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Title	Conquering the Zoombies. Why we need drama in online settings
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Publication date	2022
Original Citation	Göksel, E. and Abraham, N. (2022) 'Conquering the Zoombies. Why we need drama in online settings', Scenario: A Journal for Performative Teaching, Learning, Research, XVI(2), pp. 93-113. https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.2.6
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/scenario.16.2.6
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Download date	2026-11-04 16:29:12
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14161



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Volume/Jahrgang 16, Issue/Ausgabe 2 (2022)
https://doi.org/10.33178/scenario.16.2.6

Conquering the Zoombies

Why we need drama in online settings

Eva Göksel & Nicola Abraham

In this piece we offer a reflexive account of our recent experiences of teaching with drama in two different online settings. Eva will recount her practice teaching trainee teachers in Switzerland and Nicky will recall her practice working with postgraduate applied theatre students in a drama school in the UK. Over and over again, we have encountered the mind-set that teaching drama online is "not possible", or at the very least, that it is but a pale reflection of face-to-face teaching. Although we were out of our comfort zone at first, we now feel that teaching with drama online has its place in our fast-paced and increasingly technological world. Teaching and learning in digital contexts will likely remain a reality from now on, thus it is the purpose of this article to make the case for the creative potential of and indeed urgent need for online teaching that includes drama.

1 Zooming along: Working in isolation

Applying performative teaching methods, such as drama in education (DiE) techniques in online contexts is more necessary than ever. Not only as a tool to combat the dreaded *Zoombies*[1], a screen-induced zombie-like state that leaves participants drained and square-eyed after a full day of meetings, but also as a way to keep our online communication authentic, playful, and meaningful. Walter Leal Filho et al. (2021) argue that participants, particularly students and academic staff working in online spaces such as the Zoom platform, can often feel lonely and cut off from each other, especially if they mostly have their microphones and cameras off as they listen to (yet another) passive PowerPoint lecture. Ironically, the very technology that is meant to connect a group often isolates them, condemning them to stare at a Zoom screen for hours, effectively turning them into Zoombies by the end of the day. Yet, how very different this same context could be, if the lecture in question were infused with even a few drama games and activities. In this reflection, we draw upon our creative pedagogical experiences online to present a case for including drama in online teaching settings in order to keep the Zoombies and their consequences at bay. As it

[1] We came across this term in a 2020 Financial Times article by Gianpiero Petriglieri. It appears to be a colloquialism. Although Petriglieri may have coined it, the term Zoombies is not defined in his article. We therefore define the term within the context of our online practice, where it mainly characterises the zombie-like state that teachers and students find themselves in when they spend the day in front of a screen. We herein expand upon the term to illustrate how it is present within Zoom-based teaching and learning.

seems likely that teaching and learning in online settings will remain a reality from now on, let us consider how to include drama in those contexts.

1.1 Covid, platforms and practices

Between 2020 - 2022, a period in which most of the world experienced a shift to working in online spaces, we too, embraced the challenge of rethinking and redesigning our teaching content to inhabit new spaces. In our case, we[2] began to teach primarily via the Zoom, Google Meet, and Teams platforms. We will herein focus on Zoom because it is the platform that we found to be most dynamic and useful for our own practice. Both of us teach at the university level, Eva works primarily with student teachers in Switzerland and Nicky works with undergraduate and postgraduate applied theatre students in the UK via Zoom. Both of us felt daunted and challenged by the task of taking our teaching, which was primarily drama-based, online. However, having embraced this reality rather than resisting it, both of us feel that we have grown as practitioners as we experimented in new spaces – online spaces in which we ultimately found an amazing amount of opportunity for creative work as we combined the possibilities of various digital technologies and drama techniques. In reflecting upon some of the key learning moments for ourselves as practitioners, what really sticks with us are the moments of collaboration, play, and human-to-human connection despite the physical distance between the participants in the Zoom space.

1.2 Key learnings

Perhaps our first key learning moment was hearing the opinions of a surprising variety of international colleagues who felt that working with drama online was very unlikely to be successful. However, upon speaking with peers who usually work in-person teaching through drama or with drama at the university level, it appears that (at that time[3]) there were many people who did not even attempt to include drama work in their online practice. This may have been for a variety of reasons including uncertainty about using new digital technologies and the complexity of transferring familiar approaches to online equivalents. Perhaps this resistance could also be linked with fear of failing to properly grasp the new technologies that we were all being forced to work with. From our point of view, there was also precarity about the duration of the pandemic, and consequently uncertainty about how long we would need to maintain online practice. Additionally, another consideration for adapting practice to work online is the labour of this transition. For example, as teachers, we are all familiar with the

[2] This article is co-authored and the 'we' refers collectively to the experiences of Eva and Nicky. The individual experiences of each author are indicated by sub-headings in the text.
[3] Since that initial conversation, many of these colleagues now do include drama in their online practice.

labour involved in constantly writing and reshaping lessons for new classes and the labour it would take to adapt our practice for online settings, in particular for an undetermined length of time. People were understandably grieving for the ways in which they used to work.

These circumstances made us curious about what we perceived as practitioner resentment of working in online spaces and we asked ourselves what the root cause might be. Certainly, having to move to a new and foreign medium in a very short space of time, often with little technological support, would likely cause teachers to feel stress and thus to resist the change thrust upon them. A change which may be associated with a loss of pedagogical identity or even a loss of status, especially as many of us are not what Mark Prensky (2001) originally coined 'digital natives', and perhaps not even digital immigrants. Interestingly, the response to the initial presentation of the ideas we will discuss, was very positive. This made us wonder if there might be some initial guilt and resistance around the idea of applying drama in online spaces, since there are reports that this transition requires compromises that might impact the integrity of the work. In this article, we will address this concern by arguing that the use of online tools can actually enhance the scope of drama methodologies. Additionally, these questions helped us realise that a new battle was looming for us all as educators: The fight to include performative practices, such as drama work, in online spaces.

