

Teaching Research-based Theatre Online: A Narrative of Practice

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ABSTRACT

For the last twelve years, students at the University of British Columbia could take a course in Research-based Theatre, a research methodology that transforms data into dramatic performances. Previously, this course has only ever been conducted in-person, but due to COVID-19, the course was offered online for the first time. This narrative of practice explores the authors' experience of translating the course into a virtual form. Throughout their experience of teaching Research-based Theatre over Zoom, the authors returned to fundamental questions: What teaching practices endure in the online Research-based Theatre classroom, and what new ways practices were fostered through our emerging partnership with technology?

RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE: A PROLOGUE

Research-based theatre

Three words, including a hyphen

So, two words

Research-based—meaning based on a systematic, formal research project

Theatre—using an embodied, aesthetic approach to share knowledge

Definitions can be limiting,

Because to do their task, they define rather than open up

Research-based theatre opens up possibilities

In the intersection of research and theatre new meanings emerge

New ways of understanding unfold.

Embodying research awakens the senses

Forces us to see, listen and feel differently

Dwell and consider more intimately,

Simultaneously, more broadly

Dramatizing data translates and extends research

It uncovers and untangles

Reveals and relishes

Zooms and focuses

Breathing life into research

Research-based theatre

Three words

No, two words

Two worlds...merging

Into one

A GRADUATE-LEVEL RESEARCH-BASED THEATRE COURSE

Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things."

"I dare say you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*

For the last twelve years, students at the University of British Columbia (UBC) could take a course in Research-based Theatre (RbT) as an elective within their master's or doctoral programs. RbT transforms data into dramatic performance. An innovative research methodology (Belliveau & Lea, 2016), RbT's central aims are to present an embodied approach to data analysis, and to find engaging ways to share research. RbT is one of many terms that may be used to refer to a process of inquiry that incorporates elements of theatre creation and performance (Saldana, 2011); other names include research-informed theatre (Goldstein, 2011; Gray et al., 2015), ethnotheatre (Saldana, 2011; Salvatore, 2018), and verbatim theatre (Baer et al., 2019). Through compelling dramatizations, RbT effectively answers the question, "Why should I care?" sparking moments of "Yes, I get it!"

The experiential RbT course at UBC introduces students to ways research can be generated, analyzed, and eventually performed, using theatre-based approaches. Students learn the pedagogy and methodology through a collective hands-on experience. The assigned theoretical readings and literature in the field come to life through the in-class lab portions of the course. A major assignment for the course asks students to create a monologue of a pivotal learning experience from their lives. In the process, they develop the skills to write and perform their story.

Most students in the course have no theatre background. Typically, they work as teachers and have an interest in the arts. As such, a goal in the lab portion of the course is to awaken their artistic identities. The desks are moved aside, and the classroom space is transformed into a studio environment where the text is explored through movement, sound, and improvisation. Pair and small group work are critical for experimentation and feedback. As the monologues

develop, students are formed into clusters of 3-4 to create a collective story where their emerging narratives of personal learning moments intersect with one another. This weaving of stories often develops through the use of tableaux, chorus, and the common use of props or settings. The final stage is to connect all the clusters to share the collective story of the class. This métissage is made possible through carefully scaffolded weekly drama-based activities that build cohesion within the group.

But how does one do this through Zoom? Like many universities, in the spring of 2020, UBC suspended all on-campus activities due to COVID-19. We considered cancelling the course. However, we chose to proceed as arts-based research (Leavy, 2009) courses are still rare at UBC, and we did not want students to miss the opportunity to learn about RbT.

Educators, artists, and researchers have explored bringing technology into drama education settings (Hatton & Nicholls, 2018; Schrum, 1999; Vickers, 2020), and utilizing digital technology in theatre creation and performance (Davis, 2012; Owen, 2014; Way, 2017). Schrum (1999) observes that while “theatre has always used cutting edge technology of the time to enhance the ‘spectacle’ of productions” (p. 66), drama teachers may “avoid the use of the computer... because of its so-called ‘distancing effect’” (p. 66). Davis (2012) suggests that debates around digital theatre often position traditional live theatre performances in opposition to those in which liveness is mediated by technology, for example, when audience members attend a performance online. Digitally-mediated theatre is often viewed as somehow less-than-live or less connected. Davis (2012) and Way (2017) both argue against this binary argument of live versus mediated. Davis (2012) writes:

