

Theatre through a Computer: A Critical Reflection of Online Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic

[ROXANE E. REYNOLDS](#)

IRVING INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

ABSTRACT

The following paper chronicles my experiences as a high school theatre teacher during the school closures and state shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic in the spring of 2020. The critical reflection identifies struggles and success in the areas of communication, participation and overall emotional and mental health of students and teachers, due to the environmental shift from in person to online learning. My school community (Dallas, TX) and personal pedagogical lens are described to help further contextualize the inquiries and conclusions of this reflection. It is important to note that this paper acknowledges the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 Pandemic and does not seek to provide permanent answers or solutions to an ever-evolving crisis. The aim of this paper is to reflect on my unique struggles and success as an online educator and to explore the impact of theatre on child development, specifically during times of traumatic crisis.

On March 13th, 2020 I sat in front of a classroom of very excited and restless high school students in Dallas, Texas. My students were counting down the minutes until the official start of Spring Break and feigned interest as I explained our emergency, "At Home Learning Plan." This plan provided students with the platforms, Google Classroom and Remind101, where they could find assignments and contact me in the event that schools were shut down due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The week leading up to Spring Break was filled with students shuffling through the library to retrieve laptops and teachers cleaning off all surfaces in their rooms for the mandatory sanitizing. During my last period Musical Theatre class, I happily cleared my desk and windowsills of all the stuffed animals, pictures of performances and supplies that had accumulated and felt grateful I would return to a clean space in April. As we said our goodbyes, I naively assured students that we would be together again soon and reminded them to wash their hands. I was gloriously ignorant to the dystopian months ahead.

In the coming months, I watched in horror as my former home of New York City was ravaged by disease with the ominous knowledge that Dallas, Texas could be next. I also experienced growing pains as a first time online teacher. I consistently felt frustrated, defeated and frankly, ineffective as an educator. In this article I will reflect on the experience of virtual teaching during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and draw on the expertise of multiple practitioners and theorists to further analyze how this abrupt environmental change impacted communication, participation and the overall well-being of my school community.

As I reflect on my unique experiences it is important to identify the community and culture of my school, along with my personal pedagogical lens. The 2019-2020 school year was my first year teaching in Texas after returning from eight years on the East Coast and multiple years working as a teaching artist in Manhattan. After receiving my MA in Educational Theatre from NYU, I was hired to fill a high school theatre teaching position for 9th-12th grade students in Dallas, Texas. My position was occupied by a myriad of substitutes the prior year and had originally been vacated by a seasoned educator who was escorted off campus in handcuffs, due to an inappropriate

relationship with a student. Safe to say, there was a clear feeling of mistrust amongst the student population, in regards to the theatre department. Of our nearly 2,500 students, over 80% identify as Hispanic and over 60% are identified as economically disadvantaged and at risk for dropping out. While our Title I campus offers multiple AP/IB courses and has an advanced Collegiate Academy, our overall state accountability rating remains low at an unimpressive C (*Public Schools Explorer*, 2019).

Beyond the statistics and ratings, I experienced my students to be remarkable and longing for love, consistency and genuine kindness. In Barbara Strauch's (2003) text, *The Primal Teen*, Chairman for the American Psychiatric Association in Vermont, David Fassler, identifies that, "kids without nurturing childhoods enter the potentially turbulent territory of adolescence with—a kind of 'pseudo maturity,' leaving them more 'malleable and susceptible' to the tempting tugs and pulls of adolescence" (p. 214). Fassler's description encapsulates what I saw in my students and their "pseudo maturity" often manifested as a mistrust and disdain for authority, communicated through a dark hoodie and refusal to participate. In some cases the dark hoodie was not the chosen mirage of maturity, and students seemed wise beyond their years due to adult realities like parole officers, a household full of dependent siblings or the understanding that they were truly on their own with no familial support. However, even this wisdom reeked of "pseudo maturity," as these students were well behaved and driven, but terrified to show glimpses of their true selves and refused to ask for what they needed. And I also had a handful of students who were well-supported and passionate thespians, but their malleable minds still adapted to an environment filled with children feigning adulthood for survival.

While I was a nervous newcomer in August, by March the ice had melted, and my classroom was a space of love, laughter and risk. Even during difficult class periods, of which there were many, I felt connected to and proud of my students. In January I was joyful and relieved when a district mentor observing my class stated, "you teach with so much love and your students feel it." Love is the foundation of my process driven pedagogy, where I value the development of the child over the product or resulting performance. Due to my process-focused approach, I was very resistant to the competition centric climate in Texas. However, throughout the year I found that process

and competition could coexist in a meaningful way. Students responded remarkably well to the goal-oriented structure of competition and the road to the results allowed for exploratory, experimental and fun work. Through competition I saw students laughing, yelling and becoming fully invested with no fear of looking foolish. I adapted my pedagogy, as I realized that competition awakened the children in my classroom and shattered the pseudo maturity armor they had walked in the door wearing.

