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A Sisyphean task? Doing drama online with Year 9 students in a COVID-19 lockdown

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A SISYPHEAN TASK? DOING DRAMA ONLINE WITH YEAR 9 STUDENTS IN A COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

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Abstract

Using the allegory of Sisyphus from ancient Greek mythology, we examine the problems that arose while teaching Year 9 drama classes online during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in Aotearoa, New Zealand. At times we have felt like Sisyphus, forced to push a boulder uphill forever. We became adept at using the school's chosen online platform, in this case, Microsoft Teams. For all teachers, this meant that students were no longer in an actual classroom with their peers but met in a virtual space as a series of little icons on a screen. For drama, this disrupted the very essence of the praxis. Drama is, at its heart, an embodied, interactive "subject", requiring collaboration, cooperation and participation. Like Sisyphus, we have, at times, felt the task of teaching drama cannot be truly accomplished. In this article, we focus specifically on the Year 9 drama students, the youngest year group at secondary colleges in New Zealand. They are part of the generation defined as Gen Z (Beresford Research, 2022), "digital natives who have little or no memory of the world as it existed before smartphones" (Parker & Igielnik, 2020., para. 4). We compare the expectations and interactions of a traditional drama classroom with those online. We explore the approaches we took to encourage student participation in this new forum, trying to find dramatic strategies to mitigate some of the problems that arose. We discuss the consequences and outcomes of teaching drama remotely. Unlike Sisyphus, can we learn from successes and failures, or are we as drama teachers doomed forever to roll a large rock uphill?

Keywords

Drama education; online learning; COVID-19

Sisyphus

Sisyphus is a character from Greek mythology who, as his punishment for cheating death, was made to roll a large boulder uphill for eternity. The myth has become common parlance for tasks which appear to be endless and futile. The image of Sisyphus provides a dramatic description of what it has been like to teach drama online, specifically with a range of Year 9 classes. We have experienced several issues working with an embodied art form in a disembodied space. We risk appearing pessimistic in our comments but as specialist drama teachers for over 30 years, one with a Doctorate in Drama Education and the other with a Masters in Theatre, we intrinsically know the value of an active, embodied classroom. We cherish the sense of joy and excitement that is palpable in the drama space─the energy of young people making discoveries and expressing themselves. We also acknowledge, as teachers trained in the UK, that the place of drama within the New Zealand curriculum is a taonga, an embodied treasure we do not want to see lost in the electronic space of a virtual classroom.

COVID-19 in New Zealand

On March 23, 2020, the *New Zealand Herald* led with the headline "Coronavirus: Schools close indefinitely with just minutes' notice" (Collins, 2020). Education Minister Chris Hipkins announced that Parliament had passed the COVID-19 Response (Urgent Management Measures) Legislation Bill which amended the Education Act enabling him to "direct [education providers] to provide education in specified ways, for example through distance or online learning" (Beehive.govt.nz, 2020). This was

just one of the immediate steps the New Zealand government took to slow the pace of the rapidly spreading COVID-19 pandemic. As H. Luton describes:

> Like the plagues that have come before, the ritualistic gatherings and festivities of parliament, temples, mosques, churches, weddings, funerals, birthdays, markets and shops, hostelries, sporting arenas, theatres, and performing arts venues, all but ceased. (2021, p. 14)

One year on from the first lockdown, we devised a play for our annual school production, *The Year of the Plague,* which contrasted the history of past plagues and pandemics with the recent COVID-19 experience. In one scene teachers and students message their peers in panic about online learning and the difficulties that ensue. The scene drew on our own experiences and that of the students as they ditched their school uniforms for pyjamas and became an icon on a learning platform dashboard. When the play was performed in August, talk was already rife that a further lockdown was imminent due to the spread of the Delta variant. The production finished on Friday August 13, and on Tuesday August 17, we plunged yet again into a level four lockdown. Schools remained closed for face-to-face teaching until mid-November, with senior students returning first, followed by junior students a few weeks later. We were among the lucky schools to complete a live production and, along with our students, experience the embodied and shared performance in a space of imagination and play. With the onset of online learning so much of what we know to be drama was lost. As Davis and Phillips (2020) suggest, "drama and performing arts teachers particularly missed embodied, social and relational aspects of learning when it moved online" (p. 67), while Gallagher et al. (2020) consider that in this "virtual only world" the "traditional understandings of 'embodiment', 'participation' and 'ensemble' no longer apply" (p. 641). In 2020, most teachers and students had not previously participated in online learning, it was new and unproven ground and especially difficult for drama. Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020) have written that "many thought that doing drama in such circumstances was impossible" (p. 645). Certainly, many of our students were less than enthusiastic about learning online and many struggled with a range of difficulties. When lockdowns returned in 2021, it was time again to roll our rock back uphill.

