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Lessons learnt from teaching an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy online in a digitally divided South Africa

Abstract

An Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy is rooted in principles of embodiment, participation and collaboration, praxis and immersion in social contexts. Over the past fourteen years, the Drama for Life department at the University of the Witwatersrand prioritised the implementation of an Applied Drama and Theatre teaching and learning practice that is premised on our bodies operating within social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the experiential pedagogy is reliant on physical presence and human contact for the purposes of reflection, transformation and education. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, this complex pedagogy faced a threat. How can we migrate an Applied Drama and Theatre curriculum to online learning platforms? Can we fully honour its pedagogical objectives remotely? The study explored how Applied Drama and Theatre educators re-envisioned and implemented strategies to maintain the integrity of the embodied pedagogy as it moved online. These collective approaches transpired amidst a disruptive digital divide within a South African context, which impacted connectivity, access and the hopes of a synchronous learning experience. From 2020 to 2021, the ethnographic study tracked and observed Drama for Life and its Applied Drama and Theatre educators as they; 1) responded to the pandemic and identified its threats to the pedagogy; 2) through processes of experimentation, transitioned the curriculum to online learning platforms; and 3) reflected on their discoveries, challenges and interim solutions throughout the journey. The study found (based on literature and data) that the pandemic provided higher education institutions and practitioners with an opportunity for directed change. Central to the collective strategies remained student centredness and pedagogical alignment. Although certain aspects of the Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy have undeniably been compromised online, the study demonstrated that with increased efforts to bridge the digital divide, the strategies can be navigated continually with a carefully negotiated balance.

Keywords: Applied Drama and Theatre; COVID-19; digital divide; education; online learning; pedagogy



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1. Introduction and Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of education forever. While it undeniably caused unprecedented disruptions, it fostered a rapid progression in the lagging approaches to the digitising force of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As tertiary institution-based educators, initial feelings of anxiety and fear crept in. Adotey (2020) comments that the pandemic exposed the under-preparedness of higher education institutions in Africa at large to migrate to online platforms. Particularly within a South African context with inherent post-Apartheid inequalities, lack of educator and student training, and the realities of the digital divide (amongst many other factors) our anxieties were valid. However, they could not overshadow the opportunities to innovate.

In 2020, I served as a teaching assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) Drama for Life department. Once the hard lockdown had been announced, we began to prepare for the Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning¹ (ERT&L) period. This included the attendance of online seminars for training to use platforms such as Zoom and MS Teams, as well as maximising our proficiencies with the existing, yet underutilised Learning Management System (LMS) *Sakai*. At this point, it was evident that the theoretical aspects of an Applied Drama and Theatre curriculum were compatible with these platforms. Crucial to the study was how we would negotiate the more practical and embodied constructs of the pedagogy online and remotely. I² wanted to establish how we as Drama for Life (and specifically its Applied Drama and Theatre) educators would honour the integrity of the complete pedagogy when the pandemic threatened its inherent need to connect. Furthermore, what impact would the digital divide have on our efforts to synchronicity and maintaining collective access remotely?

A characteristic Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy offered at Drama for Life, as described in their pre-COVID mandate, is informed by 1) a teaching practice that is not only methodologically embedded but also thrives in contexts which enrich the learning, study and experience; 2) integrating the curriculum across inward (staff and student body) and outward levels (community and stakeholders); and 3) documenting and sharing the role of fieldwork as part of the curriculum (Drama for Life, 2020a). Based on these descriptions, I deduced that the pedagogy's agenda promotes participatory and collaborative interactions, the learning is praxis based, and transformation and change happens when we are immersed in social contexts. These approaches are primarily achieved through embodiment and physical engagements.

The pandemic highlighted how crucial it was to address the inequalities that exist in South Africa (Graham, 2020). An undeniable obstacle to the ERT&L strategy was the digital divide and disparities in devices, connectivity and access. David Reiersgord (2020) explicates that central to online learning is the ability for students to access their content. However, "the current necessity for a shift towards online learning reminds us that although we live in the same country, we don't have the same resources" (Reiersgord, 2020: para. 3). For Applied Drama and Theatre educators the challenge was two-fold, because they had to 1) understand the intricacies of the pedagogy and appropriately manipulate them for online learning platforms, and 2) promote an equitable learning experience whilst acknowledging the limitations of the digital divide. The study investigated their collective strategies in migrating a rich pedagogy online and documented the lessons learnt during an unprecedented time.