I was hopeful that the rapport and relationships I had built with my students and colleagues would survive the strains of online learning, but communication was the first fatality of the environment transition. In her text, *All About Love*, professor and activist Bell Hooks (2001) states that, “it’s not what you do, but how you do it” (p. 116). Hooks’ explanation concisely captures the importance of clear, and loving communication. In the first weeks of online learning our “how” was often frenzied and frantic. As teachers we were receiving policy changes hourly by email and were being threatened through curt correspondence about the penalties for not “clocking in” through the online form by a certain time each day. Furthermore, many of our students had no Wi-Fi connection or access to laptops and we were diligently attempting to make contact with every student by phone. This endeavor presented the obstacles of language barriers with many parents, along with out of service and out of date phone numbers in school records. It became clear that every flaw in our system and weakness in our communication strategy would be magnified and exacerbated by online learning.

Throughout the year I faced many failures in the classroom, but one of the standout successes was the high level of communication and connection I experienced with my students. Modeled after the work of practitioner Viola Spolin (1986) I attempted to create a theatre classroom where students felt ready to, “connect, to communicate, to experience, and to experiment and discover” (p. 2). We spent the first month of school co-creating a communicative environment where I could turn over a floundering lesson or rough day to students and ask, “How can we make this better?” I knew we had succeeded in creating an inviting space when even students who chronically skipped class and were labeled hallway “wanderers,” were in the room participating in warm ups. Online learning meant that we no longer operated within the safe confines of our co-created classroom, and students were not

only lacking materials, but many began working full time to help support their families. I was shocked when I had students joining Zoom video classes from their cars on break from a construction site or the break room of the nursing home they worked in. I felt my online assignments must be tediously trivial to students facing such adult realities. While I was grateful and endlessly impressed with students' dedication to "attending" class, I also saw the reemergence of the "pseudo maturity" armor I had worked so hard to help them shed.

Furthermore, as a faculty we struggled to agree upon what we actually expected of our students during this time. I have often followed the tenet laid out in Dr. Grant Wiggins' (2005) *Understanding by Design* that, "only by having specified the desired results can we focus on the content, methods and activities most likely to achieve those results" (p. 15). Our administration was urging us to not overwhelm students with work and to create assignments that met standards, but were less work intensive. However, every time I asked my students how classes were going they often said that they felt extremely "overwhelmed" and that teachers were sending them multiple lengthy assignments a day. Throughout the year I had often sensed animosity from veteran teachers towards our administration and this tension was exacerbated by the tenuous task of distanced learning. Teachers were all working tirelessly to do what we believed was best for our students, and for some this meant ignoring the administration's instructions. As an arts teacher I understood the impulse to rebel against uniformity, but I also felt that the various formats for attendance and assignments from teachers were needlessly confusing. This is a rare instance where I think we needed to surrender some of our autonomy as educators, to the greater good of presenting an accessible united front.

Alleviating some of the stress from our communication struggles, were a few gratifying successes. Bell Hooks (2001) tells us that, "when we choose to love we choose to move against fear-against alienation and separation," and our school community made this choice to love as we honored and celebrated our seniors (p. 93). Our school leaders designed a "Senior SWAP Day," during which seniors drove through the school parking lot to return books and uniforms and "swap" them for their caps and gowns. Students then took professional pictures in a safe and socially distanced manner and were cheered on by mask wearing faculty members.

Similarly, we had personalized gifts made for our thirteen theatre

department seniors that I delivered to their homes. Seeing where students lived was heartbreaking at times, but also inspiring. Some of my brightest and kindest students were living in small one-bedroom apartments with a family of five or six, something they had never mentioned or complained about. Many of these students had said they were grateful to have a roof over their head, and in these moments I recognized authentic, not pseudo, maturity and wisdom. I knocked on doors and wore a huge grin under my mask, as I saw my students for the first time in months. I felt I was communicating better with my students in these very short interactions, than I had in all of the Zoom calls or messages on Google classroom. As an artist and drama teacher, I suppose it should be no surprise to me that communication goes far beyond words; sharing space with someone is energizing and loving in ways that we can never fully replicate through online interaction.