The resistance we discussed above is the prequel to doing drama work in online spaces. Interestingly, once we were actually doing the work, the feedback from our students and workshop participants has consistently included their amazement that virtual interactions can be so fun. Every once in a while we heard the comment "I forgot that we were working online". From this experience and similar, for us, the importance of connection became apparent and showed us that drama online can enable creative and playful interaction, which is essential to support student engagement, morale, and wellbeing. Thus, we felt compelled to at least give drama in online settings a chance. However, we are aware of the challenges this entails, and we acknowledge that online does not replace face-to-face interactions. Indeed, we would like to reframe the notion that working online is a replacement for working in-person, by instead considering it as a practice in its own right.

Anna McNamara (2021) reflects upon what has been lost from online education in creative subjects focusing on actor training. McNamara proposes that there is a perception of loss and grief that students express from learning online, which she notes is problematic.

> Increasingly, narratives of loss and missing out have been played out in the media with regard to the impact of social distancing and restrictions upon education due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is my view that such a viewpoint will only serve to feed a narrative of deficit and learners as consumers being owed something they did not receive (McNamara, 2021)

Though this perception reads as bleak, McNamara also notes that the losses are in combination with advancement in practice. These advancements have happened through engagement with, rather than resistance to, online ways of expressing creativity, thus leading to innovations in the delivery of drama-based work online. We can only echo McNamara's view that a narrative of deficit only does learners harm and add that such a narrative is also detrimental to teachers. Reframing our approach to incorporating drama in online spaces is a key component of our professional development. Similarly, although Zoom has been offering theatre practitioners a way to continue delivering their practice and has kept theatres engaging with their audiences, there is often emphasis on the struggle of translating live work into interactive digital forms, as discussed by Marcus Bale and Peadar Donohoe (2020). Bale and Donohoe raise questions about the complexity of translating live practice into online settings, noting the complications that can arise from this process, which in their case ultimately led to the discontinuation of live practice on the online platform.

> Our technical setup was fairly complicated, with not only live discussions, but filmed performances of scenes, audio visuals, slides on themes and animations. Hence, we needed strong stable bandwidth to realise our vision for the Romeo and Juliet Session Online but at the same time we had to rely on an internet connection that could drop at any moment. Hence, the decision had to be made to discard the live option and instead record the whole webinar, including the interactive elements (p. 122).

Though this example once more demonstrates the complexity of translating practice online, it also opened up opportunities to share the practice using another approach by using pre-recorded material and interactive resources, which offer participatory engagement in unexpected ways. The discovery of new ways to engage students and audiences alike presents opportunities to advance practice through creative strategies. This takes advantage of the possibilities of the collaborative nature of online practice. We will now share experiences from our own practice that highlight the ideas discussed above.

1.3 Aha moments

In the next section, we will discuss our various individual experiences of working with drama online with different groups of students: student teachers and applied theatre students.

1.3.1 Experiences with student teachers

One of my earliest aha moments in the context of teacher education was extremely low-key, and yet it was perhaps a turning point: I suggested that my participants rename themselves on Zoom, first as numbers (for a drama game) and later as characters in a drama. This simple exercise was surprisingly challenging the first time the group attempted it because they were

mastering a new skill, however, it became a smooth operation as time progressed. This experience offered me two insights; the first was that I needed to give my learners and workshop participants a chance to experiment with the technology in order to master it. This realisation helped me create further moments within the drama work to explore the opportunities Zoom offered us. For example, as my students create still-images[4] in breakout rooms, I leave the mode of presentation open to them. While some groups present their still-images as a screenshot, others ask everyone to turn off their cameras, while they rearrange their Zoom-tiles to (re)create their image for us. The second insight was that the act of physically labelling themselves with their character names helps participants invest more deeply in the fictional context. Renaming themselves appears to make it clear to them that they are taking on a role, and they are much more likely to refer to each other by character name, rather than by their given names. This is a step, which can take quite a bit of practice, even with adult learners, but the technology scaffolds the group's learning.



Image 1: A collaborative still-image of a pig[5]

[4] We have chosen to name the drama conventions as they appear in Neelands and Goode's third edition of Structuring Drama Work (2015).

[5] For all of the following images, participants consented to publication.