Setting the scene: Year 9 drama

The school is a decile 9, multicultural, co-educational, state school—a modern learning environment which promotes 21st-century competencies. Glass walled classrooms allow staff and students to observe and share good practice. The school became a Microsoft school over 10 years ago, so it was well prepared to teach online using the Microsoft Teams communication platform. Drama has been a part of the curriculum since the school's foundation, with classes at junior and senior level and annual school productions. All Year 9 classes study drama for one term—most have no prior experience of it as a curriculum subject. In drama, students learn through "purposeful play, both individual and collaborative, they discover how to link imagination, thoughts, and feelings … and to communicate effectively using body language, movement, and space" (Ministry of Education, 2014). The classes consist of approximately 30 students and include all abilities from accelerant to those with additional needs. During our most recent lockdown we taught seven different Year 9 classes remotely, only four of which had any drama classroom experience prior to lockdown. As a department, we authors met regularly via teams to support each other and to reflect on our approaches and results. We remained flexible throughout the whole process, adapting and creating new lesson plans depending on the students' needs. What once worked in a classroom did not necessarily apply in this new remote world.

Expectations and interactions: Teaching Year 9 in a "real" space

When Year 9 students arrive at one of the drama spaces, the teacher greets them before they enter and sit on the floor in a circle. The circle formation is both a universal routine in drama classrooms to bring students together and a practical response to the alternative classroom space where furniture is not prioritised (Luton, J., 2021). It forms an important symbol of unity and gives "the illusion at least of equality of power" (Neelands in Luton, 2015, p. 112). After registration, the teacher welcomes students, reviews their previous work and discusses the proposed learning objectives for the day. This is followed by a "warm up" exercise to help students prepare their voices and bodies. The students work in groups

or as a whole class to develop their projects practically. This involves negotiating, refining ideas and sometimes performing to their peers for critical and reflective feedback. The classroom is noisy and active with bodies moving within the space using verbal and non-verbal language. There may be arguments as students learn to listen and respond, and there is often laughter in experimentation and play. The concept of play is integral to drama and as Neelands suggests, playfulness means feeling "safe to experiment, risk, fail, bend and stretch the rules" (2010, p. 129). Students are expected to "chip in", experiment, and share their ideas. They engage in peer support and peer learning.

The teacher is *not* the focus of the class but circulates, encouraging, facilitating and addressing problems. Their presence is much like that of a conductor in the orchestra, aware of the whole, tweaking little parts of "off-time" or "off-note" action, controlling without domineering, allowing creative processes to take place. Some classes need more intervention in relation to their self-control within the space. Others need more scaffolding, more encouragement, and more input into each practical task. Students work in small groups randomly selected by the teacher or grouped through a variety of dramatic strategies. As Luton has suggested "drama teachers crave creativity in their classes, embrace noise and controlled excitement and seek to ensure learning is a shared activity for everyone" (Luton, J., 2021, p. 83).

Going online: Teaching Year 9 in the virtual space

Remote learning is a very different environment to the classroom, and our embodied active approach to facilitating drama becomes increasingly difficult and challenging. Firstly, remote learning assumes a level of accessibility, that each student has access to a digital device and a good degree of internet or broadband coverage at home. While most students use devices in the classroom, their access to broadband and a quiet space at home to study in is far more problematic and varies immensely between households. This meant that rarely, even in this decile 9 school, was a whole class present. Secondly, and far more concerning to us, is that online learning alters the relationship between students, their peers and the teacher. We are no longer able to meet in "real" or actual tangible spaces where we can converse using non-verbal language, and spatial signals. Instead, we are each alone, separated by a screen, existing only as an electronic presence, whereas in the classroom we prioritise the embodied, active aspects of drama, suddenly, our ability to share a space and to "read" gestures, facial expressions, and body language is removed. We are no longer able to offer individual or small group assistance. For many Year 9 students, the ability to focus becomes an issue, distracted by their own spaces and the technology. According to Cziboly and Bethlenfalvy (2020), this is true also of tertiary students who "at any moment … could decide to switch to their email or social media without anyone noticing" (p. 647).

It is presumptuous to assume that because a school has a BYOD (bring your own device) policy and a culture of digital learning this automatically means that Year 9 students can fully engage with online learning. Their competencies are primarily limited to digital tools for social media. Combined with their limited prior exposure to drama, this meant that most Year 9 were not cognisant of the embodied possibilities of the form, nor were they confident to express themselves in the online classroom. This limited their participation in online drama as we strived to work with poems, stories and Māori myths. As teachers we found ourselves retreating to short-term engagement solutions like Kahoot, internet research and poster making. Meanwhile, at senior level the New Zealand National Qualifications Authority (NZQA, 2020) recognised that some achievement standards in drama would *not* be suitable "for remote teaching, learning and assessment" because they "require drama production for a live audience, a collaborative process or interaction with others" (p. 1). It was this interaction that we found to be most disrupted in the remote space.

