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Secret agent meets pirate professor on Zoom

Collaboratively creating characters in a digital space

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This Window-Of-Practice contribution focuses on a teaching experience where elements of on-site teaching were successfully transferred to an online theatre workshop for English learners at a German university in 2021. The sequence of activities was also presented at the 8th Scenario Forum Symposium. The text describes the stages of trust-building, character-creation based on a visual prompt, character-exploration and improvisation of short scenes with the created characters and focuses on how the online environment (in this case the video conference platform Zoom) can be creatively used to let learners make theatrical experiences and foster a collaborative atmosphere between participants in physically remote locations.

1 Introduction

Going performative in digital teaching? In winter semester 2020/2021 the question for me was more how to go digital in performative teaching, namely, could I take an EFL theatre workshop – which I had taught on-site for 10 years – online? I naively assumed “yes” and the participants of the 2.5-day workshop, 10 university students from various disciplines who had not known each other before, took on the challenge and seemed to genuinely enjoy working together in the digital space. In this article I want to reflect on some of the potentials and challenges I encountered throughout, focussing on the topic of collaboratively creating characters in an online setting. The challenges were varied, partly technical, partly to do with questions of trust and collaboration. Technical challenges included for example unstable internet connections for some students – one participant dropped out after the first day due to this – and varying sound quality on the students’ part, which was sometimes a challenge for activities focused on listening. For the instructor some challenges consisted in figuring out how to assign a fixed order to participants (to imitate a circle setting) and how to give instructions to the whole class while they were working in small groups. For small group work, breakout rooms would have been the first choice, but I had experienced previously that participants do not always notice the temporary visible Zoom “broadcast” messages that you can send to the breakout rooms. Later, when participants were rehearsing different scenes in breakout rooms, another challenge was to keep up with what was going on by dropping in to the rooms regularly. This, however, is not too different from a setting where participants go off to rehearse in different corners of a larger building, which would have been the case for

the on-site version of this workshop. More personal issues were taken into account that students might be shy to do physical activities and be vulnerable in front of the camera and to let strangers have a glimpse of their private rooms (Zoom settings of blurring and virtual backgrounds can help here, but these are not compatible with all computers). In the following paragraphs I will therefore address these challenges and how I tried to overcome them.

2 Physical warm-up

Just as in a face-to-face setting, we started the workshop with simple warm-up activities like stretching and bending (“you are plucking apples from a tree, try to reach the highest ones – now put them in your basket – reach out again”), shaking out hands and feet while counting down.

Participants can do these activities either with camera on, or with camera off if they feel uncomfortable about being seen. Another option I offered was for participants to leave their camera on but move to an area of their room outside the camera angle – which for me as facilitator felt like a workable compromise and more inclusive than if everyone had turned their cameras off and only presented me with a panel of black tiles.

3 Observation – movement – working together

To lead up to collaboration and to build trust among participants, the workshop continued with pair activities focusing on observation and non-verbal interaction. Since I wanted to be able to give spoken instructions to the whole group, no breakout rooms were used but participants were asked to use Zoom’s function of ‘pinning’ a partner, so they would see their partner in a bigger tile. Pairs can be created by the facilitator renaming participants and adding the same number to two participants’ names each. The trust-building activities included:

1) change 3 things: Person A is asked to take a close look at their partner. Person B then turns off their camera and changes 3 things (e.g., remove earrings, put on glasses, etc., but only things the partner is able to see on screen). Cameras are turned on again and all As try to detect what has changed. In a small group this can be done by every B listing the changes orally, in larger groups all Bs can simultaneously voice their guesses in a private chat with their partners, so that this does not take up too much time. Then As and Bs change roles.

2) mirroring: all As are asked to mime for example a bathroom routine, with the Bs mirroring their pinned partners’ movements, then they change roles.

3) long distance boxing match: the pairs still have their partner pinned and are asked to engage in a non-verbal, slow-motion boxing match – and encouraged to dramatically act out both

punching and being hit. The idea here was to create the illusion of physically 'receiving' an impulse from their spatially remote partner, similar as in virtual versions of soundball, passing on facial expressions or invisible objects or similar games.