Many of the obstacles that blocked communication, also contributed to a severe drop in participation among students. I often watched the news and felt frustrated as I saw images of virtual classrooms with over fifteen students attentively interacting with their teacher. I wondered shamefully if these images were photo shopped somehow, because I felt grateful if even four students attended a virtual meeting. One factor that contributed to this lack of participation was sleep patterns. During the first weeks of online learning students would begin checking in and turning in assignments as early as eight in the morning, but as weeks turned into months, this changed drastically. Reporter and editor Barbara Strauch's (2004) text, *The Primal Teen*, explains that teenagers, "naturally start staying up later and sleeping later in part because melatonin flows into their brains later—and also linger(s) later in the morning" (p. 159). This late influx of melatonin could account for why some of my students would message me apologizing for "sleeping through the Zoom meeting," even if the meeting was at one in the afternoon. Beyond the biological inclination for later and longer periods of sleep, students were often alone in their rooms while their parents worked. This lack of interaction and stagnant environment, predictably, led to lethargic behavior.

Accompanying their irregular sleep cycles was a severe lack of motivation that worsened as the pandemic persisted. Theorist and educator, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2009), tells us that it is vital to, "provide instructional 'scaffolding' [so] students can move from what

they know to what they need to know” (p. 124). I believe strongly in scaffolding and have witnessed how clear structures and classroom rituals empower students to take ownership over their learning process. During in person classes I was determined to inspire this level of ownership in my students and was a relentless cheerleader using humor, singing, dancing and even candy to encourage a proactive spirit. Students were even annoyed into accountability, as I stood over them or chased them down the hallway to remind them about an assignment or redirect their “wandering” back to my classroom. These methods were effective motivators on campus, but useless during distanced learning. I’m also aware that our fractured approach as a faculty caused a coma of confusion for some of our students; they did nothing because everything seemed unclear. And lastly, there was the district policy to refrain from “punitive grading” and that the grades during online learning would not be factored into student GPA. While I appreciated the compassion of this policy, I do think it removed a potential motivator for students to participate and complete assignments. I saw the emergence of toxic “pseudo-maturity,” as students took it upon themselves to decide that learning garnered no benefits, if it did not impact their GPA.

In an effort to encourage participation and motivate students through small successes, I created assignments that could be completed in multiple small steps. In my research for online teaching guidelines, I found professor and researcher Brené Brown’s (2020) tip to deliver information in, “small chunks—no more than 30 minutes online.” In accordance with this rule I posted a concise list of assignments for the week. This list included two assignments for students to complete and then broke them down into steps that provided necessary knowledge and scaffolding. I utilized podcasts, short performance videos and recorded my voice over interactive PowerPoint presentations to engage students. I moved all of my classes into playwriting, as this seemed to be the most accessible way to provide an imagination enriched escape from reality. In the beginning stages of the unit I asked students to read or watch one 10-minute play as the week’s first assignment and then complete a critical reflection worksheet. In this reflection they were asked to identify specifics about plot structure, character development and overall message, drawing on previous knowledge we had learned earlier in the semester. The final goal of the unit was for students to write their

own 10-minute play, so I also asked them to identify what they would like to “steal” or emulate in their own writing.

As the unit progressed, and students began writing, the assignments were focused on creative thinking and finding inspiration. For example, during the image inspiration assignment, students were provided with a myriad of images and asked to give a title to each one. The images included: cartoons, animals, black and white photos, landscapes and even celebrities on the red carpet. In an effort to garner investment, I included images of celebrities and some anime characters that I knew would speak to the interests of certain students. After students looked at the images and created the titles, the second assignment for the week was to pick one title and describe two characters and a conflict for the play. Students allowed themselves to respond with humor and creativity and created stories ranging from a fox struggling with kleptomania, to a Hollywood starlet with an embarrassingly enthusiastic costar. When I graded these assignments, I found myself truly laughing for the first time in weeks. Escaping into their imaginations allowed the genuine spirit of my students to re-emerge from beneath the disease-ridden rubble, bringing joy to themselves, and gifting hope to me.

As a practitioner I have often stated that for some students their imaginations are their safe haven, but I have never been in a situation where every single student, and teacher for that matter, needed a shelter from the storm. As the playwriting unit progressed I learned from my students that our imaginations are the ideal solution to our search for safety, because we all have one and when we share them they grow. Practitioner Peter Slade (1964) once described the phenomenon of “absorption [as] being completely wrapped up in what is being done, or what one is doing, to the exclusion of all other thoughts” (p. 2). As we neared the end of the semester and the completion of their 10-minute plays, students eagerly escaped into their imaginations and some truly excelled as playwrights. I read student plays about a raccoon who is in therapy for his relationship issues and a reimagined version of Pixar’s *Inside Out*, where a team of brain workers argue over what their human should have for a midnight snack. I also saw the renewal of the proactive spirit I had hoped to cultivate in my students. A student shared that she wanted to write a play about the small town in Texas where her family was from, not for a grade, but to inspire others to share their stories and roots. These

fantastical and reality based worlds became a light, not only for my students, but also for me. Reading and giving feedback on students' work was a window into the connection and creativity we experienced in the classroom. In these moments I was reminded of the importance of storytelling for connection and as a tool to see a world beyond our current reality.