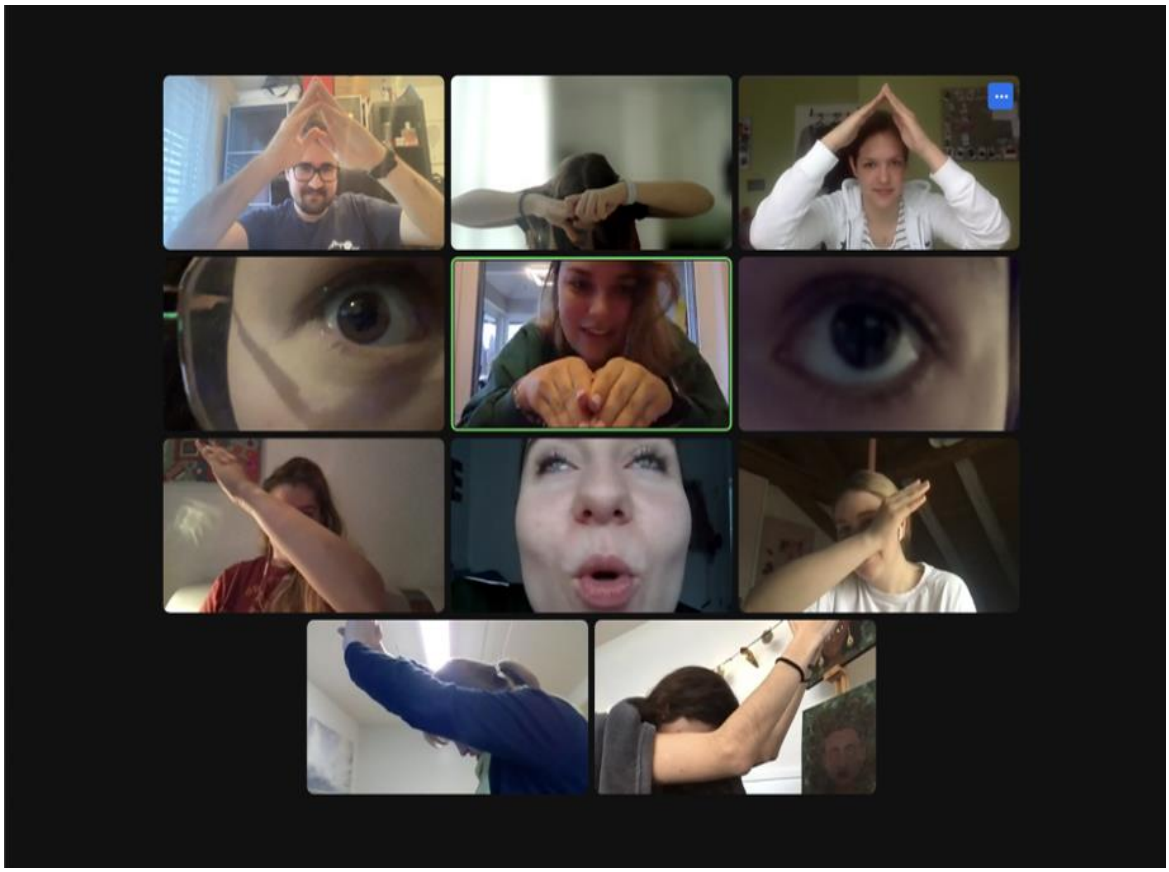


Image 2: A collaborative still-image of a wolf

Other personal key moments include recognising how simple it can be to work with transmedia in online contexts. In 2021, during a week-long compact course for student teachers at a Swiss university, the group seamlessly moved through a process drama which played out across various digital spaces, beginning with a soundscape (cameras off), then diving into an animated movie sequence on YouTube, and concluded with partner-work in breakout rooms, all without interrupting the flow of our story. Group discussions revealed that participants experienced the transition between media as being smoother and faster than it might have been in a physical space. In addition, from my perspective as the teacher, the inclusion of the movie clip did not feel forced, and I did not have the usual delays in getting the speakers and projector to work.

1.3.2 Experiences with applied theatre students

In the context of teaching applied theatre, another early example of embracing the switch to online practice happened when I worked with postgraduate students to collaboratively explore whether or not it was possible to be 'lost' in a fictional space created on Zoom. In this case, we used a drama in education methodology, Cecily O'Neill's process drama (1995), to explore a desert island and undertake an adventure together as pirates stranded in a new land. The group had experienced this workshop face-to-face on campus the previous term and they were excited to discover how to bring the world to life using Zoom. They used filters,

such as pirate hats and island images as virtual backgrounds to signify the fictional world we were creating. There is a particular reflection that I think is important to share from this experiment. Firstly, I personally enjoy working as a team with students to problem-solve and shape creative worlds together. The participants came up with so many creative solutions to respond to our challenge to work on Zoom, adapting the practice to work online without losing the quality of the methodology. Indeed, the group met this challenge with positivity, curiosity, and lateral thinking.

Secondly, I was struck by the sense of joy that came from a particular exercise where participants were asked to make a battle outfit from debris on the beach, usually a combination of tissue paper, foil, ribbons, bits of sails, ropes etc. This part of the process drama was even more exciting on Zoom because the outfits were created off camera. The 'reveal' of the costumes (on camera) was received with much laughter and enjoyment. The anticipation of each creation actually emphasised the importance of the 'Zoom window' as a way to build tension and celebrate the joyfulness of sharing creations. Thus, the online world we co-created was one of discovery, without the limits of a physical space. It benefited from the use of virtual backgrounds, as well as real and augmented costumes, and there were more possibilities for spontaneity and play than had previously been offered in-person. What we learnt from this experience was the need to be innovative and to find new ways to build the worlds we wanted to inhabit. This in no way felt limited by the online space. Thus the use of transmedia as an approach to developing dynamic online narratives through the use of storytelling across multiple online/media platforms helped us transcend limits we might encounter in physical spaces by allowing us to draw upon multimedia to tell the story of the virtual world we created. Sonia Baelo-Allué (2019) defines transmedia 'as a means to enhance the experience of telling and receiving stories by using multiple, dynamic media' (2019, p. 114a). Embracing what we have available to advance storytelling in an online space is therefore an opportunity to advance practice and not compromise it. Transmedia enables this change. Having set the scene for our following provocation, we will now elaborate on the need for drama in online settings to advance our argument.

