There and (not quite) back again: A theatre and performance instructional team’s journey through COVID-19 in Australia

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Abstract
This article details the journey of a Theatre and Performance team working in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using reflective practice informed by Social Constructivism, we addressed the dilemmas of building and shifting an online community of learners. Act One considers the unknown as we shifted online, and the new year gave way to a semester of developing solutions for teaching theatre in isolated learning environments. This focused on: peer-to-peer communication; group tasks in solo formats; and mechanisms for support. Act Two details the shift back into face-to-face collaborative learning environments focusing on artistic voice and flexible collaboration. How does one re-establish an ensemble while recognizing potential traumatic experiences? We developed effective pedagogical strategies in response to the crisis and pre-existing fault lines within a theatre curriculum. As the world recovers, we must recognize that the journey taken must inform future practice.

Keywords
Theatre pedagogy, reflective practice, Australian higher education, online learning communities, blended learning

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Prologue

Unprecedented. Uncertain. Disrupted. Distanced.

The language of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic was (and still is) inescapable. During lock-down periods we have been isolated, cut off from our communities and forced into sterile online interactions with colleagues, students, friends and family. On Friday 20 March 2020, Australia shut the international border and banned all non-residents and non-citizens from entering (Burke, 2020). On the same day the national government increased social distancing measures and closed non-essential services (ABC News, 2020). While each state and territory had slight variations in their rules and guidelines, most Australians were working from home and educational institutions shifted to online instruction.

The University of the Sunshine Coast in Queensland paused all classes for 1 week to give academic staff time to transition from face-to-face to technology-enabled learning and teaching. For the Theatre and Performance program this meant completely redesigning performative assessments into technology supported presentations. Together, students and teaching staff navigated these disruptions to assignment scaffolding, reconfigurations of assessment learning outcomes, and unavoidable integrations of new learning technology. Over the next few months, during the first phase of online teaching in Semester 1, the academic staff interrogated a key question: how can we build an online community in Theatre and Performance, that supports students and staff through a time of great disruption and uncertainty? The weekly workshops delivered on Zoom were the only interactions students had with each other and with their teachers. This learning environment was especially difficult for first-year undergraduate students, because they had only experienced 4 weeks of face-to-face learning before being isolated. They did not have an interpersonal history to rely on to carry them through this unprecedented time. In identifying these learning considerations, the teaching team’s efforts focused on managing and supporting the online community of undergraduate learners across our courses. After establishing pedagogical strategies to endure the initial shock to the learning environment, we then asked: how can we support this community during the height of the pandemic and shift this community back to face-to-face teaching when restrictions ease? We write this article to unpack the whirlwind of working in higher education in 2020; to examine the difficulties of teaching Theatre and Performance online; and to explore the dilemmas that occur when building, maintaining, and shifting an online community of learners during a global emergency.

When contemplating our teaching practices during 2020, the teaching team will review their teaching processes through reflective practice across selected courses in our curriculum. Our team’s journey began when we met for the first-time in January 2020, two new international hires and an established Australian faculty member who taught for several years at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Ten weeks later, we moved into technology-enabled learning and teaching due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and the things we took granted within a theatre curriculum’s structure were challenged by the new realities of higher education. Before the pandemic, we valued the on-site, experiential learning environments of the acting studio and the performance space. We accepted as a
truism that learning collaboration in the performing arts was best developed through in-person interactions across coursework, student projects, and public-facing productions. Finally, we believed that performances should not be created in isolation as, at the heart of theatre, the essential connection between performer and audience must be prioritised as an in-person endeavour. These professional values were reflected within the existing program structure, in-person courses driven by a combination of workshops, tutorials, and experiential learning intertwining theory, creative practice, and collaboration skills throughout the curriculum. First-year students transition from a practical acting course in Semester 1 to DRA102: Exploring 20th Century Theatre, a workshop-driven theatre history course in Semester 2. For students entering second year courses, DRA203: Physical Theatre and DRA206: Acting 2 – Contemporary Shakespeare, the curriculum focuses on intermediate acting skills developed in a performance studio environment and ensemble development resulting in university-facing studio performances during Semester 1. In the second semester of year 2, DRA204: Theatre Production and DRA202: Directing Performance – Contemporary Perspectives provide our students opportunities to collaborate on fully realized, outward-facing performances either as a performing artist within an ensemble of their peers mentored by the course’s teaching team (DRA 204) or as a community of student learners directing scenes as teams (DRA 202). Finally, our third-year students explore internships and interdisciplinary special projects during the first half of the academic year, and then complete their program coursework through the capstone course DRA301: Devising Performance, where they collaborate to create an original ensemble performance under mentorship of the course coordinator. In 2020, the academic team’s assumptions about curriculum, online learning, and ensemble building were challenged as these key courses were quickly reconfigured while maintaining course learning outcomes driven by the discipline’s in-person needs.

Hall (2003: 155) notes that ‘In the move towards an information age, a discourse of “learning communities” has been a central theme.’ In this paper we will first outline our constructivist teaching philosophy and reflective pedagogical practice, before discussing our two-act journey of teaching Theatre and Performance during COVID-19 in 2020. Act 1: Building Community will cover the initial stages of lockdown in Semester 1 from March-June as we quickly adapted to the crisis and built makeshift online communities. Act 2: Shifting Community will explore Semester 2 which began teaching online in July, before transitioning students back to face-to-face learning in Week 5. We have chosen this theatrical metaphor of a two-act play to try and communicate the experience of tertiary teaching in Queensland in 2020. The two semesters (acts) were distinct, each with different themes and issues and the inter-semester break between them almost felt like an intermission. As a teaching team this was the moment we first came up for air, reflected on the semester just gone and looked forward to the next. This is perhaps a unique experience, and we acknowledge the privilege of returning to face-to-face learning in the second half of 2020. We believe that this experience has provided us with interesting insights that we have continued to reflect on throughout 2021.
Social constructivism: An online learning community

As a team we approach our teaching from a Social Constructivist viewpoint with the philosophy that learning happens situationally between people. Social Constructivism ‘treats collaborative learning as a social process in which problems are solved and meanings are constructed through discussion amongst group members’ (Miles and Rainbird, 2015: 411). When teaching online from this approach it is imperative to create an online learning community.