1 A temporary shift of instructional delivery (face-to-face) to an alternative delivery mode (online or blended modes) as a response to crisis situations (Hodges *et al.*, 2020).

2 I will refer to myself (the researcher) in the first person. The study, however, is not auto-ethnographic, as I was predominantly observing the participants.

Judging by the inadequacies of the LMS, available online learning platforms, and the challenges of the digital divide, I deduced that the entire Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy would be compromised online; especially the aspects of participation and collaboration, praxis and immersion in social contexts, which are embodied and thrive on human contact.

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework serves to delineate participation and collaboration, praxis and immersion in social contexts as the core intentions of an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy related to the study.

Warren Nebe, founder of Drama for Life defines Applied Drama and Theatre as a “living pedagogy” which is mutually shared, negotiated and determined by all participants present in the education space (Nebe, 2022: 6). Aligning with the consensus by other practitioners that the pedagogy is a relational set of practices (Ackroyd, 2000; Freebody *et al.* 2018), Drama for Life (2021) rejects functional interpretations of the pedagogy that “reduce the field to a limited technical approach” and outlines that it carries many functions according to each context.

“Drama and theatre techniques can have remarkable educational, community-building and personality changing effects if they become accessible and tangible to participants and spectators” (Kovács, 2015: 399). When explored in various contexts, Applied Drama and Theatre processes (questioning, role enactment, play, and reflection) have the ability not only to effect change, but also address social issues concerning the specific group of people. Although there are clear distinctions and similarities between the two, Philip Taylor (2003) distinguishes that Applied Drama is processual by nature and employs Drama in Education (DIE) strategies to teach about issues, relationships or people, while Applied Theatre is powered by a strong sense of aesthetic education and is usually centred on presenting a final performative product to spectators – who also take part in the action. I refer to the two terms jointly as they are used in a flexible and interchangeable manner (Nicholson, 2005: 4).

An Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy is cognisant of its material conditions, the embodied presence of its participants as active agents in their educational trajectory, the role of the lecturer as the facilitator in compassionate self – and community-care, health and well-being... (Nebe, 2022: 16).

Central to Applied Drama and Theatre processes is the participant (within this context, the student) who through the curriculum is exposed to the critical pedagogy, in order to become a competent and skilled professional (Drama for Life, 2020b). This is achieved in the presence of a trained and qualified Applied Drama and Theatre facilitator or educator who, as stated by Prendergast and Saxton (2013), knows and is capable of employing drama and theatre tools and strategies. The educator’s role is to empower the student with essential competencies to undertake this interventional and socially transformative pedagogy and train them with the tools to manipulate each function to suit the diverse contexts and their specific needs.

Before the pandemic (in addition to the learning in class), students typically explored their curriculum through placements at various schools and community centres, attendance of and hosting Drama for Life-partnered conferences and festivals across the country, and participating and collaborating with stakeholders across the globe. Integral to these engagements are physically embedded and embodied strategies, which include warmups, icebreaker and thematic games, breathing and centring techniques, as well as roleplay or enactment (Guhrs, 2022: 110).

Applied Drama and Theatre is participatory and collaborative. Kees Epskamp (2006: 11 in Barnes, Beck Carter & Nebe, 2022), outlines that participation happens as 1) facilitators/educators and participants/students exchange ideas; 2) the content or subject matter directly relating to and impacting that group of people is discussed and reflected upon collaboratively; and 3) the problem-oriented themes are addressed through collective solution-making by the physically present parties. Freebody *et al.* (2018) argue that participation is a central tenet of practice in Applied Drama and Theatre and it interacts with our embodied histories, whilst simultaneously creating new potential ways of being. Therefore, in the educational practice, the educator guides students through collaborative and interactive processes of examining questions, themes or concerns within and through embodied self-expression (Alrutz, 2015). There is clear emphasis on shared learning that is involving and inclusive of all present bodies and this happens within a common setting. Now that the learning is remote, it is removed from the required shared space.