While a large portion of my students excelled and found escapist freedom in playwriting, it is important to admit that this was not the case for all of my students. Many students were consistently missing assignments and making no contact with me. In order to keep accurate attendance and to ensure the safety of our students, I made phone calls, sent messages and reached out to other teachers each week for students I was concerned about. I was observing the relief writing and creativity provided many of my students, but it seemed the students that needed this most were maddeningly unreachable. In addition, the painstaking process of calling and emailing was exhaustingly methodical, clinical and, as my students continued to say, "overwhelming."

Lastly, I feel it is vital to reflect on how the transition to online learning impacted our overall well-being and health as a community. Practitioner and activist Augusto Boal stated that, "oppression is embodied" and this is exactly what I experienced and observed throughout distanced learning (Bukhanwala, 2014, p. 8). Staying isolated and away from our friends, colleagues and students was the necessary step to keep everyone as healthy and safe as possible, but it was a form of oppression at the merciless hands of COVID-19. During video calls I watched as once vibrant, sarcastic and lively students shrunk to lethargic shells of themselves sitting in a dark room. Furthermore, I saw a decline in my colleagues and leaders as they inadvertently carried the weight of their sadness and exhaustion into our virtual meetings. In conversations with parents I could feel that they were running on adrenaline and trying to keep their family's heads above water. On a basic needs level many of our students were waiting in long lines at our school, sometimes even running out of gas, to try and retrieve food and sustenance for their families. I also witnessed a terrifying decline in students who were not comfortable in their own homes, but no longer could turn to school as their safe haven. And personally, I experienced moments of excruciating helplessness, where I felt powerless to shield my students from the

traumatic, and potentially detrimental, impact of this experience on their development and health.

The antidote to helplessness and powerlessness is often found in reflection and understanding how we can do better for our students. In the text *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Loyola University Professor Ruby K. Payne (2005), explains that we must provide our students with, “cognitive strategies, appropriate relationships, coping strategies, goal-setting opportunities, and appropriate instruction both in content and discipline” (p. 139). In reviewing this list I feel that our students were missing the fundamental element of coping strategies in a situation where they needed them most. Through assignments, video calls and school community building activities, we were providing our students with opportunities to set goals, strengthen relationships and receive instruction, but not providing coping strategies. As a staff we were receiving articles about best practices for working at home and our administrators were encouraging us to exercise and get outside when we could. These were tools that we shared with our students, but the deficiency was really in the lack of healthy habits and practice using these tools. I regret that wellness and self-care were not a stronger part of my curriculum and I am dedicated to modeling and teaching more of these strategies to my future students.

I embarked upon this critical reflection with an intense drive to analyze my mistakes and uncover some hidden secret to successful online learning in the arts. Inspired by Bell Hooks’ (2001) beautiful words that, “the space of our lack is also the space of possibility,” I felt I could uncover this possibility through a somewhat myopic reflection of an ongoing crisis. While I do feel there are useful takeaways regarding clear communication and the importance of structure and scaffolding, my biggest takeaway is gratitude. I am of course grateful to all educators, our fierce administrators and to parents and guardians, but I am mostly overcome with gratitude for my students. My high school students brilliantly reminded me that storytelling and imagination are the illuminators we turn to in the darkness. Stories unite us and whether they are fantastical and escapist or raw and unfiltered, they are the ultimate connector and true power of theatre.

Our country is suffering from disease of the body, mind and heart, as we face a merciless virus and a long overdue reckoning for systemic racial injustice and senseless denial of basic human rights. As I write this conclusion, I am preparing to return to a classroom with

great anticipation and fear of what teaching safely in the time of COVID-19 will look like. However, I have hope. I am hopeful because that “space of possibility” is occupied by all of our students, as they teach us to listen through storytelling and illuminate the way forward by daring to imagine.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Roxane E. Reynolds is a drama educator currently working at a high school in Dallas, Texas and is a certified teacher in both New York and Texas. She received her MA in Educational Theatre from NYU in 2018 and received her BA in Musical Theatre from American University. She has worked as a teaching artist throughout Manhattan, as well as a full time teacher at the Salk School of Science. Roxane's drama classes are rooted in critical thinking and empathy and cultivating a culture of inclusiveness, equity and kindness.