Initially developed by Vgotsky and Dewey, Social Constructivism situates learners as active and empowered, and places emphasis on student enquiry and reflection within specific relational, cultural contexts and communities. Vgotsky states that ‘all the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 57). According to Lave and Wenger (2003: 144–145), Vgotsky’s Social Constructivism concentrates on ‘processes of social transformation’ and explores ‘the development of human knowing through participation in an ongoing social world’. This method challenges cerebral approaches to learning, in which education is viewed as a process in which a ‘learner internalizes knowledge’ and in which learning can be seen ‘as an unproblematic process of absorbing the given, as a matter of transmission and assimilation’ (Lave and Wenger, 2003: 143). From Vgotsky’s approach we place emphasis on developing interactions between students as the central place of learning. Dewey advocates that ‘enquiry and the capacity for growth are embedded in the situations and activities that create educational experience’ (Heibronn et al., 2018: 9). Dewey’s educational approach focuses on ‘the transformation and growth of the experiencing self’ (Strong, 2018: 20) and is ‘grounded in quality experience generating growth and creativity…creating contexts for future learning…forming a continually modified conceptual frame’ (Gershon, 2016, 10). As informed by Dewey, we place emphasis on educational experiences focusing on transformation, growth and creativity.

Social Constructivism relies on an activation of a dynamic learning environment empowering students within a learning community. As theatre educators, we energize group discussions through activations of performance material, original creative work, and workshop activations of course readings. Sweet et al. (2014: 61) argued that teachers should function as a “mentor from the middle” with being a critical reflector as one of the six roles needed to perform this function. They note:

As a critical reflector, the mentor must exercise metacognition, an ability to examine and evaluate a class session’s progress as it occurs. This ability allows course adjustment, producing a more effective learning experience. Above all, the mentor/reflecter must employ what Elder and Paul (2009) call fair-mindedness, the ability to consider what is best for all concerned and to act only after such consideration. (Sweet et al., 2014: 62, original emphasis)

In 2020, we found ways to “mentor from the middle” within previously unknown technology-enabled learning environments for both the instructional staff and our theatre and performance students. The academic year became a real-time exploration of
metacognition within our teaching practices with each week furnishing new information to process, analyse and seek improvements.

We applied social constructivism in online learning environments through strategies including balancing synchronous and asynchronous activities across multiple modes; self-paced individual work; and dialectical discussion. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2017: 4) notes that a successful online learning community combines content, collaboration, self-paced independent study, dialectic discussion, evaluation and assessment, face to face engagement, and reflection. Harasim (2000: 50) notes that group communication ‘enables… active exchange: rich information environment… Identification of new perspectives… multiplicity…’ and text-based messaging ‘encourages and contributes to… verbalization and articulation of ideas.’ Such rich environments of active exchange are common characteristics of theatre pedagogy. We applied online learning theory to develop this kind of active exchange in a digital environment. Harasim (2000), Picciano (2017), and Hall (2003) state that these kinds of strategies work to develop a community of enquiry and a sense of belonging and engagement. Drawing on the work of Ecclestone (1999) and Sacks (2000), Hall (2003: 158) argues that viewing online education as a community process ‘moves educators and learners away from ideologically – or structurally – charged thinking towards the creation of symbiotic networks or webs of belonging.’ Creating this sense of belonging was critical during the first half of 2020 as all the members of our teaching and learning community were isolated from each other.

**Act 1: Building community**

This section focuses on three areas of building an online learning community as the academic staff made the hasty transition to online teaching during Semester 1: peer to peer communication; adapting group tasks into solo tasks; and the provision of flexible and supportive learning structures. Peer to peer communication will be discussed in relation to the course DRA203: Physical Theatre, as taught by Loth. This course introduces students to physical theatre forms and is highly reliant on interactive group activities and group devised performances. This course focuses on The Viewpoints (Bogart and Landau 2005) and Loth’s research focus area combining The Suzuki Actor training method and Linklater voice (Loth and Pensalfini, 2021). Finally, both adapting group tasks and flexible/supportive learning structures will be discussed in relation to DRA203 and DRA206: Acting 2 – Contemporary Shakespeare, a course that introduces students to performance theory and performance skills. DRA206 was team taught by all three authors. This course was informed by Linklater voice and Shakespearean acting techniques (Linklater, 1992, 2006).

**Peer to peer communication**

In early March Loth observed that their USA and UK colleagues were already teaching online. What had felt like an impossible task, that of teaching a Physical Theatre class online, seemed to have become common practice on the other side of the world. In
mid-March, Loth attended online discussion forums led by Voice and Speech Trainer’s Association and American Theatre for Higher Education and observed great generosity in these forums in the sharing of innovative approaches to the challenges of online teaching. In early April, Loth attended a forum run by AusAct (an Australian organization connecting tertiary acting teachers) that shared Australian adaptations to the online space. Buoyed on by the energies and inspirations of this global community, for Loth, adapting and applying these new inspirations and innovations to take DRA203: Physical Theatre into a digital space became an exciting and energetic project. This experience shows the importance of national and international communities of teaching and learning.

