

Challenges in Teaching and Learning in Practical Theatre Courses during the COVID-19 Lockdown at Lupane State University

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the challenges faced by Theatre Arts lecturers and students at Lupane State University (LSU) during the COVID-19 induced lockdown which forced the university to suspend face to face classes. On the 25th of March 2020, Lupane State University, like all other Zimbabwean universities, was forced to close abruptly in response to the government declared total lockdown restrictive measures. The abrupt nurture of closing created challenges for lecturers and students, chief among them lack of preparedness to transition to online learning, unavailability of online teaching and learning material as well as lack of connectivity. Yet, students taking theatre courses needed to continue learning. We discuss the deployment of blended learning and its impact on the teaching and learning of practical theatre courses at LSU. We also examine how

students (performers and audience) struggled to adapt to the new normal of performing to a smaller audience of invited guests and social distancing during performances against an interactive and social performance tradition.

INTRODUCTION

African theatre is by nature an interactive and social enterprise, hugely characterised by dance, movement, call and response as well as togetherness. These definitive categories of African theatre have come under scrutiny during the COVID-19 imposed lockdown with most countries closing down businesses, public and social service centres to slow down the rate of infection. The theatre performance culture and tradition at Lupane State University (LSU) and many other African universities thus took a knock and had to re-adjust especially in light of expectations by university management that teaching and learning needed to continue during the entirety of the lock down. As a result, LSU lecturers and students had to navigate through numerous challenges to teach/ learn and position these courses as fundamentally important within the university community and nation.

This research discusses the challenges faced by Theatre Arts lecturers and students at LSU during the COVID-19 induced lockdown which forced the university to suspend face-to-face classes. On the 25th of March 2020, LSU, like all other Zimbabwean universities, was forced to close abruptly in response to the government declared total lockdown restrictive measures. The abrupt nature of closing created challenges for lecturers and students, chief among them lack of preparedness to transition to online learning, unavailability of online teaching and learning material as well as lack of connectivity. Yet, students taking theatre courses needed to continue learning. We discuss the deployment of blended learning and its impact on the teaching and learning of practical theatre courses at LSU. We also examine how students (performers and audience) struggled to adapt to the new normal of performing to a smaller audience of invited guests and social distancing during performances against an interactive and social performance tradition.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research is framed within a case study paradigm. At the centre of this research is a dual process that (1) attaches any teaching and learning action to the process of doing research and (2) presents it as a solution—a product. This dual process encapsulates what Nelson Goodman (1978) characterised as a form of world-making. Schon submits that:

When a practitioner sets a problem, he chooses and names the things he will notice. [...] Through complementary acts of naming and framing, the practitioner selects things for attention and organizes them, guided by an appreciation of the situation that gives it coherence and sets a direction for action. (1987, p. 5)

In the context of this research, we sought to identify the challenges that could be or were faced by lecturers and students undertaking practical performance-related courses at LSU. We also sought to experiment with ‘new normal’ possibilities in teaching and learning as we prepare for the upcoming academic calendar year. Schon (1983) is of the view that practitioners need to reflect simultaneously as they take action so that they can improve their practise. As theatre lecturers, we argue that reflecting on our strategies and ways of doing things offers us an opportunity to learn about what works and what does not work in the teaching of theatre during this COVID-19 period.

This process enables us to treat the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the teaching and learning as a unique case that demands reflection-in-action. However, because this is ‘new’ zone of practice that is characterised by “uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict” (Schon 1987, p. 5), a reflexive approach that escapes the clutches of existing canons was needed. Further, Schon adds that “when a practitioner recognizes a situation as unique, she cannot handle it solely by applying theories or techniques derived from her store of professional knowledge” (1987, p. 5). This calls for a reflection-in-action exercise that explores all possible and available options for both the student and lecturer.

Theoretically, we locate our argument within the Community of Inquiry Framework (CIF) (Garrison and Anderson, 2003). Shannon Vickers (2020, p. 3) identifies “Cognitive Presence, Social Presence, and Teaching Presence” as the three pillars of the CIF necessary for

an online course design and implementation. Garrison and Anderson (2003, p. 28) view cognitive presence “as the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry.” Social presence relates to the participants’ ability to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves to the other participants as “real people” (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000, p.89). Finally, teaching presence includes course design, facilitation, instructor-student relationships, rapport, and opportunities for collaboration and connection, which result in student success (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). We turn to the process and approach adopted by LSU lecturers in teaching theatre modules online and examine how these three pillars were attended to and the attendant challenges thereof.