Praxis, according to Draper-Clarke is a “central ambition of Drama for Life curricula” (2022: 135). Praxis can be understood as the integration of theory and practice in the learning and then interrogating the results of this combination as a collective. Paolo Freire (1973) expands on this that praxis involves students reflecting and acting upon their world and practices. Therefore, a praxis-based approach to learning is facilitated by connecting the theoretical concepts of the pedagogy and expressing them practically whilst reflecting upon them in the presence of fellow participants. Draper-Clarke (2022: 135) highlights that the commitment by Applied Drama and Theatre educators to combine theory with experience, allows for the transformation of self and society. Gavin Bolton describes the result thereof as the student being “within the subject matter rather than outside it and their understanding remaining implicit rather than proportionally explicit” (1986: 158). Earlier, I alluded to the LMS’s design and capacity having the tendency to favour theoretical curricular content more. For an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy, the study found this imbalance problematic.

The immersive aspect of the pedagogy is two-fold. Firstly, cited in Prendergast & Saxton (2009), Thompson & Jackson (2006) explain that Applied Drama and Theatre is taken out of the conventional mainstream theatre spaces and into various non-traditional and marginalised community settings. These non-glamorous settings include schools, villages, prisons, hostels, parks, etc. (Lasisi, 2020). Through the manipulation of drama and theatre techniques, the immersion into marginalised communities, cognisant of the social, cultural and political constructs, promotes dialogue and fosters citizenship and agency.

Secondly, participants immerse themselves into fictional contexts. Building belief techniques such as story, play and use of props are carried out with the purpose of immersing participants in the roles of an imagined world (Wagner, 1999). From a dual perspective, enrolled participants negotiate their lived experiences with the situation in the fictional world to achieve the pedagogy’s solution-driven agenda. Ultimately, it is through these immersive encounters that concrete experience and transformation take place. The inability to physically immerse in various contexts and the distractions of the home environment to the stepping into the role in fictional contexts have compromised the purpose of this intention.

Finally, uninterrupted and undistracted physical connection remains a characteristic feature of an Applied Drama and Theatre’s encounter. Coetzee (2018) states that all dramatic and performative activities are acts of being grounded in the body and as such, Drama for Life (2021) emphasises that we “learn in, through and with the body”. The pedagogy is premised

on human interaction and this is translated through the exploration of participation and collaboration, praxis and immersion. Vettriano, Linds and Jindal-Snape (2017) motivate that reflection is also an embodied expression, hence participants make the necessary changes through feeling and not just thinking. Our entire bodies and senses are active agents in our practice. The above definitions indicate that in the absence of the shared space and human interaction, the experiential learning aspect of the pedagogy is rendered incomplete.

3. Literature Review

For the purpose of this article, this section is divided into two sub-sections. The literature covers the role of the digital divide and the complexities of migrating an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy online.

Andreas Schleicher (2020) comments that the overall response to the COVID-19 crisis motivated university institutions to undergo a process of creative adaptation by reinventing a digitised learning environment. Although universities did undergo these adaptive and re-designing processes, the transition was a struggle. Kupe and Wangenge-Ouma (2020) highlight that apart from inadequate infrastructure and limited expertise for ERT&L methods, the inability of institutions to provide devices and data posed a huge challenge to the digitisation process. The digital divide is complex. Muller and De Vasconcelos Aguiar (2022) express that it is multifaceted and includes numerous factors such as access, affordability, quality and relevance. An extension of these are areas that create digital inequalities such as security, interconnectivity and digital literacy. This shows that getting internet access is half the battle and institutions should not ignore related implications of the divide when confronting it.