Inspired by Hanley’s (2020) blog post, the instructor’s online classes followed a model of a synchronous introduction to the class where students would ‘check in’ and warm-up together. Video tasks were set for the class. After establishing the workshop’s goals, students worked independently on their tasks, resulting in their creative contributions shared online and followed by peer-to-peer discussion. As an additional pedagogical support, Loth initially set up a closed Facebook group for the class so that students could post video tasks and share with the group. As the course progressed and their technological capacity developed, this shifted to a collaborative Padlet page.

To ensure a supportive and productive learning environment, clear parameters were set for the peer feedback provided online. Students were directed to comment on effective uses of Viewpoints principles, and on aspects that they found ‘fresh, new or interesting’ as advocated by Linklater (2006: 62). We believe that this reflection technique of focusing on ‘fresh’ experiences (rather than judgmental critique) was particularly important in an online environment, and comments were monitored to ensure students met these criteria. Loth posted an initial response in the Facebook/Padlet group to model this style of feedback, and then individually emailed students constructive feedback on their creative works in progress. Following these procedures, peer-to-peer feedback started to reflect individuals’ personal experience in response to the performances, rather than judgmental comments on what was ‘good’ or ‘bad’. This process also ensured there was a resource for students unable to attend class. The online recording of in-class performances (plus additional material posted by students who had been absent) with posted comments, contributed to the creation of community that celebrated artistry and individual experience.

Group tasks in solo formats

Both DRA203: Physical Theatre and DRA206: Acting 2 - Contemporary Shakespeare had an end-of-semester group performance assessment that transformed into an individual online task. In adapting these assessments, the instructional team aimed to maintain the assessment’s emphasis on student collaboration and the support systems that are necessary for end-of-semester assignments. In previous years, the DRA203 group assessment was a group devised physical theatre performance responding to a choice of stimulus items. In Semester 1 of 2020, this assessment became a group video task and combined a series of solo performances. Effective collaboration was required to ensure consistency amongst group members in delivering an effective dramatic meaning. Moreover, this
adapted assessment allowed individual students to tailor their own section to their own physical and vocal skills. For the final DRA206: Acting 2 - Contemporary Shakespeare group assessment, all student groups engaged with scene analysis and a rehearsal process. Students could choose to go in different directions in their design choices providing flexibility within the assessment. The DRA206 group assessment had previously been short Shakespearean scenes for two to three people that would be presented as a live theatrical performance. Each student would also then create a ‘self-test’ version of the scene (with the lines of the other characters being read off camera). The self-test proved to be a serendipitous aspect of this task that required no adaption to the online learning environment, while the live theatrical scene needed considerable revision and adaption. Banks and Walling developed this part of the task into a design focused task in which each student would present their part of the scene to camera in a site-specific location, with purposeful design choices inclusive of props, lighting and costume. Students submitted a reflection of 300 words or a short video justification (2–3 min) justifying their design choices with an analysis of text and character. These approaches to group assessment tasks allowed students to work in separate locations while also planning and collaborating with their peers to rehearse, discuss their scenes and develop ideas.

These adaptations of the group tasks proved to be a functional way forward within a challenging situation. Students had the opportunity to address most of the course criteria and connect with their peers in creative collaborations. They developed skills in design and filming that would not otherwise be a focus of the course. However, we feel that these group tasks were less than ideal preparation for the theatre industry. In these tasks, students tended to focus more on cinematography rather than choreography, and thus it became more of a film making exercise than a development of physical performance skills. The skill of performing in real time with a group of people and developing synchronous, highly rehearsed movement work under the pressure of performance was not developed. The video tasks tended to focus on camera angles and the body within a particular frame rather than physical skill and expressivity. In the Shakespearean scenes, students missed out on the opportunity of working off another actor in the space due to state-level COVID-19 restrictions. This absence was most notably felt in the Shakespearean comic scenes that feed off physical humour, discovering new moments through spontaneous play, and staging opportunities. In these ways, there was a distinct loss of creative connection and dynamic interaction in the group performance tasks.

**Flexibility and support**

A major lesson for the authors in going online in a sudden response to a pandemic, was the need for flexibility and support in the newly established online space. This aspect is by no means particular to our experience and has been well documented as a facet to consider in the online teaching space. Students’ lives had been turned upside down during Semester 1 of 2020. Teaching and assessment modes had suddenly changed, and many students were not set up to easily engage in online learning. Parents suddenly had childcare responsibilities during class times; poor internet access challenged students attending class; and scarcity of work opportunities meant that many students were required to take
shifts that clashed with class times in order to maintain employment. And of course, mental health was being challenged by the numerous facets of a stressful pandemic world. For us, technology enabled learning and teaching meant a major shift in our approach. Previously we had emphasized ‘professional practices’ in the classroom with standard expectations including punctuality, full attendance, being prepared for class and strict adherence to due dates. We quickly realised that these expectations were neither realistic nor helpful in the new situation. For example, we encouraged students to have their camera on during collaborative exercises, discussions and breakout session group work; yet we recognised students encountered ‘Zoom burnout’ over the span of a three-hour class – so, students had the flexibility to turn-off their cameras during lecture components of each week’s class. Beyond this consideration, here are some additional ways that we enacted flexibility and support for students:

1. The teaching team set up a common Zoom ‘drop in’ consultation time every workday from 1 p.m.–2 p.m. Similar to a hallway of academic staff offices within a building, students could ‘drop in’ and receive information about the program, future goals, or discuss course assessments.
2. Regular student announcements with reminders as to class content, assessment items and Zoom links.
3. Online recordings of lectures and detailed documentation of questions and answers in class sessions were made available for students who were not able to attend class. During the lockdown periods, we noticed several factors impacting student internet access: their internet and cell phone connection’s reliability at home (especially for students living in rural areas with unpredictable internet coverage), their individual cell phone’s data plans (which impacted access to video content), the number of people working in their living accommodations (impacting the availability of sound isolated study spaces), increased work pressures due to COVID-19’s impact on maintaining employment, and increased family responsibilities. While we believe synchronous teaching and learning was essential to the course’s learning outcomes, we recognized that the student’s participation could be negatively impacted by events outside of their control. Lecture recordings mitigated some of these unanticipated learning dilemmas through offering students’ additional instructional flexibility.
4. An option for COVID-19-impacted students unable to attend class to send videos of their works in progress or drop-in during consultation times for instructor’s feedback.
5. Multiple options for assessment task format and submission. Students familiar in screen media processes preferred video submissions, while some students (especially mature aged students) found video task recording and submission daunting. For this reason, we allowed students in the Shakespeare course to choose to either submit their performance work via video submission or present live during the online Zoom workshop.
These teaching accommodations were appreciated by our students, and we subsequently received very positive student evaluation reports. It is important to note here that while these approaches were effective in the short term, they were certainly not sustainable, long-term approaches that are suitable to online teaching. Having a common drop-in office appointments time across all academic staff would not be realistic for general teaching practice. The regular announcement updates could become an overload in information that may be counter-productive in the long term. The students who were not able to connect with synchronous class materials generally did not do well in assessment tasks. While they were able to complete the courses, we feel they also suffered from a lack of engagement with the learning community. The multiple options for assessment formats became confusing for students at times and was one of the reasons for ‘information overload’ during communications with students.

Intermission: Act 1 summary

As a three-person program we rallied together to quickly adapt to the online environment and support our students. We hastily engaged with new pedagogical techniques and were both challenged and exhilarated by the new online environment. The establishment of platforms for peer-to-peer communications and multiple options for communication channels and assessment submission developed in Harasim’s words an ‘active exchange’, a ‘rich information environment’ and the ‘verbalization and articulation of ideas’ (Harasim, 2000: 50). Our official student evaluation reports were very positive. Our students greatly appreciated our efforts in these unusual circumstances. As detailed above, many of our approaches were adequate short-term responses but were not sustainable pedagogical plans. Our major challenge was in adapting collaborative tasks to an online environment. Here is it useful to refer to Dewey’s colleague George Herbert Mead who discussed the importance of gesture as part of communication noting that,

We are reading the meaning of the conduct of other people … There is something that reveals to us what the purpose is – just the glance of an eye, the attitude of the body which leads to the response. The communication set up in this way between individuals may be very perfect. Conversation in gestures may be carried on which cannot be translated into articulate speech. (Mead, 2015: 14)

When our students were collaborating in separate online spaces, we noticed a loss of creative connection and dynamism that can be seen as a direct result of a lack of gestural communication. A 2016 online investigation of actor training, rehearsal and performance conducted between UK and Finland universities found value in the use of Adobe Connect ‘rooms’ to facilitate small group rehearsals and informal social interactions (Gorman et al., 2019). One of the students involved reflected that these rooms were valuable because,
With theatre, you need to have some connection, to get to know the people you’re acting with. You’ve got to get used to them, to get used to their mannerisms, their rhythms, because you’ve got to do a performance together (cited in Gorman et al., 2019: 217).

Daken (2021) proposes that the transition of in-person learning to online learning can be seen as a creative process of “transcreation” that is best achieved when ‘(1) teachers enhance the way the virtual space is set up, (2) when embodiment is developed through kinaesthetic approaches, and (3) when students are allowed to connect more with their peers” (Daken, 2021, 16). In reference to kinaesthetic approaches, Gorman et al. (2019, 220–221) recommend that ‘when acting in a digital environment, the lack of the immediate touch of the hands and the skin must be replaced by other sensory means.’ In Semester 1 we had found ways to develop communication via digital word-based means but had missed a key element of theatre education – that of the senses and embodiment.

However, this intense experience brought us closer together as colleagues and we built a supportive online community with our students. On reflection, this experience brought examination of our pedagogical and personal values. As Hanley (2020) reflected in her blog on online movement teaching:

Ultimately, the way we choose to be together online reflects our values as a community. This is true when we share physical space, but perhaps the novelty or the difficulty of gathering in digital space forces us to examine those values more thoughtfully.

After coming up for air during the inter-semester break and finally seeing each other in person again, as a teaching team moving forward, we wanted to acknowledge the curricular shifts and the knowledge gaps resulting from technology-enabled teaching environments during the first semester’s progression. We wanted to address potential fault lines within the curriculum obscured by Zoom lectures, online office hours, and performances within found spaces (student housing, family yards, and other health directive compliant locations). After our intense Act 1 of transitioning into technology-enabled learning and teaching, we experienced new challenges of maintaining this community and then shifting back to an in-person delivery model as we journeyed into Act 2.

**Act 2: Shifting community/addressing absence**

After the inter-semester break’s reflection, we identified two student development areas as our undergraduate students shifted again from online environments back to on-campus workshops: the rediscovery of the student’s artistic voice and a focused development on each student’s flexible collaboration skills. The academic staff at the University of the Sunshine Coast were notified of the likelihood of students returning to campus for in-person lectures and workshops about a third of the way through the upcoming semester. This reverse disruption was still a major challenge because three of our courses in Semester 2 result in public facing performances. Beginning a rehearsal process online before transitioning back to face-to-face workshops would provide several new challenges.
Artistic voice

The first dilemma we faced as instructors while teaching online and transitioning back to campus, was in finding ways to enable a rediscovery of student’s artistic voices. Creative artists typically have the agency to respond to the world surrounding us (creating production metaphors, selecting plays responding to current events, talkback sessions, devised theatre pieces, and so on). When professional theatre venues and on-campus performance spaces shut down during the pandemic, it was understandable for all practitioners to have a sense of “lost voice.” For a performing arts student learning their craft within a higher education setting, the separation from their rehearsal studios, performance sites, and collaborative spaces was a potential setback to their creative and interpretative practice.