TEACHING THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE THEORY IN THE ‘NEW NORMAL’

One thing that the whole LSU community agrees on is that the COVID-19 induced lockdown found the institution unprepared. Although university management has for quite some time advocated for a blended approach to learning, a lack of an enforceable policy has been its Achilles heel. As a result, when the Government of Zimbabwe declared a total lockdown beginning the 30th of March 2020, the university sprung surprises on its faculty and students. Firstly, the institution demanded that the university community continue teaching and learning online. This was against a knowledgeable background of technical and capacity inadequacies of both staff and students in fully utilising the MOODLE platform or Google Classroom. Vickers (2020, p. 2) observes that any successful online courses require “mindful consideration of equity issues in order to ensure course design is accessible, engaging, and able to mitigate predictable barriers to diverse student populations.” The impromptu declaration of the lockdown made it difficult for the generation of a course design relevant and applicable for online learning platforms available to lecturers and students. As a result, most academic staff members turned to WhatsApp, where they shared with students material in the form of documents, recorded audios and messages in line with their

face-to-face course designs. Secondly, the university transferred the expenses of the e-learning exercise in the form of data and laptops to lecturers and students. With data and internet connectivity challenges for both lecturers and students, it became clear that e-learning was best suited for the teaching and learning of theory rather than practical theatre work.

Teaching and learning of practical theatre courses requires that students rehearse and perform or design. This process requires that performers (students) interact with each other in the same space and time without limit or restrictions. In essence, LSU's performance training is modelled on an Ndebele (African) storytelling and communal performance narrative anchored on familial values. These values demand a lot of physical (bodily) interaction which is outlawed under the COVID-19 prevention guidelines. As a response to this challenge, we thought of asking our students to record solo performances at their homes as part of their practical. The recorded videos would be sent to the class WhatsApp group for discussions and feedback. Although students did not object to this, it became clear that the resources available to the students would not make this possible. To this end, we focused on teaching and building in-depth understanding of the Theatre and Performance theory.

The teaching of Stanislavski's method approach using audio recordings over WhatsApp without practicalising them was also challenging. To beef up the strategy and approach, we directed students to You Tube where they could find recorded material from around the world that would provide the practical perspective of the recorded audios. While some managed to access these videos and used them for their rehearsal processes some failed due to high costs of data and internet connectivity. Those students that did not have data received video files from those who had managed to download. Yet, most students got bogged down on trying to visualise their movements and actions as they tried to replicate exactly what they had watched in the videos. To this end, the students' acting became mechanical instead of the Stanislavskian 'inside-out' approach. With the benefit of hindsight, we observed that although we considered referring our students to YouTube channels, for students who are not Theatre and Performance majors this was asking too much of them.

The LSU's Department of Languages' Bachelor of Arts in Language and Communication Studies offers a few performance

related courses which students take up as electives. Students with interest in theatre studies take up Theatre and Performance or Applied Theatre at Level II, Arts and Cultural Industries or Scriptwriting at Fourth Level. Some of these students are integrated into the Drama and Dance Club where their performance skills are further nurtured. However, it can be noted that these students are not fully grounded in either practice or theory and performance praxis as they would have only taken a minimum of two or maximum of four performance related courses at graduation. Thus, referring these students to self-teach using YouTube videos was, in hindsight, not the best approach to take. The Department of Languages has since introduced a Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree in Theatre, Performance and Media Technologies, which should attend to the lack of grounding in theory, practice and praxis. However, there is still need to develop a practicable teaching and learning approach if the programme is to be successfully rolled out under the restrictive COVID-19 landscape.

As the lockdown was eased and Zimbabwe moved to Lockdown Level Two, LSU welcomed back students on campus. The university adopted a prioritisation approach allowing only final year classes and those with practical courses to return to campus. The theatre classes were part of this group that was prioritised. The return of theatre students to campus meant that the students could now resume work on their theatre projects albeit under restrictive regulations. These restrictions related to social distancing, limit of group gatherings and a ban on physical contact. Within the theatre section, we had to negotiate these restrictions during rehearsal and performances, together with students, on a moment-by-moment basis, repeatedly taking action and reflecting on the action.