When working with mediating technologies, feedback channels may be more restricted and may or may not occur synchronously. The lone chat room attendee or the forum poster who receives no response feels keenly the absence of the presence of others. The feedback loop in these cases is not complete. However, when feedback is received and responded to in real time (or something close to it) a sense of liveness and immediacy may be achieved even when participants are not co-present. (p. 510)

Burnett et al. (2019) divide the literature on theatre integrating digital technology into three broad categories: (1) technology used to enrich the live experience, (2) technology used to transmit a piece to a wider audience, and (3) theatre created entirely in a digital space. Burnett and colleagues propose viewing technology as a fellow collaborator influencing the participatory theatre creation process, rather than merely a mediating technology.

In the following narrative of practice, we (Tetsuro and Chris co-led the course, and George advised) interweave our reflections from offering an RbT course online, exploring RbT solely in a digital space. As artist-scholars, none of us had experience developing theatre entirely in an online environment. Without question, we knew the digital environment would fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Would the same *métissage*, scaffolded drama-based activities, and community building among students be possible through the screen? How could we overcome the ‘distancing effect’ when learning at a distance was the only option? As Gallagher et al. (2020) write in their reflection on research and teaching in secondary drama classrooms during COVID, “the challenge...for drama educators, is how to establish a sense of intimacy in their now exclusively-online pedagogical work” (p. 641). In reflecting on our online RbT teaching experiences, we draw on questions for digital theatre education inspired by Burnett et al. (2019): What teaching practices endure in the online RbT classroom, and what new ways practices were fostered through our emerging partnership with technology?

USERNAMES AND PASSWORDS: LOGGING-IN TO ONLINE THEATRE EDUCATION

We logged in certain that we would fall flat on our faces over the next few hours as we tried to recreate the experience of an RbT course online. But we decided to approach our first class as if we were beginning a collective creation process. Bringing knowledge gathered from George’s previous twelve years of teaching the course in-person, we admitted students from the Zoom waiting room, not knowing what shape the class would take. As is often the case with enrollment in this course, all students were in the Faculty of Education, and all had teaching experience. Some students had previous experience creating

theatre, but most had never taken a theatre course before. One or two admitted that they enrolled because it was the only course they could find with space left. We were honest as well, sharing with the students that this digital classroom environment was entirely new for us.

For our first warm-up, we invited the 12 students to move back from their computer and stand. We emphasized to the students that they had the right to pass or tailor the exercises to work in their particular setting. For example, they might continue to sit or participate with their video off. We began by passing the energy, an umbrella term for various exercises facilitating embodied contact between participants. Rather than standing in a circle in a classroom, students were standing in their homes, calling a person's name on their screen as they threw energy at them with a gesture. After a few minutes of stumbling through the exercise, the students were laughing and smiling. In the midst of this first warm-up activity, glimmers of what this course could offer were apparent—an alternative to a semester of disembodied heads. Rather than technology creating a 'distancing effect', this warm-up exercise suggested perhaps the connections that are lacking for many of us while quarantining could be supplemented by these online activities that invite us to use our bodies and imaginations.

COLLABORATIVELY CREATING A DIGITAL CLASSROOM SPACE WITH STUDENTS

Throughout the course, students shared their knowledge of Zoom and other digital platforms so we could run the online class more effectively, collaboratively constructing the digital classroom space with us, helping to expand the boundaries of what our RbT class could be, the equivalent of pushing the desks aside in a physical classroom. We clearly did not have all the answers. Our willingness to collaborate with the students and to approach the new technology with an attitude of "No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett, 1989, p. 101) modelled the approach we hoped the students would bring to their exploration of RbT.

Trying again was also present in our attempts to increase unstructured student interaction. In one of our early classes, we called our regularly scheduled 15-minute break. In an instant, the mic symbols went red, and the live video feeds turned black, leaving white

block letters spelling names, or maybe a photo, where students' faces used to be. We were about to turn our video and audio off too, when we realized that one student was still there, trying to get our attention. In an in-person class, students might walk up to ask the instructor questions during a break or turn to their neighbour to socialize. These interactions were missing in our online environment. After the break, we encouraged students to keep their video or audio live during class breaks if they felt like socializing with their classmates, but this rarely happened. A few weeks later, when we first assigned students to breakout rooms for a substantial amount of time—over half an hour—students requested more frequent breakout room use, lasting long enough to work on the exercise we were exploring, with time leftover to connect on topics in the class more generally and their experiences of online learning. The breakout rooms allowed students to have private conversations in smaller groups, without us present. By increasing the use of the breakout rooms, we were able to create more space for student interaction.