As an instructional team, we deliberated about potential opportunities for theatre and performance students to quickly adopt technology-enabled learning and teaching spaces. Instead of viewing the pandemic as a setback and accepting a lost year, the team considered how we can further the course’s learning outcomes when caught between video conferencing software applications and past in-person instructional models. When navigating this underexplored teaching environment for a theatre and performance degree program during the pandemic, it was striking to encounter the following statement regarding classroom technology from Sweet et al. several years prior to the COVID-19 outbreak:

Many teachers avail themselves of IT support, however, without taking to heart one key concern: the technology must serve the learning goal. Especially when trying to learn something new, instructors can be so focused on the means, the mediation, or even the usability of a technology that they sometimes forget why they are doing it. Good instruction requires techniques for which the proper tools are employed that serve the instructor, enhancing the teaching rather than detracting from it. (2014: 68)

While their comment would not be seen as revolutionary for most experienced higher-education professionals, it was a valuable reminder that educational technology (even in times of crisis and pandemic) must enhance teaching delivery and support the learning outcomes of a course. The software is not the enemy - it is the facilitator of communication and many assumptions and social constructions of communicating online that we simply accepted in 2020, can now be challenged to use the technology more effectively.

Unfortunately, we found that throughout 2020, our students’ artistic voices were often muted by technology, especially as sustaining conversations in Zoom workshops almost always fell towards the instructor as the conduit for communication. We needed to overcome the lack of physical presence within a performance studio which impacted authentic student-to-student collaborations and decreased opportunities for their creative empowerment as peers. As the pandemic has continued, we are all now more practiced in the art of Zoom and better at communicating online, but in face-to-face classroom environments, the point of reference still shifts as more voices have the opportunity and ability to collaborate, negotiate, and activate performance. Students can read each other’s
expressions and body language more clearly, interpret tone and pauses accurately, and conduct conversations entirely through gesture (Mead, 2015: 14). Students are empowered to become that point of reference within an in-person workshop and the instructor gains the opportunity to become a ‘Mentor from the Middle’ (Sweet et al. 2014, 62–63). In contrast, it is more difficult to participate in a Zoom room without stopping the conversation’s continuity. This disrupts perceptions of etiquette and agency and even simple adjustments of technology, for example whether someone is viewing the Zoom room in Speaker view or Gallery View, can drastically alter the learning experience and have a negative impact on the development of a student’s artistic voice. In the online environment, questions of who chooses to speak up, who remains silent, and who dominates the conversation are so much more complex. Often in 2020, the instructor needed to vacate the middle in order to maintain conversation.

Since participation in a collaborative environment is already complicated, when that environment shifts online, even more attention must be paid to the hierarchies of voice. In the article “Devising as Pedagogy,” Anne Wessels writes that there are “hidden hierarchies” in a face-to-face rehearsal room which can affect participation and can lead to multiple problems, which Wessels presents as a series of questions about who is able to use their voice. Wessels writes, “Who is talking, who keeps quiet and for what reasons? What happens when someone says one thing and immediately says the opposite as a form of self-silencing?” (Wessels, 2011: 132). A lack of participation from some students within the online learning environment was complicated to navigate in 2020. There could be an enormous number of reasons why a student is quiet on any particular day. In “Devising as Pedagogy” Wessels quotes Megan Boler to describe the “varieties of silence.” Boler says that silence:

… can be voluntary and self-imposed, or it can be the result of external pressures and constraints; silence can be expressive, or it can be empty, unreadable; silence can be temporary, situational, or it can represent a consistent even pathological pattern; silence can signal withdrawal from a conversation, or it can be an indicator of attentive and thoughtful listening. (Boler, cited in Wessels, 2011: 132)

Even when the students were able to speak up and contribute in an online learning environment, they often had to negotiate their artistic voice via the instructor and not their immediate peers, because there were fewer opportunities for students to connect and collaborate. All these issues had a negative effect on the student’s empowerment of their artistic voice and their ability to respond to the given moment. How could we as instructors provide an opportunity to positively engage in the current moment and further the curricular goals of the course?

While learning online at the beginning of Semester 2, each student’s rediscovery of their artistic voice had to be more of a solo effort. Theatre making relies on collaboration, but as instructors in this environment we had to come up with creative ways for students to explore their artistic practice on their own. This was especially difficult in our practical courses DRA204: Theatre Production and DRA301: Devising Performance, both of which conclude in public facing performances. We found that mandatory isolation
provided students a false environment of collaborative theatre practice. For the third-year students in DRA301: Devising Performance, the re-discovery of their artistic voices, while navigating an online collaborative environment, was even more challenging. The third-year students would have normally spent Semester 1 in an internship or an interdisciplinary project before taking the program’s capstone devising course. However, in 2020, our students were unable to have this important experiential learning opportunity. This meant they had not been able to go out into the industry, experience original theatre work and learn from professional companies. As a result, when beginning the devising course, the students held a lot of doubt about their own artistic voices. While students may always suffer doubt or lack self-confidence in their ability to tell their own stories and create new work, this sense of doubt was especially troubling for students in 2020, because due to the pandemic they had not had the opportunity to begin exploring their professional identities outside of the classroom in Semester 1, and they were much more uncertain about their creative future.