2 Drama is necessary

Choosing to include drama in our online teaching whether by necessity or by choice[6] , means choosing to give our learners a holistic experience, as working with drama involves learning through all channels of the body: Cognitive, affective, and kinaesthetic (see Göksel, 2019; Schewe, 1993). Although the Zoom screen is flat, when we engage in doing drama, we play

[6] Indeed, during most of the pandemic, we had to teach online. In the future, it will hopefully be a choice to teach either fully online or to maintain hybrid practice.

with embodiment in relation to our screens both as a co-player and as our audience. We argue that this playful aspect of drama is necessary in the somewhat stiff and formal online space, in which we tend to feel overly self-aware, in part because we constantly see ourselves on-camera[7]. Thus, interacting with the screen through drama work helps us take the focus off of ourselves as we transcend physical space through digital transmedia approaches. We can engage in narratives by easily moving between platforms, for example by working with jamboards, viewing a clip on YouTube, and working with others in breakout rooms[8]. These changes of venue and activity help pace a lesson and thus keep participants attentive and engaged.

Indeed, as working with drama invites us to engage more of our senses than we would typically do in a Zoom session, it keeps us actively listening and participating. It also widens the scope for creative interactions, which might not otherwise be present in an online session. For example, when attending a virtual seminar, participants are mostly expected to keep their microphones on mute, and perhaps also to turn their cameras off. Most of the time, there is an opportunity to ask questions in the chat and perhaps to ask questions at the end of the session. What we are proposing here is a challenge to this passive predisposition.

Contrary to popular belief, the Zoom tool does not dictate enforced participant silence, rather we seem to have collectively opted for the easy way out in perpetuating the "banking system" (Freire, 1996), in which one person lectures a group. We offer this example to illustrate the passivity that most participants unfortunately experience when engaging with the Zoom platform.

When it comes right down to it, what is the difference between attending such an event and watching a recording of it on YouTube? Imagine instead, that the same event were to include audience interaction, perhaps in the form of polls, short games, and a chance to chat in breakout rooms; wouldn't that completely change the participants' experience? To clarify: These inbuilt online tools support flow, immersion in imagined worlds, (simultaneous) communication through multiple channels, and much more. In our experience, these alternative ways to interact and to make collaborative decisions are ideal for incorporating performative elements that keep learners dynamically engaged and thus invite creativity. In addition, these kinds of tools make a space for working in the moment and being creatively present with each other in order to create connections that bypass the digital divide. This is a

[7] There is now an option to turn this feature off in some platforms

[8] For clarity, we are aware that teaching across multiple subjects engages with these tools. However, we are specifically thinking about how these tools can be used for performative teaching and learning. We strongly advocate for specifically infusing online practice with drama and arts-based learning in order to enhance collaboration, artistry, focus, and participation, to name a few.

quality that is innately associated with drama. Much like in the physical classroom, it does not require a lot of drama work to make a positive change in the pace and structure of an online lesson or seminar. Infusing drama into a lesson, even if it is just a few games to get the participants out of their chairs and moving around their individual physical spaces, is a real gain for our learners who enjoy and thrive from experiential learning approaches.

2.1 Increasing accessibility

Another strong argument in favour of continuing to foster drama in digital spaces is the aspect of decolonising access. For example, international online drama workshops are arguably more inclusive than their in-person counterparts as they provide opportunities for drama practitioners from all over the world to join and learn together without traveling abroad. As long as they have a Wi-Fi connection and access to a Wi-Fi-enabled device, anyone can participate[9] - even if they do not have the resources to travel to an in-person workshop. If we go back to only sharing our practice in-person, we risk keeping knowledge more elite and exclusionary. Keeping drama alive in online spaces is therefore also a pledge to keep the diversity of the drama community alive without always having to travel.

Furthermore, drama work is necessary in online spaces because it allows teachers and learners alike to play: Play with the technology, play with the space, and to engage meaningfully with each other and with the lesson content. Stuart Brown (2009) refers to the properties of play as being inherently natural and exhilarating and thus comprising an important part of human development:

> Play provides freedom from time. When we are fully engaged in play, we lose a sense of the passage of time. We also experience diminished consciousness of self. We stop worrying about whether we look good or awkward, smart or stupid. We stop thinking about the fact that we are thinking. In imaginative play, we can even be a different self. We are fully in the moment, in the zone. We are experiencing what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called “flow.” (2009, p. 17).

Being ‘in the moment’, stepping away from the pressures and the stress of the outside world in order to creatively engage with play can provide a sense of safety in a non-judgemental space. Play is therefore necessary as it allows participants to take ownership of what could be a somewhat uncomfortable space, such as a Zoom room filled with relative strangers, each in

[9] We are aware that there are still access issues, particularly in some parts of the globe, but these have improved significantly over the past few years, including programmes to provide Wi-Fi to large portions of the population. We acknowledge there are still many locations without access to Wi-Fi and supporting devices, but for the purposes of this article we are focussing on increased access rather than claiming there is ‘total’ access to the online world we are discussing.

their own homes. Creating a sense of ensemble within the group through drama games can allow participants to engage more deeply in their learning and to explore the technology playfully. One way we engage students online or in-person is to lead by example. We show vulnerability as teachers and as facilitators as we model play. We jump into a role, we invite our participants to join us, and as much as possible, we participate in the action. We thus show our students ways to teach and learn through play.

2.2 Immersion and creative safety in online spaces

One of the challenges of working in online spaces is that participants may feel exposed, even if they are working in their own home. Short of turning their camera off (which usually defeats the purpose of the exercise) they cannot hide in the Zoom space. In addition, if they are attending a lecture or a meeting, the tone can be quite serious and formal, which may make them feel ill at ease. Including drama in these types of settings can serve to break this formality, change the pace, and encourage more active participation. At the very least, we can make our lessons playful, so that the Zoom space becomes a more familiar one, thus perhaps helping students to feel more confident and comfortable in other online settings.