4 Listening to each other

After these non-verbal activities, listening activities were included as a more cognitive form of warm-up. These were played with the whole group. If the group is very large, they could also be done in several breakout-rooms. To play these games which are normally played standing up or sitting in a circle and require a fixed order of participants, the facilitator renames participants by adding a number before each name, so they will know when it is their turn. Suitable activities here are for example variations of word-chain games:

1. Word association, with each participant supplying a word and the next quickly giving the first word that comes to their mind when they hear it, such as: house – roof – chimney – Santa Claus, etc.
2. A player starts a word with the last letter of the previous word, they do not need to be connected semantically, for example: house – elephant – tea – apple, etc.
3. One-word story: each player contributes one (or two, or three) words (number to be agreed on in the beginning) to a collaboratively told story. This requires close listening to both sentence structure and content and keeping up with the development of the story. It also introduces the principle of collaboratively building one story and not trying to push your own ideas that is crucial to improvisation – a principle which might need to be explained to participants if they are new to this activity.
If participants are struggling to keep track of the story, it can help if the facilitator recounts what has been said up to that point. A rule of thumb in improvisation classes is to not use 'I' or 'you' in this game (as this can be confusing) but tell the story from a 3rd person perspective and to name the protagonist(s) early on.

To let participants continue working on stories together in a smaller group, pairs are now invited to join breakout rooms. Participants have been given the script for the activity "You will never believe what happened to me yesterday", which is another improvisation game that focuses on the principle of 'accept and build', challenges creativity a bit more and asks for spontaneous production of sentences using various past tenses.

Structure:

A: "You will never believe what happened to me yesterday!"

B: "Oh, I know. I saw you. You (*person B describes what A did/was doing when B saw them – for example*): you were walking across the roof of the supermarket next door, cheered on by a crowd of people. Why?"

A: (*A now has to justify why they did what B described – such as*): “The neighbour’s cat had jumped up to the supermarket roof and would not come down, so I climbed up and rescued it.”

5 Working with physical props and virtual backgrounds

Is it possible to create a sense of being connected across the little boxes typical for video conference platforms like Zoom? The previous exercises were already supposed to do this through words and movement, but can this idea be reinforced with physical objects and visuals? I had gained some ideas from participating in online drama workshops and from watching several live theatre performances on Zoom prior to teaching my own theatre workshop. Passing on or (virtually) ‘sharing’ an object can create a certain idea of spatial continuity. For example, the activity *pass the prop* can be played with real objects players usually have in easy reach around their desks such as pens, water bottles or coffee cups. The aim of this very well-known activity is to use the objective in mime but not use it as what it really is (a pen thus becomes a flute, toothbrush, cigarette, etc.). In an online setting participants can additionally be encouraged to play around with creatively passing around the object from one Zoom window to the other (varying direction, angle of the object, speed of movement) and the receiver should try to receive it in the same way. As in other games normally played in a circle, in Zoom the facilitator can either call out the next person by name or number all participants before or let participants choose who they want to pass their object to by calling out to that person. When participants have become accustomed to this idea, they can later use this technique in their improvised scenes. If participants have similar-looking items (cups, bottles, plates, food etc.) this works well to create the illusion of a shared space, for example with a waiter in one Zoom tile handing a glass to a guest in another tile, or two people passing a bottle back and forth between each other. In two-person-scenes actors can also place an object at the edge of their Zoom window so that part of it is out of view and if their scene partner does so as well with an object that looks similar (this works well with bottles or vases), the illusion is created of the object being in both Zoom windows at the same time. Depending on participants’ access to certain features of the Zoom platform, they could also:

- 1) use video filters in Zoom which offer a limited choice of virtual hats, glasses, beards etc. Apps such as *snap camera* offer a wider variety but need to be installed beforehand;
- 2) use virtual backgrounds: different backgrounds suggest that characters are in different locations but maybe connected on the phone or in a video conference or the same background to suggest they are in the same location;

- 3) edit an image to create a stronger illusion of spatial continuity: it is possible (for a scene with 2 characters) to cut an image in half in an image editing software and have each actor use one half as a background. For this to work, the two actors have to be in the same position on everyone's screen – depending on the Zoom version, facilitators may be able to adjust this manually.

6 Creating characters

After the warm-up activities, participants are assigned to breakout rooms with the task to create a character based on visual prompts, namely, objects in a suitcase. This is a variation of the drama convention *role on the wall* (Neelands & Goode, 2000, 22). Each group is sent an image file via chat (or email) which shows a suitcase and various objects that were found in this suitcase. Based on this they are to create a character profile for the owner of the suitcase, considering outside aspects (personality, age, job, relationships, interests) and inside aspects (hopes, fears, secret desires) of their character. They are also asked to give their character a name.