Castells (2000: 269 in Graham, 2020) indicates that the fundamental digital divide is not measured by the connections to the internet, but by the consequences of both connection and lack thereof. Van Dijk (2020: 3) argues that the term 'digital' suggests that the divide is only a technical issue, "when, in fact, it is more of a social problem". Especially in terms of participation, the digital divide can include or exclude individuals from society in domains such as education, community and citizenship etc. (Van Dijk, 2020). Consequently, the lack of physical connection and the difficulties to sustain internet connections for virtual activities were a double blow to the pedagogy. Inclusion is a central agenda for reaching marginalized communities and if the digital divide is not managed, it continues to marginalise them further.

The immediate strategy to kickstart ERT&L by tertiary institutions across South Africa was by conducting surveys to evaluate the digital situation across the student and staff body. Premnath (2020) outlines that these surveys focused on the kinds of devices and compatibility to the LMS, as well as access to the internet and the level of connectivity. Cellular networks and telecommunication providers also contributed to the zero-rating³ of LMSs and some online educational resources. Nonetheless, Cloete (2020) criticises that online libraries such as JSTOR and Google Scholar were excluded from this provision. Moreover, for students without devices, the university made provision on a financial aid basis and they would have to replace them upon the loss or damage thereof. It is ironic, because these students might not afford to replace the devices anyway.

The Black Academic Caucus (2020) defends that these strategies have failed to interrogate the deeper issues surrounding students' circumstances such as a conducive

3 The data-free access to approved institutional portals and educational websites for students (Mzekandaba, 2020).

learning space and essential resources. As such, Steele (2020) confirms that students from low-income households with less internet access, living in cramped homes and with no food are at a disadvantage, compared to their privileged counterparts, who have a better learning experience. Protesting against these dynamics, a social media movement called #BoycottOnlineLearningUJ ensued, raising awareness on the holistic inequalities that were ignored (Molosankwe, 2020). In response to this, #NeverStopLearning was a call for the government to consider feasible and equitable strategies that forge productivity, while saving the academic year (Makwakwa, 2020).

World Bank Group Education (2020) acknowledges that much of what happens in physical classrooms cannot easily be translated online and therefore, educators need to consider carefully what content, pacing and interactional models can be adapted for the transition. Although teaching remotely was foreign to Drama for Life, we took full advantage of the opportunity. Sicre (2020) admits that unlike business, math and science majors, going online would be challenging for drama and theatre-based practitioners, but it can be done. Bridging the divide requires a multi-faceted approach that is contextually conscious and promotes an optimal learning experience for all.

Prendergast and Saxton (2009) highlight that Applied Drama and Theatre predominantly takes place in non-traditional settings and it can be taken to any space or site for the benefit of the targeted community group. As such, this implies that the online or remote space fits into the classification of non-traditional and it is simultaneously capable of connecting people from more than one site. Janse van Vuuren and Freisleben (2020) demonstrate this through an Applied Improvisation process where students across the world interacted and collaborated in the virtual space. Educators are encouraged to produce and design exceptional experiences from a variety of multi-modal digital technologies for students to engage with in fostering collaboration and participation across their screens (D'Mello, 2020). However, if the mediating agent – connectivity – is not resolved, then the pedagogy cannot reach all of its participants in meaningful ways.

Due to the data demands, asynchronous learning was found to be the most viable option – even with its drawbacks. Besides, physical contact cannot be achieved online and there is an immensely disconnecting effect when working in isolation. Addressing these dynamics, Janse van Vuuren and Freisleben (2020) advise that flexibility is key and even though students cannot touch one another or engage spatially, they can access other aspects of one another that are available in online rooms. Sajnani (2020) recommends that educators return to the very games and exercises that were established in contact to the online space in order to negotiate this lost connection. By using WhatsApp voice notes, students can lead one another into physical warmups and exercises and although they are engaged with individually, there is a feeling of collective exploration. Song, Rice and Oh (2019) confirm that online learning can be as effective as face-to-face courses, as long as students are provided with well-designed interaction activities.

Some elements of process drama (a DIE strategy) that are related to simulation or interactive narrative experiences can be merged online through Virtual Reality (VR) technologies. However, there are drawbacks to such interface, technical and social communication issues (El-Nasr, Vasilakos, & Robinson, 2008). Arguably, VR technologies are too expensive within our educational context and they relinquish any ability to imagine and create – which is what the pedagogy's fictional context relies on. Alternatively, Sajnani (2020) suggests that educators

use story and students prepare costumes for enrolment to enhance their imaginations and belief into the fictional world. Although Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020) admit that they were greatly constrained online, they affirm working in roles, showing character objects on screen and using Teacher-in-Role for functioning powerfully in their attempts at Zoom-based process drama during COVID-19.