2.2.1 Experiences with applied theatre students

Reflecting upon teaching applied theatre, in the course of experimenting with ways to enable students to feel safe when interacting online, I developed the CR38TUR3 Methodology, which is the online equivalent of an escape room (Abraham, 2018). I created this methodology to engage students in reflexive practice and empathy building. The workshop takes place in the future and offers students an immersive experience working together with a scientist (teacher-in-role), to upload ideas of what it means to be human to a second character, who needs this knowledge to safely escape the laboratory they have been living in. This is an exercise in deconstructing unconscious bias. It asks participants to think about their preconceptions, values, and the way they understand complex concepts like love, as well as how these concepts may differ for every individual present in the workshop. The most important quality of the project that makes it effective is immersion – participants need to feel part of the world they are occupying for the duration of the workshop in order to feel responsible for the fate of the secondary character. Being immersed in role protects into emotion (Bolton, 1984) and allows participants to feel safe in the drama space when working with complex topics. I had also run this session in-person, and it can be tense depending on the ways in which the participants-in-role chose to engage with the scenario. The escape room is an increasingly popular social activity that people are familiar with as a format, and this combined with the drama convention of teacher-in-role (see O'Neill, 1995, p. 61) can be a powerful and immersive experience.

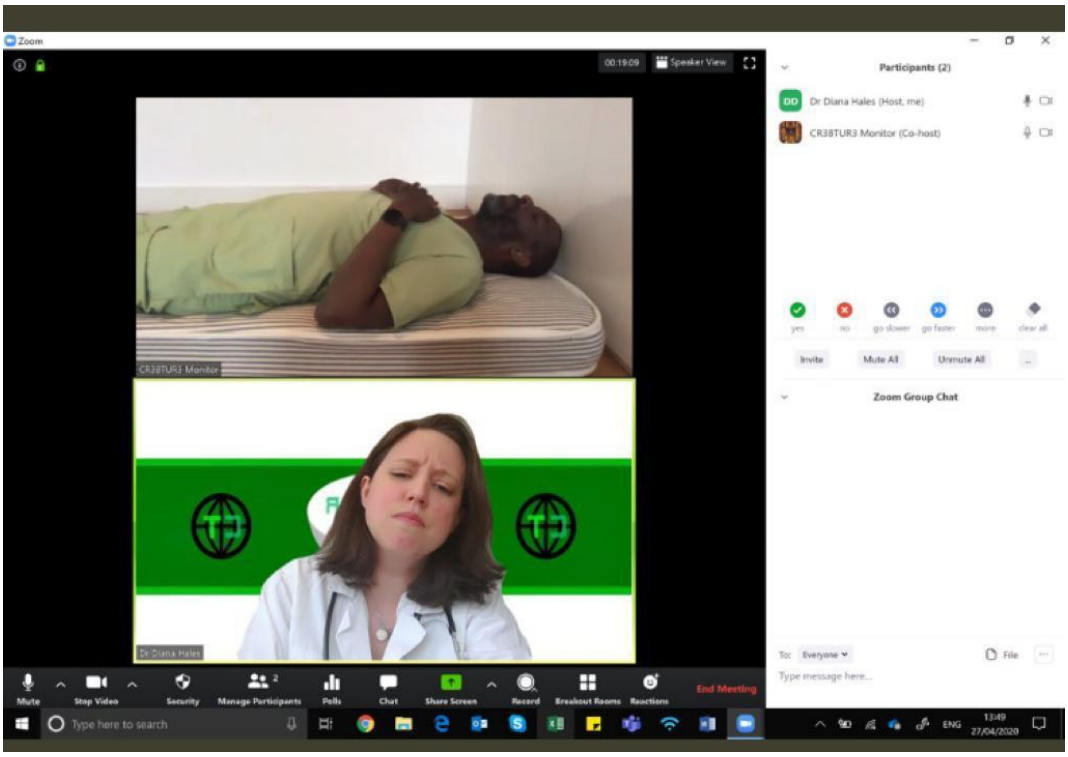


Image 3: CR38TURE methodology on Zoom

One of the aspects of doing drama online that interested me, was the way the functionality of Zoom allowed us to be more playful and to offer increased avenues of participation simply through the use of private messaging to set up sub-plots within the drama or to give secret mission briefings to different people. These 'plot twists' added humour and excitement and encouraged participants to be playful in their roles. It also provided an avenue for students who were a little more reserved to participate without feeling pressure to dominate spoken conversation. Students additionally engaged in private message missions to recruit people to help them carry out their tasks with ease. The offer of new types of participation through text-based interactions and through polling for group decisions added to the immersive quality of the workshop creating a lasting experience. Additionally, the medium of text messaging is one the students felt very comfortable with, as they also actively engage in text messaging on their devices in the physical world.