A (WI-FI) CONNECTION TO BODY, VOICE, IMAGINATION, AND COLLECTIVE PLAY: THE ONLINE THEATRE WARM-UP

We gestured to each other with digital hands. We messaged each other using WhatsApp, sent links of performances broadcast on YouTube, and shared our screens with each other over Zoom. We also began introducing theatre-based activities. In-person, we would start our exploration of theatre-based exercises slowly, gradually, adjusting to the level of experience in the classroom. The laddering of exercises emerges organically and looks different each time. The same alchemy occurred virtually but required explicit verbal discussion, in the form of regular check-ins to see if students had anything they wanted to express. Below we explore our online versions of traditional warm-up exercises.

Passing the Energy with a Name

Despite the online nature of the course and our initial doubts that theatre warm-ups would be successful, we found that simple alterations to standard warm-up exercises were effective. For any games that relied on making eye contact with one member of the

group—an impossibility over Zoom—speaking a person's name replaced eye contact effectively.

Standing in a Circle, Apart

In-person, many warm-up activities are done in a circle, something impossible over Zoom. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020) write that one of their significant challenges in creating process dramas over Zoom during the pandemic was the inability to gather in a circle and lack of eye contact with students. As an alternative, we tried a simple invitation, asking students to lift their arms and stretch them outwards. Something simple yet meaningful happened. As we stretched out our arms beyond the frame, our forearms disappeared, and we all became more or less connected by our upper arms, like a paper people chain. This alternative approach made visible the limitations of standing in a circle: you can't see everyone's faces, but over Zoom, you can. It also enabled us to realize that even when we are in the same room, we are *always* physically separate, but by using our imagination, we can become one. Looking around at the videos of outstretched arms offered a means for us to visualize group connectedness.

Solo Tableaux, Together

In the RbT course, we use *tableaux*. In-person, students usually portray specific situations in pairs and small groups using their bodies. Often it looks like a moment of modern dance choreography 'paused'. But how to do this separately? By simply prompting students with "A tableaux of what you're going to do after class," this allowed students to negotiate what space they had right in front of their screens. It also functioned as a warm-up exercise to explore and build students' autobiographical learning moment narratives. While doing tableaux in-person, those without actor training can feel uncomfortable as they navigate the awkwardness of invading personal space and asking permission to touch each other's bodies. Online, tableaux offered a safe and manageable means of physical exploration. Nonetheless, the online context fostered a new sense of risk for the students, as they were frozen alone.

Looking back, the adaptations of warm-up activities are not unusual. As educators, we adapt theatre-based exercises to our settings and participants—whether we are in a classroom space,

working with a community group, or making our classes accessible to students with diverse abilities. In all of these instances, and in an online setting, slight alterations allow for more versatile warm-up exercises.

A DIGITAL MÉTISSAGE: VIRTUAL GROUP WORK

The playwright Sarah Ruhl (2014) describes a fire-alarm going off during a performance of her *Passion Play*. As the alarm continued, the actors began performing the play on the steps of the church, their evacuated performance space, adapting the scenes and spontaneously creating sound effects, amid traffic noise and passersby. Ruhl writes that “often there are things for actors to hide behind—costumes changes, sound cues, pillars, beautifully painted drops, props, and the like. But on the steps...they had nothing but each other, the audience, and the story” (p. 98). Burnett et al. (2019) suggest integrating technology into theatre creations leads to new possibilities because it disrupts. But technology was not the only disruption we were dealing with during the course. In the time of COVID-19, alarms are going off the world over, forcing us out of regular routines, to wait on the steps of typical theatre practices. What will we create as we wait? What opportunities do these interruptions give us to abandon what we may hide behind?

For the online RbT course, we decided to continue with the main assignment from the in-person course: developing and sharing a story about a crucial learning moment, first individually and then in groups. Never have these one-person autobiographical narratives been performed so singularly alone. As students developed their monologues, we used Zoom’s function to randomly assign participants to breakout rooms, creating groups of 3-4. Students began designing a collective story in these breakout rooms where their learning moment narratives intersected. Even in groups, the students were performing together while apart.

