s The coat of living, where they wrote notes and briefly gave a response, and I has asked them to respond using these ideas as a question I will set on BB tonight. (Tutor 1, 15/1/07)

The enhanced learning environment evolved through the blending of e-learning, workshop-based practice, and critical reflection has contributed to the moulding of a cohort with a positive outlook toward the demands of university life and their capacity to meet them. This is precisely the outcome that D’Andrea and Coles (2003) says universities should be aiming for. They claim that investing the extra time and expense in the first year is essential for building group identity and has a flow-on effect to feelings of self-confidence and progression rates in freshers students both of which are evident in the cohort at the centre of this research. Further, the structure and record keeping possibilities provided by the e-learning can enable staff to more fully facilitate and monitor the reflective practice-to-critical writing requirements for first-year students who are challenged with dyslexia and other learning disabilities alongside providing extension-type activities for students seeking more stimulus and greater challenge. Such practice fostered what D’Andrea and Coles (2003) refer to as an inclusive learning community facilitating a more co-ordinated approach across the cohort that helped to improve coherence among students and resulted in the development of a group identity within which can appear to be a very large and disparate group in the module-based course structure. A small sample of module evaluations made particular note of the anonymous writer’s willingness at having to leave behind for the summer. Equally useful is the clear indication from the module evaluations that there is a group of motivated, self-confident students...

Section 2: Learning & Curriculum

References


Appendix 2: Experiments 2

Appendix 2: Samples

Appendix 1: Mock schema activity

DRY581 PERFORMANCE STUDIES 1

Blackboard Instruction:
This task is designed to help you think through what you are about to embark on in your small group devising project for the remainder of the term. Table 2 looks at the diagram and answer the question that is set. Submit your work via the Digiboard box or email to you tutor.
<image>