Ultimately, drama and theatre is concerned with the making of things perceptible by and through the senses (Prendergast & Saxton, 2013: 2). As such, Adam Habib, ex-Vice-Chancellor of Wits concedes that such degrees will still require face-to-face learning (*The South African*, 2020). It must also be explicitly stated that we cannot paint all pedagogies at an institution with the same brush. Whether in combination or returning fully to campus, Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy cannot do without its quintessential need to interact and assemble in physically present bodies. The navigation of the online space should remain equalised, or we should consider a mix of equitable and accessible approaches for each pedagogical function.

4. Research Methods and Design

The study was conducted in the ethnographic qualitative case study research tradition. From 2020 to 2021, as the researcher, I observed Drama for Life and its five Applied Drama and Theatre educators through participant observation, field notes and documentation.

Drama for Life was selected as a case study due to its pioneering of a richly historical and internationally recognisable offering of the Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy. The research focused on the department at large and its approaches to the pedagogy (pre-pandemic) and specifically observed its Applied Drama and Theatre educators who delivered the curriculum under unprecedented circumstances. As the pandemic unfolded, I began to undertake preliminary research through journaling, and relevant reflections made as teaching assistant (and then ethnographer) were included as data. Wee (2011) appropriates case study for educational institutions as it attempts to understand the complex instructional approaches and student-educator interactions in an open and flexible manner. The details and discoveries recorded in the journal became the melting pot of the study.

The study drew on ethnographic methods, in parallel to 'classroom ethnography', which "can be viewed as a matter of foregrounding the classroom and back-grounding the broader contexts" (Bloome, 2012: 10). Consequently, the classroom was redefined by the inability to be in the physical classroom. Brodkey (1987) states that ethnography is the study of lived experience and the context (settings/environments) cannot be separated from the participants. Williams (2018) describes the role of an ethnographer as 'getting under the skin' of the problem in order to understand it and Reeves, Kuper and Hodges (2008) conclude that ethnography is a cyclic process that requires of the ethnographer to begin with a panoramic view and then close in on the finer details. As teaching assistant (doer) negotiating the role of ethnographer (observer), the process demanded reflexivity.

The research tools employed were participant observation and field notes, semi-structured interviews and documentation. I observed the department and their five Applied Drama and Theatre educators throughout the 2020 and 2021 academic years. I am not included as a participant in the study even though I was part of the teaching cohort in 2020. I gathered notes from WhatsApp teaching staff group chats, captured related conversations on Zoom meetings and recorded overall reactions and key developments throughout the data collection period.

The field notes also included my personal reflections recorded in the research journal. Three of the five semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually and the other two participants opted to respond via Google link questions. Kakilla (2021) indicates that researchers are susceptible to rely on technology-based data collection for critical qualitative research because of the effects of the pandemic on gatherings, travel and contact. Finally, I relied on documents such as institutional communiques, departmental notices and relevant media articles. These aided in tracking significant progress and changes throughout the crucial pandemic years.

Caulfield (2022) writes that thematic analysis is a good approach not only to find out one's participants' views, experiences and knowledge but the flexibility in interpreting the data allows one to sort it out into one's research questions as well. The research question related to this article is: *How did the Applied Drama and Theatre educators set about honouring the core mandate and intentions of an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy (especially amidst the challenges of the digital divide) during the move to online learning platforms?* The thematically analysed data present 1) managing the digital divide, and 2) migrating the pedagogy online.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the Wits Ethics Committee for Non-Medical Research in Human Participants with protocol number H20/11/43. The ethical permissions covered all research steps mentioned in the article. Participants are not named or gendered and are referred to as Participant A-E, although their anonymity could not be guaranteed.

