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Report: Going digital under duress - Notes on the 6th Drama in Education Days 2020

Drama in language teaching and learning

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In this conference report, we look back on our first digital conference, a challenge which ultimately came with many silver linings. Among the highlights: The online setting made our event more inclusive, with approximately 100 participants from across the globe attending the four-day drama event. This report highlights the keynotes, the workshops, and the talks shared at the 2020 Drama in Education Days.

It is said that hindsight is 20/20. Thus, as we leave 2020 behind us, a year overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we look back at what we have learned about teaching and learning under duress, after lockdowns around the world forced many teachers and students to work and study remotely. When our Drama in Education conference was faced with the threat of cancellation, we made the leap into the digital world: The conference, focused on best practices and research in the field of drama and theater in language teaching and learning, took place via Zoom from July 16 to 19. It grew from a two-and-a-half-day “live” event to a four-day online event, attracting a record 100 participants from 22 different countries.

In order to maximise the time spent together online, we asked our presenters to upload a ten-minute recording of their talk to our website¹ ahead of the conference. Thus, participants could view the videos at their own pace, with the option of posting questions and comments under each video. This approach, inspired by online conferences held earlier in 2020, greatly reduced the likelihood of technical problems during the conference, as well as freeing up time for in-depth discussions during the individual online sessions. Some participants particularly stressed that they appreciated the chance to listen to the talks repeatedly and at their own pace prior to the event, without being rushed. They felt that the asynchronous format gave them time to reflect on content, with the bonus of being able to revisit a talk at a later date. As the participants were expected to have viewed the talks ahead of time, the presenters began with a short summary, and were then free to address the questions posted online

¹ <https://dramapaedagogik.de/en/>

and/or to facilitate a live Q&A. We feel that these measures created ample space for reflexion and for deeper and more meaningful conversations.

Despite the shift into a digital format, presenters and keynote speakers alike were well up to the challenge of offering interactive drama workshops. Presenters had the chance to participate in preparatory zoom sessions ahead of the conference in order to test and modify their workshop ideas in the digital space and to familiarize themselves with easily available tools for recording their talks before the conference. Even though the physical aspects of drama work were necessarily limited by the online format, participants who had previously doubted that doing drama online was possible at all were positively surprised and reported feeling encouraged to adapt the ideas for their own practice. As one participant wrote in the conference evaluation: “I was wondering how an online workshop would be handled. I was amazed to see how they were planned and conducted.” Another participant found the workshops just as memorable as face-to-face sessions: “I still recall scenes from all of the [workshops] from time to time. They have stayed with me.”

The decision to move the Drama in Education Days online was not taken lightly, as we, the conference organisers, Stefanie Giebert (Konstanz University of Applied Sciences, Germany) and Eva Göksel (Centre for Oral Communication, University of Teacher Education Zug, Switzerland) strongly felt that the authentic encounters of a face-to-face event should be preserved. For this purpose, we included time for socialising in *Online Town*² a platform that assigns users an avatar which they can use to walk around a private chat room. Much like at a real conference, the avatars can gather in groups for a chat (via video) or walk away from the crowd for a private talk.

In the summer of 2020, it might have seemed daunting to imagine drama-work being performed and practiced online, but the conference opened boldly with two hands-on drama workshops and a talk. True to its roots, the Drama in Education Days 2020 was a bilingual conference with one German and two English keynotes, as well as parallel conference tracks in German and in English. In the English track, Garrett Scally (Kiel University, Germany) facilitated a workshop: “Flocking: an exploration of devising and being the Ignorant Facilitator for additional language development”. The workshop featured both an artistic process and an artistic product, while raising questions and exploring ideas about the importance of allowing language learners to connect on a non-verbal, embodied level. In the German track, Christine Best and Kerstin Guhleemann (TU Dortmund University, Germany) spoke on “the art of language acquisition”, in which they introduced the method of “social art” and shared two best practice examples showing how theatre can be integrative for underprivileged groups

² <https://theonline.town/>

e.g. participants coming from long-term unemployment, often with German as their L2. In her interactive workshop “Speaking with one voice, choral speech in performative foreign language teaching” Tanya Wittal-Düerkop (Belgium) had participants experiment with various forms of choral speech, adapted for performative language teaching and learning.

The conference’s first keynote introduced #TheWaterMethodology. Nicola Abraham, lecturer and applied theatre practitioner at the Central School of Speech and Drama (CSSD, University of London, UK) is a pioneer in the area of integrating drama and digital pedagogies. In her keynote, she proposed ideas for adapting drama-in-education methodologies specifically for language teaching and learning in digital spaces. The keynote was followed by back-to-back process drama workshops facilitated by Nicola Abraham, Sylvan Baker (CSSD, University of London, UK), and Melanie Frances (Produced Moon, London, UK). The so-called CR38TUR3 workshop was originally developed by Abraham (2018) to help young people living in a closed psychiatric centre to move to independent living. It was later adapted as a tool for students at CSSD, to help them to critically perceive and analyse the social constructs they might impose onto others. The CR38TUR3 workshop was followed by an in-depth debriefing and reflexion session, in which participants discussed their workshop experiences in detail and drew parallels to individual participants’ contexts. The topic of the drama workshop was particularly relevant to conference attendees, as it was used to reflect upon the ethics of interactions in language teaching with groups such as refugees. The workshop also demonstrated simple ways to use an online platform such as Zoom, to enhance the creation of a make-believe space, for example by using a virtual background and by renaming participants with character names. The day wrapped up with a talk by Jenna Nilson (Arizona State University, USA) discussing her meta-study synthesising fourteen previous studies to identify and describe the outcomes of using performative language teaching approaches in foreign and second language classrooms in schools and universities.