2.3 Why we need to play in online spaces

As argued above, play is both a necessary component of drama work and a necessary element when teaching in online spaces. In the course of our experience teaching in the Zoom space, we have both found that playfulness creates a forward movement: It elicits immediate responses from the group. For example, one way to support the drama convention of hot-seating is to spotlight a participant in-role. In the Zoom space, this action brings that particular Zoom tile (video) to the forefront, i.e. into the spotlight, so that the group's attention is

focused on the same place at the same time. We have found this to be a simple yet effective tool. It has the benefit of helping those outside the spotlight to relax, as they know that the attention is no longer on them. Unlike in a physical space, we can, to a certain extent, control who sees what through the digital medium and this enables better focus. Thus, we use technological tools to direct attention to where and when we want it. For example, in a process drama workshop exploring the impact of climate change, the spotlight function enabled an extra layer of playfulness, as the participant on the hot-seat used a direct form of address to share her thoughts with the group, whilst in spotlight mode. Thus, looking directly into the camera gave the group a sense of being seen and this helped elicit lively interaction. We also discovered, that working in the Zoom space can be quite intimate, as participants can choose to move very close to the screen - closer than we might typically feel comfortable with in a physical space. We also noticed that, from our experience, we felt more connected to participants in terms of the amount of eye contact: As opposed to in a physical space, in a virtual space participants' gaze tends to be more often directed at the screen and thus seemingly at the person speaking. Particularly if the speaker views the group in gallery mode, the impression is of having a fair share of the group's attention. This experience is not always as poignant in physical spaces.

We have experienced playing in the Zoom space as a rewarding experience; it is a challenge for teachers and students alike and it often leads to learning moments we can share. For example, surprising the group by suddenly using a filter (such as a moustache or a hat) or turning on a virtual background can motivate them to explore these functions and to come up with innovative ways to include them in their own practice. Allowing participants time in a solo breakout room is also a fun way to develop a character, or explore an emotion, without the pressure of an external audience, as the computer screen becomes a mirror in which actors can see their own (re)actions. In addition, playfulness can lead to productive collaboration, which is possible in so many ways in the digital medium, be it via breakout rooms, google documents, jamboards, or programs and platforms that allow participants to draw or create something together.

We have found that one of the conditions for successful collaboration is working in a non-judgemental space. Breakout rooms can provide such spaces, as they remove small groups of participants into quieter spaces in which they can work uninterrupted, without having to compete with other groups. Here is an illustrative example focused on dynamic storytelling, which features participants working in themed breakout rooms. Each breakout room invites a small group to explore a different section of a story, which is then shared back with the group. Rotating through the various breakout rooms, participants discover the story collaboratively. The flexibility of this tool means that the facilitator can multi-role or add in different

information for each group as they build their own narrative. For example, if the group are in role as detectives, they may receive different clues that they must use to reconstruct what has happened. Being part of the same session – yet separate – provides participants with an opportunity to work together without overhearing other groups. This allows them to come up with original stories as a team, which they can present back to the whole group. Similarly, they could use break out rooms to interview characters using drama conventions such as hot-seating, in order to find out more about a particular event or perspective. Having an online break out room has, from our experience, heightened creativity, and allowed more diverse narratives to arise in comparison with in-person iterations of the same session[10] . In addition, the teacher can choose to join the groups, or to leave them to work autonomously, thus giving them space to breathe, think, and play.

A further playful element is the competition that can be introduced through drama games, offering a sense of safety and support for participants. Factors that create this safe space include the non-judgmental nature of drama work, as well as the distance the virtual medium affords us, and the agreement that there are no real-world implications for taking risks in creative worlds. This type of interaction fosters positive anticipation about the outcome of an exercise, focuses attention, and increases participation. This allows us to learn by taking creative risks rather than personal risks, thus building a supportive space for exploration and learning.

2.4 Holistic play and leadership

So far, we have touched on why we feel drama is necessary in online contexts. We have stated that drama work is holistic, engaging our bodies, hearts, and minds. This holistic aspect of working with drama invites participants to work with more of their senses than they normally would in the Zoom space. For example, engaging in drama work encourages participants to communicate and read body language through posture, gesture and non-verbal and paraverbal channels. Furthermore, drama in the online space allows participants to explore technology in playful ways and it helps take the focus off the self and instead direct it towards the lesson content. The next logical question is then, why is holistic learning necessary? Taiwo Afolabi (2017) proposes that there is a need for a holistic and participatory approach to practice in order to offer opportunities for positive and supportive leadership, suggesting that:

> This holistic notion of participation will help to build trust, networks, institute collaborative planning and approaches, and ensure longevity of practice even when the practitioner is no longer there because people's

[10] For example, there was a greater variation in participant contributions when they worked in break out rooms and couldn't overhear each other.

> vulnerabilities are embraced through love, listening and sacrifice. These innate human attributes engender a leadership model that is innovative, community based and partnership driven, and that fosters capacity-building. (2017, p. 79)

As practitioners working with student teachers and applied theatre students, we consider the role of leadership as central to our practice. We therefore propose that there is a need for care, compassion, and teamwork when training student teachers and applied theatre students. This is twofold, as we must offer our students care and compassion, while also inviting them to reflect on how they might incorporate these values in their own future professional contexts. Working holistically thus develops skills in listening, trust, and connection, which are valuable qualities inherent within drama practice. The need to support wellbeing in our students and communities was pronounced by the pandemic and warrants an approach to practice that embraces such holistic models of care. Indeed, drama enables us to offer these in creative, fictitious worlds, which offer escape, discovery, and an exciting way to navigate learning.

As pedagogues, we feel driven to educate the whole person, not just their heads. For this reason, we feel that working with drama is an ideal mode for developing interdisciplinary skills such as collaboration, teambuilding, and communication. Drama usually asks participants to be empathetic, to problem solve, to reflect and to talk to each other, both in and out of role. As Charlena Wynn (2018) points out, interdisciplinary skills are what most employers look for in prospective employees; they are the skills we hope our friends and family have and they are the skills we practice daily. In teaching, whether we are working online or in-person, we wish to cultivate these interdisciplinary skills in our students. Now that we have discussed the necessity of drama for online teaching and learning, it is important to think about the urgency and timeliness of creative interaction. Next, we will therefore offer insights into our perceptions of the relevance of drama now.