5. Findings and Discussion

The study endeavoured to establish the strategies that Drama for Life and its five Applied Drama and Theatre educators employed in navigating participation and collaboration, praxis and immersion in social contexts amidst the prevalent and disruptive digital divide.

5.1 Managing the digital divide

Following the announcement of the hard lockdown, Wits and Drama for Life assessed the digital affordances of students and staff by circulating online surveys. Once devices and data provisions were somewhat finalised, ERT&L commenced. Naturally, the digital divide was an apparent issue and its interlinking factors became increasingly exposed. Nonetheless, the main priority was to save the academic year. Managing the divide was not only about the provision of data, but remaining platform conscious.

In 2020, Wits University emphasised that the primary learning platform would be their LMS *Sakai* and as such, staff were trained to use it effectively and its data-free mode was activated. However, the findings revealed that students were resistant to it due to device incompatibility and functionality issues. In fact, when asking the participants to name the least effective online learning platform in 2020, *Sakai* was included. In 2021, *Ulwazi* was introduced and Wits vowed it to be more effective and functional than its predecessor, *Sakai* (Wilson, 2021). Confirming this, Participant C stated that it was more user friendly and Participant E appreciated its "one-stop-office" features.

Central to the Applied Drama and Theatre's pedagogical endeavour is the advocacy of social justice and agency. Then where is the justice in an unequal learning situation? Even though Phakeng, Habib and Kupe (2020) emphasise that students should take agency in their learning by being vocal about their digital challenges, the findings of the study reported that some students were unable to take agency in their learning, regardless of being supplied with data and devices. Consequently, their learning experiences were dissimilar to their more economically and digitally resourced peers.

The data also exposed that in the early stages of lockdown, some students relied on phone calls and emails to be reached due to data demands. Thus, findings specify that a multiple platform approach was most practical for managing the digital divide. Participant D found that using platforms in a “unidirectional manner” yielded better student engagement and added that “WhatsApp was extremely effective for full classes and students could send voice notes, images and videos of their work and respond to one another”. Zoom was mostly used for practical assessments and Drama for Life had to subsidise their students with additional data. Due to data-saving measures and lack of frequent connectivity, some students could only engage with content or participate in lesson activities in the evenings – robbing them of a collective learning experience.

Even though the attempts to mitigate the digital divide allowed ERT&L to progress, they were inadequate and the pedagogy suffered immensely. Participant A reflects that the biggest challenge of the digital divide is the inability to be synchronous. Due to data constraints, disruptive home environments, connectivity issues and unequal access to resources, students were unable to assemble virtually at once and this had a negative impact on their overall academic endeavour. ERT&L produced an individualised and fragmented approach to learning and destabilised the sense of community that could be achieved in person. The emergent data deduced that online learning replicated a passive banking system – which an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy opposes. The failure to address the digital divide adequately compromised the learning experience and the pedagogy’s commitments to equalised participation.

5.2 Migrating the pedagogy online

5.2.1 Participation and collaboration

The participants described a pre-COVID contact class in which students play and interact through bodily expressions and make embodied connections. However due to the pandemic, the loss of physical connection and embodiment in a collective learning space was significantly felt and the online lesson structure had to be distilled. Although concerns were prevalent; the participants shared an excitement for innovation and directed change. Wildman *et al.* (2021) reflect that the pandemic made it difficult to engage in teamwork-related activities. Still, in efforts to build solutions, Participant B responded,

So what I would do is ...4 I would specifically assign group tasks and peer teaching and learning, uhm opportunities. But they would have to do this outside the main WhatsApp group and then come back and give feedback to the rest of us.

Almost identically, Participant D commented that participation became more of a “show-and-tell” model where students would receive the stimulus of the day, complete the task and then return to the WhatsApp group to present to their peers through videos and images for review, reflection and response. A problematic analysis of this approach is that students may not respond as instantaneously and the process of downloading peer contributions would be time-consuming or even delayed. Encouraging a more consistent approach to collaboration, Participant E expressed their use of a “*chommie* (buddy) system” where in groups of three, students would account for one another by forming relationships and tackling group tasks together remotely. Due to data inconsistencies, the participant recalled some buddies “going off the grid” and negatively impacting their peers’ progress.