In response, Banks adapted the curriculum of DRA301 to focus on autobiographical stories and solo performances rather than a group provocation. This method required self-reflection and encouraged the students to explore their own stories as a way to re-discover their own individual artistic voices before beginning work as a collaborative team. During the first workshop which took place in an online learning environment, the students did an exercise inspired by spoken word poet and teacher Sarah Kay. In Kay’s popular TED Talk, she discusses teaching poetry by asking students to write lists. The first list she always assigns is “10 Things You Know To Be True” (TED, 2011). In this first workshop, we discussed the common themes and connections between their lists, and these influenced the dramaturgy of our devised production as we brought all their individual pieces together when we returned to teaching face-to-face. Despite the online learning environment dampening artistic voice in the ways outlined above, the Devising students shared their creatively vulnerabilities with each other. The uncertainty at the beginning of Semester 2, with the oversaturation of information, diminished ability to action learning processes (studies, readings, and scaffolding assessment tasks), as well as a multiplicity of COVID-19 experiences resulted in many unanswerable questions. But the inclusion of this list exercise provided students grounding within their own life and their own stories. It is impossible to predict the future, so asking students to write a list of “10 Things You Know To Be True” gave them an anchor to channel the rediscovery of their artistic voice. It led them to create an original production that was completely unique and could only have been created by those students during this global crisis.

**Flexible collaboration**

The second dilemma we faced as a teaching team was flexible student peer-to-peer collaboration, particularly navigating the differences and difficulties between online collaboration versus in person. In *The Collaborative Habit: Life Lessons for Working Together*, Twyla Tharp posits:
Collaborators aren’t born, they’re made. Or, to be more precise, built, a day at a time, through practice, through attention, through discipline, through passion and commitment – and, most of all, through habit. (Tharp with Kornbluth, 2009: 12)

Collaboration empowers student voice through reinforcing professional behaviours, providing positive reinforcement for new ideas, and setting realistic peer expectations on projects. Therefore, addressing the absence of in person collaboration had to be a priority when we returned to face-to-face lectures and workshop activations in week 5 of Semester 2. The main issue we encountered was the expectation that building a company of theatre artists online would translate into the in-person rehearsal and workshop spaces. Upon reflection it became clear to us that collaboration between students in an online learning environment is sanitised and lacking authenticity, even with Zoom’s collaborative functions like break out rooms. Tharp agrees that virtual collaboration and technology can be difficult in that:

[it] can force us to move too quickly for our own good, establishing its own world and pushing us to make decisions… every technological compromise is compromise only on the human side; we adjust to the computer, never the other way around. So there are times for me when face-to-face is still required. (Tharp with Kornbluth, 2009: 66)

While Tharp was considering how technology influences professional practice and collaboration, we observed a similar impact within a learning environment for emerging theatre artists. As mentioned earlier, the instructional staff and students adapted to the software’s capabilities when empowering voice; however, our classroom environment reflected several comprises due to mandated technology-enabled learning and teaching approach. During the semester, we recognised how these restrictive limitations impacted our classroom environments due to the one-sided compromises with computer technology that was unyielding due to software capabilities.

Each author noticed technology’s impact on collaboration in similar ways. During the first few weeks of workshops, as a result of conventional Zoom etiquette rules like muting microphones when not speaking, it was difficult for students to collaborate authentically or bounce off one another’s ideas. Moreover, audio lags and internet discrepancies created an awkward and disjointed rhythm in almost every conversation. The “collaboration” in an online environment devolved into exchanges between individual students and the instructor, while the remainder of the class did not contribute their thoughts in the conversation, often preferring to stay mute until a there was new discussion topic. We also encountered the false narrative of the Breakout Room function on Zoom being an enabler of collaboration. While it does allow small groups of students to share their work or complete an activity together, they are still restricted in many ways, and it is difficult to explore practical theatre exercises or to share their work with the entire class. Moreover, when using Breakout Rooms, the instructor lost their ability to monitor and mentor all conversations within the virtual classroom space as they were previously able to accomplish within a face-to-face learning environment – the instructor must select a conversation to join removing the instructor from other group discussions within the
virtual space. We realised students needed to feel empowered to fill this mentoring void while working independently within a digital space.

Several of our courses used the platform Padlet while teaching online at the beginning of Semester 2. Padlet worked well for DRA301: Devising Performance as a collaborative digital whiteboard enabling a sharing of knowledge in real-time; however, the students were effectively still isolated. Significant social indicators from their collaborations were absent. Once we were back on campus, we realised that the ensemble building that occurred on Zoom was incomplete because the full personalities of the students were not completely evident. These working relationships for the students were being established in an unrealistic and not fully realised online environment. This led to some friction in some of the Devising groups once they started collaborating and rehearsing in person. Adding to this dilemma was the contradiction of an online learning environment being both distant while also intimate. Collaborating and learning on Zoom was sanitised in terms of verbal behaviour but not sanitised in terms of presentation of self. Students are always aware that they are on screen and that everyone can see you (if they choose to have their camera on, something we encouraged in our Theatre workshops). This creates a strangely intimate situation in terms of visual presentation – their Zoom backgrounds were a window into private spaces which were sometimes not curated for public consumption – they were never meant to be seen in a classroom setting.

After encountering these limitations during Semester 1, the instructors sought to minimize the impact on in-class collaboration through new assessment approaches. In DRA102: Exploring Twentieth-Century Theatre, the course’s first assessment task was rewritten and now focused on American experimentations with the Living Newspaper technique during the 1930s Federal Theatre Project. This was a new assessment task for the course, which offered flexibility in presentation format as either a technology-enabled or an in-person performance could be activated. The resulting short performances were based on a noteworthy Australian news event within the past 6 months and sought to empower students to break through COVID-induced isolation through a collaborative piece. Instead of students being passive consumers of COVID-19 news, they activated their options, worldviews, and artistic ideas into their group’s dialogues. Students gained an opportunity to artistically respond to immediate events through applying their information literacy skills. Each group evaluated veritable information versus fictional impressions distributed through various media outlets. After their initial research, students created short performances incorporating Living Newspaper aesthetics as a channel for public dissemination. This process allowed students to regain artistic voice and incorporated a scaffolding process which helped overcome existing collaboration limitations.