Meanwhile, in the German track, Anke Stöver-Blahak (Leibniz University Hannover, Germany) reflected on her experiences of working performatively with university students to explore challenging topics from literary sources, such as being gay, and self-acceptance. She found that drama-based approaches create space for critical reflexion and that they allow for discussions of topics that are conventionally considered taboo. Corina Venzin (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) shared insights of an empirical research study on how teachers use performative approaches to promote students’ self-regulation skills in subject-specific teaching. Laura Joanna Schröter (University of Göttingen, Germany) focused on using *simulation globale* for integrating multilingualism and multiculturalism through drama in a master’s course for French language teachers at the University of Göttingen and Oriana Uhl (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) focused on teaching English vocabulary through music.

Stefanie Giebert (Konstanz University of Applied Sciences, Germany) shared details of her examination of why teachers choose to teach with drama-based pedagogies.

The second keynote was held in German by Manfred Schewe, formerly head of both the Theatre and the German departments at University College Cork, Ireland. In a delightfully personal talk, the newly retired professor looked back at his personal and professional journey of applying performative approaches in the teaching of literature from his thesis (1993), in which he coined the German term *Dramapädagogik*, to the present. Schewe emphasized the community-creating power of theatre and described, among other personal stories, his first ventures into theatre directing – as a young university lecturer staging Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*. Fittingly, the next speaker, Brigitte Hahn-Michaeli (Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, Israel) also led participants into the crazy world of *The Physicists* with a process drama created for students of science and engineering. The afternoon session featured more talks and a workshop: Natalia Dominguez Sapien (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) and Michael Troitski-Schäfer (Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany) considered the Covid-19-induced circumstances of working in isolation and in online contexts, with a special focus on the dramaturgical category of space. The facilitators introduced the drawing of a multistorey house with many balconies as a springboard to invite the participants to interact as tenants, making use of the Zoom gallery view to recreate the picture. Albina Mukhamadiarova (Kazan Federal University, Russia) shared her experiences integrating music into teaching German as a foreign language for A2-B2 level learners. Elisabeth Vergeiner (Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia) spoke about Project Vex – a project in which language students produce a silent film as part of their exploration of a literary text, while Natasha Janzen Ulbricht (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) shared research findings examining multi-modal language learning with the help of gestures and music. The English track opened with the cross-curricular workshop “Mathemart”, in which Maurizio Bertolini and Elena Cangemi (Social and Community Theatre Centre of Turin, Italy) presented drama techniques for teaching mathematics. Alison Larkin Koushki (Al Ekhlas International Education, Kuwait) and Shannon Parks (University of Birmingham, UK) shared empirical evidence on the impact of teaching English through theatre. Christiane Klempin (Freie Universität Berlin, Germany) spoke about the Performative Lab, which introduces EFL student teachers to performative teaching approaches and assesses the student teachers' attitudes and teaching performance. In a hands-on workshop including a short Swedish lesson, Janya Cambrono Severin and Linda Petterson (Teater Aros, Sweden) demonstrated their immersive approach for teaching language through drama in the classroom and online. Andreas Wirag and Carola Surkamp (Göttingen University, Germany) shared their empirical findings on the impact of drama on foreign-language anxiety and Eva Göksel (University of Teacher Education Zug, Switzerland)

facilitated two workshops in which participants experimented with the limitations of the online medium while working with one of the smallest units of drama work: the still-image.

The closing keynote “Resilience and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge in post COVID-19 Education” perfectly completed the circle to Nicola Abraham’s opening keynote. Erika Piazzoli (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland) highlighted the importance of maintaining and cultivating teacher artistry in digital spaces, while paying particular attention to working with aesthetic distancing and creating a safe space for exploring emotions in the drama space. Immediately following the keynote, Piazzoli facilitated a process drama using the animated short film *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore*³. In a workshop that was both playful and profound, participants experienced the magic of working with drama to explore new worlds and to step into new shoes – or in this case, into new stories. Piazzoli certainly achieved her stated goal, which was to reflect on aesthetic distancing and protection into emotion while exploring concepts such as connection, isolation and displacement. The final afternoon featured two talks in the English track: Ebru Boynuegri (TED University Ankara, Turkey) pondered upon what makes a good drama activity in ESL teaching, while María Eugenia Flores and Margarita Planelles (Universidad Nebrija, Madrid, Spain) considered which competences are required of a language who teaches with drama-in-education methodologies. In the German track, Stefanie Giebert (Konstanz University of Applied Sciences, Germany) had her workshop participants investigate cultural values, clichés and ethical dilemmas in a performative exploration of the VW scandal “Dieselgate”. The afternoon wrapped up with an open space in which participants discussed ideas for, and shared experiences of, teaching with drama online. So, in summary, what did we learn about teaching in the new circumstances created by the global pandemic? One of the biggest take-aways was certainly that it is possible to do drama in online settings, as the many workshops demonstrated. Additionally, the great turnout, with participants from around the world shows that online conferences are inclusive and perhaps more accessible than face-to-face events. Finally, the four-day conference inspired participants to include drama in their online teaching, giving them new ideas and many concrete examples and tools to help them do so.

The annual Drama in Education Days/Dramapädagogik-Tage provide a platform for language teachers of all levels and all languages, who are interested in teaching and learning performatively through drama and theatre. The conference is open to drama novices as well as to seasoned drama and theatre veterans. The conference proceedings for 2018 and 2019 (Giebert & Göksel 2019, 2021) are published online and can be found on peDOCS. You can also

³ 2011 animated short film directed by William Joyce and Brandon Oldenburg: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ad3CMri3hOs>

join us on Facebook and subscribe to the Drama in Language Teaching (DLT) podcast on the Drama in Education Days website.

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