4 Ellipses between words are an indication of pauses in thought or speech.

Offering a more concrete example, Participant A described their Zoom-based Redemptive Theatre process,

Firstly, the facilitator shares a slide show and the enrolled storyteller presents the script for everyone to see. At any point of the process, participants can continue or shift the story by swapping with the storyteller. Throughout the process, participants respond through questioning and reflect on themes and perspectives collaboratively.

Similarly, Participant C designed a WhatsApp-based process drama encounter where in groups of four, students took up roles and explored a story. The story was shared via voice note in the group and all members had to listen simultaneously. Then the facilitator asked questions, the artist sketched the world and characters of the story and then, all participants had to bring the story to life through the role-actor, who used props and clothes from their home. This was all shared by sending pictures and videos on WhatsApp. Although these processes were effective for collaboration, both participants reported that not all students could be present for the entire duration of processes (due to data constraints) and this was disruptive.

Analysis reveals that participation was alienating because it was expressed from an individual perspective. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy foster collaboration by creating small groups in Zoom breakout rooms. However, it is difficult because they cannot not have an overview of “what is going on in the four corners of the room” (Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020: 3). Participant A confirms that the quality of participation and collaboration remained on a material level. Wanting to change this narrative, Participant D shifted their view of collaboration by promoting students’ voices through sharing quotes and texts from books they were reading in the form of group seminars. Nikos-Rose (2020) explains that even though Zoom breakout rooms can assist with interactivity, the challenge of the virtual chasm remains the same. Collaboration improved from mid-2021 when restrictions were eased and students could partially return to campus and access the learning spaces. This implies that the pedagogical and curricular objectives are highly dependent on physical presence and contact-based exploration.

5.2.2 Praxis

Bates (2021) challenges that teaching content-heavy lessons may feel like the easiest way to move the practical aspects of courses online, but it would clearly be detrimental to students if their technical skills were diminished. The data depict a battle faced by the participants as they fought to negotiate the balance between practice and theory and conclude that they resorted to simplifying the concepts. It begs the argument that simplifying or watering down concepts has the potential to weaken a potent pedagogy. I asked the participants, “What does praxis look like online?” Participant A described the process as follows,

... So I have translated some of the embodied practices into ... So I would do voice notes that take the students through a process. If they put the voice note on and follow what I say then they could go through a warmup exercise from where they were. Then they need to reflect on what that process did for them in the group chat.

Participant C acknowledged that praxis was not easy to achieve and through a process of trial and error attempted to apply some techniques to video, photography and art/drawing. Participant E chose to locate praxis from memory. Their group of students had travelled to an interventional site before lockdown and as such, the students drew from the memory of that experiential encounter to reflect upon and theorise the rest of their learning better. Also,

Participant B first gave students the theoretical underpinning; then, as mentioned above, left the practical parts to be explored individually and students would share it back online through various media. Participant D maintained that throughout this crucial period,

The questions became ... What is the effective practitioner skill set required from that method and then, uhm how can I simulate it online? The theory would be engaged in a similar way as before – whether its lecture notes or PowerPoint. It was consistent. Integrating the practice though was ... uhm ... we were limited and it became about what the students could design, write down, draw up and critique and review, off the page.

The data suggests that because students and educators could not consistently use Zoom, the practical aspects were difficult to engage with. As a result of being consumed by the complications of learning from home, Taylor's (2003) reflective aspect of praxis was "sacrificed" (Participant A). The findings shows that students were not fully present (in all senses of the word) and therefore, the reflexive lens of the pedagogy turned on itself (Draper-Clarke, 2022: 136). The findings deduced that educators found themselves relegating their primary roles of facilitator to those of counsellor or therapist at times. Progressively, even though there was no collective embodiment and the practice aspect was fragmented, Participant A applauded the pedagogical tool of story and symbol:

Yes, we became less embodied but we were far more verbal and story based. It's sadly more in the head than the body. We used symbol, asked people to interact with objects ... used hand gestures with their phone cameras. There are gives and takes but praxis still happened ... although it is less embodied and more story based.