Each of DRA102’s course sections met on a synchronous timetable in 3-h workshop session blocks. While at the outset collaboration was not guaranteed, Walling provided several critical stopping points for groups to assess their ongoing research process, collaborate on the artistic vision of the performance, and key weekly rehearsal goals. The initial student collaborations focused on sharing potential Living Newspaper stories and determining which news event would serve as a mutually agreed starting point for their investigations. After reaching a consensus, each individual student would investigate the news event through additional research using their own preferred news outlets and
incorporating national news sources. Each group reconvened and shared their findings after a week’s research into the topic. For many of the groups, they discovered that each group member brought into the conversation different news sources which, in turn, shaped their perspectives on the event. Students came across various perspectives shaping their sources: individual perspectives brought forward by interviews conducted by the reporters, political leanings of the publication, the reliability of each cited source’s information, and the article’s intention for its readership. Over the technology-enabled communication platforms, students were able to discuss a sensitive current event through the news articles, and as a result, the sanitised digital environment gave way to active participation and meaningful collaboration. Several groups identified ways to highlight the complexities of an event through initial character choices choosing to represent a multiplicity of potential perspectives. In the remaining weeks, students would be required to check-in at other key collaborative moments: the development of the plot’s outline, the framing of each dramatic segment’s meaning for an audience, and the scripting of dialogue with a view towards character objectives and the expressed main idea.

Over the first month of Semester 2, students confronted the technological limitations on collaboration by becoming comfortable with participation. A student’s initial self-censorship of their opinions yielded to group discourses informed by background research and the recognition of the multiplicity of perspectives within society. Effective scaffolding of the task enabled shorter periods of time within Zoom environments, which resulted in more focused conversations with achievable outcomes. Finally, an academic habit became more transparent to those visible, creative projects developed with small, attainable advances forward. The result: through an acknowledgement of technological limitations, the assessment task fostered a collaborative environment by engaging the students as researchers and transforming their passive consumption of world events into a positive artistic outcome. By removing the instructor’s function as a mentor in the middle, students needed to develop their own agency and communication structures as peers while acknowledging the technology’s limitations.

After the initial trauma of Semester 1, transitioning back to face-to-face teaching in Semester 2 needed to be done with care. While the authors quickly adapted into an online community, no one had any prior experience of shifting out of that environment and back into a very different world requiring COVID-safe practices and physical distancing. Students did not have instructional, social, and behavioural guideposts that customarily occur during their in-person university studies. Students had become accustomed to watching themselves, similar to the experience of hearing your recorded voice played back to you. This created unease after returning to a face-to-face environment where their self-curated digital space was removed. The transition back to campus came with the expectation of a “return to normal,” so students sometimes struggled when they placed expectations on themselves to be okay and to be functioning at the same level as they were pre-COVID-19.

Upon reflection, it is useful to compare this journey to Victor Turner’s discussion of liminal spaces in “Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology” (Turner, 1974). The student and instructor experience of 2020 in Australia could be examined as a rite of passage, especially when considering Turner’s
summary of Van Gennep’s three phases of a rite of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation (Turner, 1974: 56). Turner explains that the first phase of separation must include “a rite which changes the quality of time,” and certainly the isolation of the initial lockdowns in 2020 constructed “a cultural realm” which could be “defined as ‘out of time’ that is, beyond or outside the time which measures secular processes and routines” (Turner, 1974: 57). The return to campus and the impossible return to “normal,” represents the phase of transition. It was the liminal or threshold space where “ritual subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo” (Turner, 1974: 57). In order to navigate this ambiguity and attempt to move towards the third phase of incorporation, students were given opportunities to share experiences, process COVID-19 as a life-changing event and discuss the displacement of self as a student (potential career path, academic progress, mentorships).

A final case-study of flexible collaboration as the students moved into the incorporation phase, which also employed considerations of artistic voice, was in DRA204: Theatre Production. In this course, students form a theatre company with a director to rehearse and professionally present a production to the public. The choice of play for 2020 was critical as it needed to be flexible. Part of Banks’ teaching strategy was selecting a play that could bounce out of an online environment, with the always real possibility of having to go back if COVID-19 restrictions returned. Creating a production calendar that began on Zoom came with serious creative restrictions, and all the hallmarks of an industry standard process had to be flexible and were scaffolded throughout the semester as restrictions lifted, and the possibilities for the final performance became more exciting. The chosen text was the radio play Sunday Morning at the Centre of the World by Louis de Bernières. This text had the capability to expand and contract depending on the circumstances of production. The expansion of the production qualities as we returned to campus and started amplified sound rehearsals was driven by the students, and they were happy and empowered to do so. We also collaborated with the Music Program and the students in MUS203: Songwriting 2 created original songs transforming the radio play into a musical. Both the Theatre and Music students felt they had artistic ownership on the piece. It took time to have students transition from “being directed” to having a sense as an artistic collaborator - making artistic offers in the best-practices of actor-director two-way collaboration, communication, and investment in the production’s stakes. But by production and performance week they shared the artistic and technical vision with the directors, and the two cohorts worked together to create a company and build a community. They were able to realise their own artistic ideas in collaboration, within a performance space surrounded by community.