3 Drama is relevant

Teaching (with) drama online has its place in our fast-paced and increasingly technological world. Indeed, we argue that cultivating drama in digital spaces helps to keep the arts relevant by connecting technological advancement with creativity in new and exciting ways. In the earlier examples drawn from our own practice, we can see that simply allowing participants to explore the features of a platform or tool can scaffold their drama experience, while the drama work can help them relax and enjoy a space that is sometimes perceived as lonely, formal, or static. Furthermore, giving permission for creative engagement in online learning is a simple but highly effective approach that acknowledges the virtual space, whilst traversing

it by inviting participatory exploration. For example, opening an interactive whiteboard on Zoom and inviting students to explore what they can do in this space gives them autonomy. Additionally, this allows the teacher to take a step back. Generating space for autonomous play and learning is a particular focus of drama education. It realigns power dynamics and enables students to have creative freedom. In this sense, we are here considering the ethics and values of drama in education as a field of research and practice, which are heightened by the virtual space.

The significance of providing a virtual space for creative interaction is not just important as a means of continuing education and learning; it is paramount to offer a space for students who may be feeling isolated, frightened, and uncertain, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual space is a place in which to connect. Returning to Stuart Brown (2009), engaging with play is vital to help adults connect by inviting opportunities to create together and to bond as a group in the process. Isolating in the pandemic only increased the need for interpersonal connections to form. An important quality of play that can enable this is reciprocity. Nicola Abraham (2021) discusses a pedagogy of reciprocity within online creative practice that offers a relational and holistic view of creative engagement. Finding connection and knowing that we can create things together is the essence of the pedagogy of reciprocity. We are fearlessly learning something new together. We are collectively taking risks in the online space, both creative and personal, which helps to connect virtually in ways we sometimes cannot in physical spaces. Reciprocity is enabled through autonomy, which is in turn encouraged by the tools of an online platform like Zoom. This allows teachers and students to connect creatively as equals, thus helping to fill a void that became apparent during the pandemic. Reciprocity is an act of generosity that we can provide within the creative interactions that support student wellbeing in a time of precarity. People experiencing anxiety can be supported by play as a cathartic outlet by embracing and giving permission for joy and this removes us at least creatively from the uncertainty of daily life. In addition, it supports students to positively navigate this uncertainty through a fictional frame. Giving participants permission to play in a safe space (Hunter, 2008), without harmful consequences, and with results that are focussed on self-discovery, lays the foundations for personal and communal wellbeing. This is a quality that interactive drama offers.

3.1 Drama and the digital

In his work with drama, pedagogy, and the digital, Paul Sutton (2021) describes our emerging virtual landscape as:

> rich, fertile territory for a school of efficacious applied theatre practice, encouraging our participants to not only act theatrically, socially, educatively and politically, but also to 'act smart', in tune with the digital devices in most of their pockets and homes (p. 203).

Indeed, use of digital devices are prevalent in schools particularly at university level study. Engaging with readily available and daily used tools creatively can enhance student capacity to think laterally. It can encourage students to incorporate the technologies they already have at their fingertips into their practice.

3.1.1 Experiences with student teachers

Reflecting on my online classes with student teachers, I have observed that so many of us are constantly online connecting via our phones and other digital devices, that the shift to working and especially playing in virtual spaces really should be a natural one. Even if we do not consider ourselves digital natives most of our daily engagements will likely involve some sort of interaction with technology. In fact, drama practitioner and author, Tony Goode, joined one of my classes online, thus connecting his home in the UK to my students' homes in Switzerland for a cosy chat; a perk that was afforded to us by working in the Zoom space. In the course of our chat, he noted that if he were to rewrite the drama conventions in the book, "Structuring drama work" (Neelands and Goode, 2015) he would update them to reflect the way we communicate via new technologies.

In addition to zooming international drama experts into our classrooms, digital platforms and digital devices can also be a means of transporting us to a fictional world as respite from the strains of work-related communication. Helen Nicholson (2005) draws upon the work of Richard Schechner to propose that drama is a *transportative* form that transcends the 'real world' into a fictional space. In this sense, transportation "is about travelling into another world, often fictional, which offers both new ways of seeing and different ways of looking at the familiar" (2005, p. 13). Nicholson's proposition offers useful ways to think of drama in the digital realm as a means of escaping the uncertainty of our current reality for respite. It engages our imaginations in the realm of unlimited possibility and invites us into a liminal space between fiction and reality that we can experience without leaving the house. The need for this type of experience has increased, due to the impact of social isolation on the emotional wellbeing of students and teachers alike.

3.2 Creative urgency

Finally, we would like to address the notion of urgency: Applying drama in online spaces is particularly pressing because it puts the focus on connection, listening, and collaboration. These are the interdisciplinary or "soft" skills that can now be found in most modern school curricula. The development and practice of these skills has arguably been lacking during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As in-person contact resumes, some of these skills will inevitably be in focus in many classrooms and workplaces. However, additionally focusing on these skills in virtual spaces can only be a plus. Indeed, practicing these skills in online spaces is a natural step, given the collaborative nature of many of the technologies we have already discussed herein, and given, as discussed above, that we increasingly spend much of our free time online in some form or another. Perhaps one of the most convincing arguments for including drama in online work is the urgent need to reflect on current events and to consider how their delivery and consumption via various (social) media platforms impacts our learners.