Critical Reflexive Praxis is a Drama for Life course that is structured by storytelling and role-playing. Draper-Clarke (2022) validates stories for their effectiveness in communication and allowing students to reconstruct their identities through collective creation. Taking digital action is about adapting pedagogical tools appropriately (Matteo, 2020). This was a common lesson for all participants. Praxis was possible, but could not be expressed in the same ways or depth as in-person. Therefore, the findings concluded that due to the limitations of connectivity, the participants (in their teaching) treated theory and practice as separate entities. Attempts to integrate the two was marred by the reality of students learning in isolation and the act of reflection being overshadowed by their unfavourable learning circumstances.

5.2.3 Immersion in contexts

The data explicate that immersion is not only about the social and fictional contexts, but extend to students' immersion in the online space for the benefit of their learning. It further discussed that students could not go into schools or engage with communities and, due to the data inequalities and the overall nature of the pandemic, "there was no way to bridge that" (Participant D). All of the participants attested to not being able to provide students with field trips and placement opportunities in 2020 and 2021 and this was disadvantageous. Nonetheless, Participant D appreciated the pedagogical gift that was the first ever Zoom-based Conference and Festival, *Masidlale:5 Exploring Connection* in August 2020.

This partnership between Drama for Life and ASSITEJ⁶ not only fostered participation and collaboration, but Participant B pointed out that it gave students "a window into engaging with other voices in the Applied space and the larger community". I also journaled that as attendees, we immersed ourselves in the programme and engaged with the greater Applied

5 Meaning "let us play" in isiZulu.

6 A South African Performing Arts network organisation for artists, educators and institutions.

fraternity. Nonetheless, in the communal spirit of sparing bandwidth, cameras had to be switched off and microphones were muted.

Neiss (2020) fears that educators and students cannot receive emotion or bodily feedback when cameras are switched off. When the camera is off, one cannot fully immerse in the online space, because the participants resort to doing other things without fear of being seen. In the same breath, one cannot immerse into fictional contexts if their attention is divided and imagination is interrupted. The data also revealed that some students could only access their learning at nearby Wi-Fi hotspots or next door. Hence they could not tap into their imaginations as freely as those nestled in more conducive spaces.

Participant B stated that continued interactions with others in the online space are another way of immersing into the field as future practitioners. Participant E expressed that, after seeing the capabilities of Facebook for reaching greater community contexts at *Masidale*, students felt more encouraged to explore digitally immersive engagements. This suggests that within the student body or across year groups, students can take on the role of community for one another, or utilise the communities in their surrounding areas for their learning. Participant E found the latter difficult to manage in 2021, because educators would not be able to supervise their students' interventions in their different locations.

Evidently, this period was characterised by resilience and determination to on-board a nuanced curriculum to an unfamiliar learning space. Du Plessis *et al.* (2020) foreground that educators worked through sense-making and debriefing steps. As such, the findings deduced that certain platforms were more productive than others, but ultimately, returning to campus would be the most feasible option. The findings also outlined that the experimental nature of this period could not be boiled down to simply ticking off what was achieved, but rather considering the intricate details of the pedagogy and reflecting on the students' capacity to achieve the curricular objectives.

6. Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from the findings maintain that Drama for Life and its Applied Drama and Theatre educators took the "living pedagogy" and valiantly transformed it online (Nebe, 2022: 6). Through carefully considered processes of distillation, reflection and negotiation, the malleable pedagogy – even though not experienced to its full capacity – had its territory enlarged. The pandemic, albeit breeding chaos, birthed creativity and new paths were charted.

Did we honour the integrity of the entire pedagogy, online? No. But the migration of certain aspects was proven possible and there is evidence of directed change in our collective efforts. Amongst the many lessons and discoveries, it was interesting to witness that one strategy could work for one aspect and not the other, and some ERT&L successes of 2020 did not have the same effect in 2021 due to the evolving needs of the students and the deterring digital divide. Consequently, the severity of the digital divide has stripped us from examining the full might of our technological affordances as a country. Therefore, the study recommends that a blended approach with increased in-person activity may serve the teaching and learning of a progressive Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy optimally.

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