In Semester 1, many assessment tasks were redrafted across the university. Students and instructors operated on a week-to-week basis, almost in survival mode learning new educational technology, adapting in-person projects to technology-enabled collaboration, and navigating our students’ dependency on web-based resources for research. When entering the second semester, instructors revised assessment projects enabling students to flourish within the COVID-19 teaching environment. The first 5 weeks of DRA102: Exploring 20th Century Theatre served as a microcosm of the entire course, students were asked to consider how the lecture material related to a key assessment task and how these...
aesthetic developments could influence their short performance. After each week’s class concluded, every collaborative group was left with an aesthetic launching point, along with a progressing research process, supporting the upcoming week’s collaborations. In DRA204: Theatre Production, while learning online, the theatre students developed familiarity with each other as a company of collaborative peers. When returning to campus, the students were able to navigate the realities of a larger interdisciplinary production team based on these earlier developed skills. The approaches used in both courses developed each student’s collaborative skills, and as they transitioned back to campus, they expanded their commitment to a structured collaborative process.

**Act 2 summary**

Artistic voice and flexible collaboration were the two main pedagogical concerns throughout Semester 2. These dilemmas were already existent within the curriculum; however, being forced into technology-enabled learning and teaching exposed presumptions about student learning which were masked by productions, student enthusiasm being in a dedicated rehearsal space, and unseen peer-to-peer support systems. As an instructional team, we knew of the potential fault lines, but not the depth or number of students impacted. As a result, the journey back to ‘normalcy’ was a re-discovery of terrain taken for granted over years of instructional repetition and groupthink. The ravines were still present, as the artificial bridges of production, performance, and rehearsal were exposed by technology-enabled learning and teaching.

While the first half of the academic year focused on mitigating the trauma imposed by COVID-19, the second half traversed the curriculum’s strengths and weaknesses. Theatre and Performance students anticipating a safe environment to explore their artistic voice and individuality, were deprived of those learning environments. While COVID-19 was the main cause of displacement at this time, students can experience these limitations or losses in a variety of a similar life-changing circumstances such as: the transition to university from secondary school; adjustments to new peer collaborative groups; discovering difference between a personal hobby and one’s vocation; and achieving industry-informed university course expectations. The typical pressures that students may experience were compounded by COVID-19 – but even when the pandemic is over, the realities that COVID-19 exacerbated still exist for our undergraduates. The author’s solutions addressed the immediate short-term realities; however, we realise that these realities were part of much longer-term problems. COVID-19 exposed the fault lines already existent in the performance curriculum and the pandemic’s influence over the past 2 year’s deliberations, course restructuring, and identification of potential pedagogical pitfalls, remind us that the process is never complete. As a field, we need to recognize these fault lines and acknowledge that these do not disappear with vaccination and the theatres reopening.
Epilogue

This article is not meant to be a commemoration of past choices. Instead, we hope that the profession recognizes new opportunities to address ongoing systematic issues. As higher education moves beyond COVID-19, educators should not forget the progress that was made—addressing student needs, resolving instructional demands, and perhaps re-claiming a work-life balance. Each moment signposted a rite of passage that the student experienced during 2020, with each stage containing its own ephemeral realities shaped by sudden pedagogical shifts.

The instructional team’s solutions addressed immediate shortcomings in the abrupt implementations of a technology-enabled performance classroom. When a student’s presumed learning environment contrasts with the realised learning environment, this can result in a sense of displacement, trauma, and anxiety regarding their attainment of learning outcomes. Within this article, we have outlined potential dilemmas for a community of learners suddenly transitioned into different learning structures and participatory environments. While this was observed during COVID-19—these approaches could apply to similar displacements in learning environments. Digital technology served as the metaphorical splint addressing COVID-19’s significant impact on teaching delivery until our curriculum’s learning outcomes could be met through the reintegration of the senses, physical presence, and embodied practice in Semester 2. We gained new pedagogical approaches and shifted our views regarding the incorporation of technology-enabled learning within a performance classroom; however, we were always reminded of the technological deficiencies with regards to the ephemeral and embodied nature of a theatre and performance curriculum. Consequently, confronted with our preconceptions of technology early in the process, we discovered that the incorporation of the technology provided important lessons about our pedagogical processes going forward: what we valued as educators and what skills were necessary for a successful theatre student: artistic voice, collaboration skills, adaptability, and an appreciation for the ephemeral moment.

Before reanimating our theatre processes post-COVID-19, we realised that the significant lessons learned during the pandemic must be incorporated into our future pedagogical practices.

As higher education professionals, we need to examine student stresses within our processes. Before COVID-19, heavy production season schedules, intensive production calendars for construction, implementation and rehearsal processes negatively impact student wellbeing and their studies. Also, these curricular choices can impact the instructional staff through their teaching practice, artistic work, career satisfaction, and realization of their research objectives. In reflecting on the exposed fault lines brought into view by COVID-19, we need to ask the questions: Can we learn better processes and improve quality of education for all involved? Or do we revert to past structures which mitigate proactive reforms? Will higher education effectively sweep issues under the rug, only to be addressed sporadically during post-production discussions and then never resolved? We have spent so much time hoping for a return to normal. Before the performance field in higher education resumes “normalcy”, can we embrace the lessons
learned throughout the pandemic and integrate new understandings into our post-COVID-19 teaching approaches?

Stop. Breathe. Let us appreciate what has and is being learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. And now, let us move the profession forward.

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Carl Walling lectures in the fields of performance design, dramatic literature and theatre history. During his career in higher education, he has collaborated as lighting and/or scenic designer on over seventy productions. In 2009, two of his lighting designs were selected for inclusion at World Stage Design 2009 in South Korea. His current research focuses on 20th and 21st century performance design theory, contemporary international design, and theatre pedagogy in higher education. He currently serves as the University of the Sunshine Coast’s program coordinator for the Bachelor of Creative Industries: Theatre & Performance degree program.

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