REHEARSAL ROOM BASED INTERVENTIONS

Rehearsals, audience management and performance formed part of the continuous assessment process for the Theatre and Performance and Arts and Cultural Industries courses. There was need for these creative processes to be undertaken in the most responsible way under the 'new normal'. One of the strategies that we employed during rehearsals was splitting the students into smaller groups of three each guided by the scenes that were being rehearsed. This enabled the

observance of social distancing made possible by the lecturer who split the classes into smaller groups comprising of three people at maximum. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we ordinarily worked with students as a whole class, only breaking into smaller groups when the need arose. The splitting of students into smaller groups worked well for the Arts and Cultural Industries class where the students were working on their applied theatre projects in different areas such as Drama in Education, Theatre in Education, and Forum Theatre. This was made easier by the fact that the students were already in smaller groups of fives working with different groupings in the university community.

However, this strategy did not work for the Theatre and Performance class that was working on Tsitsi Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*. Before the COVID-19 induced abrupt closure of the university, the students had been given the script, been cast, and completed their script analysis and blocking. The splitting of the class into smaller groups would have meant that we had to re-cast and restart the whole creative process again. Pressed for time as well since the university had allocated only two weeks for the completion of teaching and learning including cumulatively marked practical examinations, it became clear that with a lack of in-depth theoretical and practical skills by students it would be very difficult to rehearse and perform in two weeks. This was also complicated by the fact that the script has 15 characters some of which could not be double casted. Although there was a possibility of double-casting, the integrated quality of the script and characters made it very difficult to do so. As a result, we would have ended up with 15 actors on the stage, which was in conflict with the institutional and state regulations on social distancing.

We then decided, in consultation with the students, to completely cancel the staging of the play and assign students audition monologue pieces that were presented at the beginning of the second week of their return to campus. The students were struggling with their blocking, dialogue, adhering to social distancing, and expressing the psychological and emotional relations with co-actors. This meant that students would no longer need to work in groups but could use the constructive feedback from their classmates during daily rehearsals. These solo performances, which adopted a variety of forms such as songs, poetry, dance and monologues, were performed in-line with the

guidelines of the 'new normal'. Although these solo performances fell short of the objective of the Theatre and Performance course that demands students to perform a full length play, it offered students a practical experience of live performance under the 'new normal'. Manoeuvring past the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic requires that both theatre lecturers and students be adaptive, creative, reflexive and flexible. While some teaching and learning strategies might work, others may prove not to work but flexibility and reflexive actions will position both the lecturer and students to respond better.

PERFORMING TO SOCIALLY DISTANCED AUDIENCES

In African performance, just like other paradigms of performance, the audience or Boalian spect-actor play a fundamental role in the framing, interpretation, and reception of a live performance. These spect-actors in most instances become part of the scenographic architecture of the performances, sometimes defining the performance space and sometimes becoming part of the performance space (Sibanda, 2018). For applied theatre contexts, the spect-actor is pivotal for the intervention to take place and navigate towards social change and transformation. Jerzy Grotowski (1968) is very clear about the need for the audience when he argues that theatre can exist without fancy make up and costumes, detailed sets and properties—but it cannot exist without the live communion between the actor and the audience. The spect-actor question was one we had to contend with.

For the Theatre and Performance class we initially planned to allow the students to perform in an empty auditorium since gatherings of more than 50 people were outlawed by the institution and the state. As rehearsals progressed and students rehearsed in their private residencies, this idea seemed to work until one student, who had had an experience of performing in a purpose-built theatre space to an audience protested against it. Like Thespis of the Greek, who stepped out of the chorus and assumed a distinct role of an actor, this student argued against the idea of performing without an audience calling it a 'dry' experience that killed the theatricality of (African) performances. Another fellow student concurred, observing that the "restriction on gatherings resulted in a few people on campus during those days we

performed. This is demotivating because theatre is meant for an audience...its boring to perform to a few people” (personal interview Yolanda Moyo, 29th October 2020).