3.2.1 Experiences with student teachers

In my experience, combining drama and technology training teachers offers us exciting ways to examine, for example, the impact and real danger of single narratives, such as they are often uncritically presented to us via the media. Who is telling us what, and why? Drama helps the group think critically and collectively. Working across multiple media and using various channels of communication gives participants the tools to support lateral thinking and active citizenship. As an example of this, student teachers exploring ways to teach with fairy tales worked with the drama convention gossip circle. In breakout rooms and using the chat function, they traded rumours about the "wicked" characters, such as the robbers and the wolf. Later these rumours were challenged, and the characters were re-examined using the conventions of role-on-the-wall (done via interactive whiteboard) and hot-seating (using the spotlight function). Although these techniques can also be applied in face-to-face teaching, the opportunity to challenge single narratives could have easily been lost. Working in the Zoom space, however, maintained focus while the functionality of Zoom linked the activities in a way that supported the development of skills such as complex thinking and engagement with pluralism.

Just as our students continue to develop their professional skills, we continue to grow as teachers and drama practitioners. While applying drama in virtual spaces can be uncomfortable at times, it is this feeling of discomfort that pushes us to improve and to reflect critically on our practice. If we allow ourselves to enjoy the challenge of not knowing, and to show some vulnerability while teaching, the journey can be greatly rewarding. Drama practitioner and author, Kathryn Dawson (University of Texas at Austin), spoke to my students via Zoom about teaching and learning with drama in digital settings, emphasising that: "The

reality is, this work is fun: It should make you feel good and make you think critically" (Dawson, 15.02.2022, online workshop). This takeaway message resonated strongly with me both as a teacher and as a drama practitioner, reminding me of the power of play, particularly in educational settings (see Brown, 2009).

4 Sometimes drama online *is* better

Although there is no need to directly compare in-person and online settings, we wish to highlight here that working online has its advantages. As previously discussed, doing drama online allows us to transcend physical barriers and enables drama practitioners and researchers to connect with colleagues around the world. Due to recent global events, many people have now bridged the divide in knowledge, either out of curiosity or out of necessity, and can make use of a range of digital technologies. This skill set naturally leads to transmedial work, which is something many of our learners may feel more comfortable with than their teachers. This, however, provides a good opportunity for the teacher/facilitator to show some vulnerability; it is okay to let participants take the lead in setting up or explaining things to the group. By inviting our students to help us push the boundaries of the technology, as Nicky's students did in creating an online version of the Pirates process drama, the whole group, teacher, and students alike learn about and through the digital medium. Particularly when working with future teachers and facilitators, it makes sense to model a culture of care in which it is safe to make mistakes or to confess not knowing all the answers. Exploring how to make best use of the technology available, particularly for creative purposes and in creative ways, supports and encourages learning and autonomy. In addition, such transparency humanises the teacher, providing a good role model for student teachers, as well helping the group form connections with each other as fellow humans, not as Zoombies. As the reader may recall, Zoombies are essentially 'screen zombies', a state of passivity that we wish to resist in favour of engaged interaction.

Another benefit of doing drama online is that it can be less invasive than in-person practice: Although being in the Zoom space is essentially being in someone's "lounge", participants can choose what to show and what not to show on camera. They can, for example, choose to use a screen filter or a virtual background, or they can choose to set up their physical space, perhaps by covering a bookcase with fabric or placing plants or paintings in the background. In some cases, they may even choose to turn their cameras off for a while. Sometimes it is worth discussing the implication of deciding where to Zoom from, as students do sometimes join class from private spaces in their homes, such as their bedrooms. In that case, it can be helpful to discuss rearranging the room, thinking about where to point the camera, choosing not to sit (or lie) on the bed, or choosing to use a screen filter. It can be helpful to remind

students that they can decide what part of their personal space they share with the group. Thus, students learn to 'frame' what they share on the screen, thereby developing their professional skills in self-presentation. Other fun features of Zoom include applying virtual make-up, such as augmented lips and eyebrows, and even beards and moustaches, which can be convincingly mapped onto a face. This feature, along with the option of changing names at any time, helps support work in-role. The 'name change' function allows participants to add additional information, such as their preferred pronouns, which is helpful to ensure that we remain inclusive and follow best practice in this area. Having thus explored creative safe practice on Zoom, we can take a look at the key take-aways from our experiences working with drama in online spaces.

5 From Zoombies to humans

Now that we have the necessary tools, it is time to shift from being Zoombies to being humans: Humans interacting authentically, meaningfully, creatively, and playfully in the Zoom space. In this article, we have discussed the potential of Zoom as a tool that enables us to continue using humanising pedagogies that embrace reciprocity and connection through creative exchange. The role of drama as a strategy to keep students excited about learning presents opportunities for discovery and promotes positive wellbeing. This is well documented as an *affective* tool (see Thompson, 2011). Although we acknowledge the challenge that online teaching has brought to our established, tried and tested pedagogies, we note that opportunities for new ways of interacting together creatively upskills students and teachers in digital technologies. In addition, it enhances communication skills by making us think differently about our approach to collaboration. For those who have chosen to embrace the uncertainty that new technologies bring to our practice, and embody the playfulness that they teach, there is joy to be found in lateral thinking and problem solving together with our students. When we are faced with uncertainty, it is vital to prepare ourselves with strategies of resilience. It is imperative to prepare our students to find excitement in times of precarity, and to embrace the unknown as a creative opportunity. There are elements of online practice that will of course fall out of fashion. However, we write with a commitment to what we have learnt so far, by recognising how it has enabled, benefited, and provided access for the communities of students we have worked with in this time.

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