One of the few limitations we placed on their performances was that they could not be pre-recorded; they had to be performed live. Students gathered costume pieces from whatever they could find in their closets, handmade props, experimented with digital backdrops, audio recorded family members, choreographed gestures, vocal

rounds, and choral moments. Unlike the cues and props that Ruhl refers to above, which may offer a hiding space, these truly made-from-hand-at-home theatrical explorations of personal narratives were testaments to the students' willingness to take risks. In our final class, we presented the group narratives as a single piece.

In theatre, it only takes a moment for the audience to suspend their disbelief. We see an actor 'driving' a car, and we believe it. This happens so effortlessly that it barely registers. However, as we learned, such moments can also happen over Zoom. During our final performances, the awkward interface of boxes on a screen disappeared, and we were drawn into stories that can never be repeated.

In a sense, such a moment is more significant than a suspension of disbelief. Rather, it is the reaffirmation of the belief in the uncanny power of theatre, and its capacity to move, despite the potentially alienating distance that technology imposes. Such moments also demonstrate the ability of a digital RbT course, even with liveness mediated by technology, to achieve moments of intimacy rivalling in-person delivery methods.

DISCUSSION: TEACHING RBT THROUGH THE ONLINE LOOKING-GLASS

When the RbT course concluded—all too quickly—we debriefed. There was much to celebrate, but underlying it all was the question, "What just happened?"

Now that we have had the distance of time, the unexpected success of our experience has led us to question some fundamental beliefs. For instance, why did we think this online course was bound to fail? Perhaps it is because we were holding on to an antiquated definition of theatre, in which the work must take place before a live audience. Part of the magic is that actors and audiences alike are all breathing the same air. Indeed, if you are seated in the first row, you can reach out and touch King Lear. Its intimacy is unrivalled. This definition of theatre falls within a live versus digitally-mediated binary (Davis, 2012).

This course allowed us to consider what an RbT class looks like with only one body in the room. In translating this course online, we become aware of the constraints of sharing physical space. For

anyone who has spent time in acting school, one quickly becomes aware why such training is for the fearless. The senses are assaulted with body odour, bad breath, sweat, and pheromones, on top of the distracting spectacle of bodies stretching and warming up. In art historical terms, drama programs are akin to the plunging depths wrought by the triumph of perspective, and dizzying verisimilitude of trompe l'oeil. Conversely, a grid of faces on Zoom is a flat Byzantine painting. In lieu of depth, it reflects glittering surfaces like a Klimt. Such a flat canvas feels like a much safer introduction to theatre-making. After all, what safer space is there than the comfort of your own home? And one must feel safe in order to be brave.

In his film, *Le Fantôme de la Liberté* (1974), Luis Buñuel depicts a fancy dinner party scene where the guests sit on toilets around a dinner table, conversing, smoking, reading, and occasionally retiring to a cramped room to eat in private. This surrealist scene makes visible the arbitrary nature of our cultural customs. In the same spirit, consider the following thought experiment. Imagine a world where technologically mediated communication has been normal for so long, even theatre is made this way. In fact, no other way is known, for no one is ever in the same room together. That is until a force majeure shuts down all forms of electronic connectivity, and people are (gasp!) forced to be together in the same space. Imagine a group of theatre artists bravely coming together for the first time, trying to figure out a way to move forward. At first, they sit in a row all facing the same direction, and then slowly, accidentally, they bump into others, make physical contact, shove, a kiss, an embrace, and at last, make eye contact.

There is only a vague sense that new ground is being broken. The theatre artists wonder to themselves, “Is it possible that there might be new aesthetic possibilities waiting to be discovered by doing theatre in person?” But the chorus of purists cry, “It’s just not the same, look how limited the number of people who can attend! Now we’re being elitist and undemocratic. We’re going to sit this out and wait for connectivity to resume no matter how long it takes.”

Beyond pandemics, if in-person work is necessary for theatre learning and creation, accessibility remains a central issue. What are alternatives for those individuals who cannot access theatre education and exploration spaces?

The RbT course makes an explicit promise to students: there is

space to explore personal narratives in the assignments, and we will learn about theatrical tools for expressing them. Implicitly, there is another: we will create a sense of family, a safe space where the risk of sharing the private is possible. That such promises were still deliverable over Zoom is a hopeful discovery and suggests that even after COVID-19, there is potential and possibility in exploring theatre and RbT education in an online form.

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