Following on a Grotowskian perspective that the audience is central to a theatrical event, the performers pointed out that their need for the presence of an audience was premised on them as first time performers to experience a complete theatrical experience. With the exception of this student who demonstrated against the idea of performing in an empty space, most of the students had never performed except in high school sketches and child’s play. They also demanded for an audience because they wanted to get feedback from their peers during the post-performance discussions. As first time performers, some of the students also argued that they needed their friends as part of the audience for emotional, psychological support and solidarity. Generally all the students were in agreement that for a rich theatrical experience to take place there is a need for an audience as reflected in Shadreck J. Ndlovu’s submission that:

kuyabhowa ukuperformela abantu abayi three (3) [Its boring to perform for three people]. It’s like there is no one in the audience. Sometimes it demotivates your dream as an artist – you no longer see your artistic future bright...On the other hand kungcono ukubona umngane wakho [it’s better to see your friend] in the audience, it motivates you. (personal interview, 29th October 2020)

As a consequence, we toiled with the idea of allowing class mates to watch their class mate’s performances and become the audience that students asked for. This idea was discarded as the students felt they needed an audience consisting of people who had not watched their solo performances for feedback. This reliance on an audience not conversant with the demands of theatre and performance for critical feedback meant to improve professional development characterises most Zimbabwean universities offering theatre and performance training. Although it transposes performance from a ‘passive’ audience to a carnivalesque atmosphere with call and response, whistles and shout-out encouraging the performer, the critical feedback value is usually lost. As such, the concept of audience in university performances needs to be further investigated and engaged so that it is beneficial both for the practice and the trainee performer. Yet,

students argued that the very presence of an audience inspires the actor to feel his/ her part and motivates one to his/ her best. We thus agreed with the students to allow them to invite a specific number who will join the lecturers' invited experienced actors. We had invited these experienced actors to give professional feedback to the students. Due to time limitations we only allowed the professionals to give feedback to the performers.

For the Arts and Cultural Industries course, we decided to undertake contained experiments with both the 'performers' and spectators. The different groups in this class were working on applied theatre projects that required Boalian spect-actors and not an "audience" in the strict sense of the word. We therefore decided that other class members will be the spect-actors when they are not 'performing' their intervention. This arrangement worked, from the perspective of integrating the spectators and adhering to the COVID-19 institutional preventive regulations, because these spect-actors were aware of the kind of environment that was needed for the successful 'acting out' of the interventions. In this scenario where the COVID-19 pandemic induced restrictions affected even the process, the managed experiment approach proved effective. It could be the best available approach for applied theatre projects provided they deal with localised issues and challenges.

Yet challenges arose because of this approach. Applied theatre is a term that refers to a conglomerate of different strands such as Theatre for Development, Drama-in-Education, and forum theatre among others. Christopher Odhiambo (2004, p. 6) observes that Theatre-for-Development is a performance by the people, about the people, for the people with the people. Sibanda and Gwaba (2017) argue that these inter- and intra-relationships are important as they help the community to be self-critical and develop consciousness. To this end, these relationships must be allowed to play in the open, and solutions developed out of the engagement with the entanglements towards social change. The community should not be relegated into a bystander in performances that engage and explore their socio-cultural and political situations as in the case of the Arts and Cultural Industries interventions. This transforms these social change interventions into entertaining public spectacles.

CONCLUSION

As we write this paper, these theatre classes that we discussed in this research have completed both their practical and theory examinations. For Zimbabwean universities to continue to run Theatre and Performance degree programmes under the 'new normal', there is need for tough and difficult choices that university management, lecturers, and students must take. One critical area is the development of innovative approaches and ways of teaching practical programmes and courses during and post-COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of performance practice, staged readings are gaining momentum within the semi-professional Zimbabwean theatre industry. The adoption of staged readings as part of the university theatre training and performance repertoire could provide a possible and feasible social distancing mechanism. This could have been a solution for the challenges that we faced with the Theatre and Performance class. As higher and tertiary institutions prepare for the September-December 2020 semester, there is need for collaboration and note sharing regarding teaching and learning. Although e-learning provides a sustainable teaching and learning platform during and post-COVID-19 pandemic, innovative strategies need to be developed if performing arts and visual studies are to remain relevant in the academy. It remains unclear for how long the COVID-19 pandemic is going to stick with us but what is crystal clear and very important now than ever is that theatre practitioners, lecturers and students must make difficult choices and pathways informed by their contexts, desired outcomes, and cultural spaces to remain relevant.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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