To flesh out the character, each group is then asked to take part in a collective or *multiple hot-seating* (Even, 2011) activity with members of the other groups asking questions about the character, such as “where did you grow up?” and the group members answering spontaneously, drawing on what they agreed on with their group mates and improvising answers to questions that weren't discussed in their preparation session. I have found that this activity is usually very productive but easier in a face-to-face setting as turn-taking among group members is harder in online environment and there can be some awkward silence at first. Scaffolding: If the facilitator thinks that students may be hesitant to ask questions, let all students prepare one or two questions in advance. To make it visually clearer, the members of the character on the hot seat could use the same video filter (for example hat, glasses) to signal that they are all part of one character.

7 Playing with the characters

Participants should now have a general idea of the character they are going to play. To find the physicality of their character, the predominantly verbal phase of character creation is followed by two activities that concentrate on movement and body language.

Walks: individually (on or off camera) each participant – several are playing the same role as this is all based on the suitcase activity – tries walking around as the character in different situations prompted by the facilitator (for example: “you are coming home late, what do you do, how do you move?” “you are trying to catch the bus, you need to hurry, you are feeling very happy”, etc.)

Entrances (adapted from Dahl, 2009): using the Zoom window as stage, every player moves 'off-stage' and enters (in character) reacting to different prompts such as: "your character is entering... an elevator, a night club, a fancy hotel, etc." – "how does your character move in these settings?"

The final activity and the one that this sequence of activities has been working towards is a series of improvisations using the roles the participants have created.

Character + 'neutral' role: In breakout rooms (2 players each), the participants are asked to act out the following two scenarios: the character wants to buy something (the other person is a 'neutral' shopkeeper character or could try to integrate aspects of their character into a shopkeeper's role) or is asking for directions from a stranger on the street. Then switch – person B is one of the created characters, person A is shopkeeper or giving directions.

Meeting other suitcase characters: Several of the created characters improvise scenes of meeting each other e.g., at an airport, farmers' market, dinner party. The facilitator can optionally provide virtual backgrounds for these scenarios that all participants in a scene can use (put image files in chat and tell students to download them before they join breakout rooms or put links in a shared document or keep files on a learning platform that all can access) and can ask participants to play with ideas to create the illusion of shared space as described in section 5.

8 Writing in role

During the workshop as an individual or group task or as a homework activity, participants can now engage in various writing activities: write a diary entry from the point of view of their character reporting what happened in the improvisations – going to the shop, meeting people at the airport, etc.

They could also write a monologue from the point of view of one of the objects (adapted from Hensel, 2020, p. 253) in the suitcases: how did it come to be in the possession of this person, how does the owner treat this object, what has it seen that maybe other people don't know about the owner. (Depending on the time frame, this could also be done as an oral activity in a breakout room.)

For collaborative writing during the workshop, various types of etherpads (like Padlet) or other tools that allow participants to work in a shared space (Google.docs, Jamboard, Miro, Mural, etc.) may work if it is acceptable that everyone sees what every group is writing. If not, the facilitator can create separate pads or shared documents for each group and share the link with the respective group. Etherpads are quite practical when students are in many breakout

rooms working on a task which requires some kind of written output and the facilitator wants to have an eye on what is going on or see how quickly the groups are progressing without having to go through all the rooms. If only one shared document is used, the instructions should require participants to include their room number in the title of their text, so that it is clear which group created which text.

9 Conclusion

The weekend workshop I taught in 2021 ended with students presenting a number of short scenes they had rehearsed in pairs, using virtual backgrounds and share props. Despite the limitations, students reported feeling proud of this achievement and reflected that the workshop had enabled them to share and engage with other students, an experience especially the younger students said had theretofore missed (as they had started studying during the pandemic). All participants exchanged contact details and declared their intention of meeting in person soon if possible. This response indicates that drama activities, even in an online setting, can create meaningful connections. While it may still lack some of the desirable qualities of on-site collaboration, engaging in character creation and guided improvisation online can provide participants with the experience of using online space creatively, collaborating successfully and even integrating physical aspects of theatre work into an online setting while physical meetings are not possible.

Outside of pandemic conditions, it is probably not a long-term replacement for on-site theatre work but would be a feasible format for preparatory activities for a group (a class, a project, a theatre ensemble) whose members are spatially distanced (e.g., live far apart or even in different countries) and which has no or only limited capacity for on-site meetings.

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