Cameras on! Encouraging participation in the virtual classroom

The lack of interaction within the online learning environment is heightened when students are unable or unwilling to follow the expectation that cameras must be turned on. This is a fundamental requirement for collaborative learning in the virtual space. For some students it may feel intimidating being remote from their peers, alone in their learning bubble, waiting for the teacher to appear online. Regardless of whether they were accelerated learners or students with additional needs, most Year 9 students refused to turn on their cameras, remaining hidden behind an icon or chosen avatar. While it

was comforting to discover this has been a collective phenomenon in online teaching (Davis and Phillips, 2020) and something which Gallagher et al. (2020) refer to as "an absent presence" (p. 639), it left us deeply frustrated because it denied everyone an important means of communication. Unable to see students, we could not read their facial expressions or participate in eye contact, something we teach and value in the classroom. We asked students their reasons for not appearing online:

- My camera doesn't work!

- My Wi-Fi isn't good enough!

- I won't do it if they won't!

- It feels awkward!

Cameras, we were told by students, were not a pre-requisite for other subjects. We suspected that students being able to see themselves on the video feedback might be a key reason for noncompliance. In drama, unlike dance, students do not usually watch themselves rehearsing in a wall of mirrors and collectively we have all cringed at the sound of our own voices. We tried to encourage students to cover up their video feedback hoping, that if they could not see themselves, they might forget to be self-conscious. We suggested they experiment with background effects in a hope to minimise any embarrassment they might feel about their locations—only three students engaged with the process. While we encouraged, cajoled and demonstrated this it was of no avail, and we continued to be faced with silent icons. The "Together Mode" feature in Microsoft Teams attempts to encourage students to look at each other in the virtual space and to become "more relaxed, more attentive to one another, more playful" and to help teachers to "read the room" in a "shared space" (Lanier, 2020, para. 2). As Lanier explains (2020) "when people become more able to interact expressively, then appearance matters proportionately less" (para. 17). We experimented with Together Mode with senior and junior students. Altering the scene to an outdoor amphitheatre added a theatrical dimension. We played a simple object passing game and students experimented of their own volition with high fives and waving at each other. However, once again, only a few students appeared willing to respond and engage with the possibilities. Even using breakout rooms, many students still refused to turn on their cameras or to communicate with each other.

Teacher as entertainer in the virtual space

In this silence we began to feel like entertainers. No matter what strategies we used we struggled to break through the electronic barrier. We would receive updates from the school about students who had valid issues as to why they could not participate online. Consequently, we drew on our communication skills taking care to use an encouraging tone and smiling to communicate warmth. In contrast to the classroom, it was difficult to engage with individuals because the whole class is exposed onscreen. We considered whether we could "relax" and have "fun" using our own performative skills to encourage our students and help us enjoy the process more. We leant closer to the screen, exaggerating our facial expressions and gestures, attempting to make eye contact, ignoring the video feedback of ourselves. Even in intense moments of frustration, we presented a positive front. Alongside our attempts to educate through this electronic medium, we were conscious that everyone's mental health and well-being must be a priority.

Students who put on their camera would invariably appear in shadow or only show the tops of their heads or eyebrows. Some adjusted the video to show only the ceiling. Very few students became "performative" and we found there was little communication from them either through facial expression or vocal tone. Conversely, we found that the senior students were more willing to engage performatively, dressing as aspirational heroes or characters from a play they were studying. These tasks helped alleviate some of the disconnection that the senior students have felt with online learning. The difference between the senior and the junior students is the fact that they have performed together, for, and with each other in the "real space" and therefore appear less self-conscious in front of their peers. Their past learning in drama has developed their confidence, communication skills and degrees of trust.

Remote learning: Problems for drama

The following table highlights some of the disruptions we found between our actual classroom and the remote classroom of Microsoft Teams that became apparent in drama.

Table 1:   The Problems of Online Remote Teaching in the Drama Classroom

Learning in a "real" classroom	Learning in a "virtual" classroom
Learning is embodied, encouraging movement and direct communication with others.	Learning is disembodied as the platform encourages a sedentary approach, with students positioned in front of a camera and viewing a screen.
Learning is interactive and collaborative.	Learning is an individual activity.
Students' participation is central.	Students can choose not to participate by turning off their cameras and microphones.
Students can actively engage with others.	Students can be detached from others.
The classroom provides a space to be innovative and creative.	Students appear uninspired by the limitations of the platform to interact and create with their peers.
Learning is democratic through open discussion, negotiation, and agreement between students and teachers.	Learning can be autocratic as teachers can mute audio, visual and chat features of students.
Students seek creative solutions.	Students use excuses not to be involved.
Teacher as facilitator.	Teacher as performer/entertainer.
Practical tasks are central.	Written tasks are prioritised.

Mitigating the problems using team teaching and in-role method

To mitigate the problems discussed, we aimed to be more performative since online learning already tends to put the focus back on the teacher. The Head of Drama took on the convention of "Teacher-in-Role". She assumed the role of a museum professor, Professor Mauskowitz, complete with backstory, costume and accent. Students were invited to find a simple object at home and use their imagination to bring it to life as an important historical artefact. After describing the object's purpose and history it would be placed into the imaginary museum. In just one lesson, she found her students engaging more readily. This was further developed when Professor Mauskowitz was invited into her colleague's classes. They acted as a museum volunteer helping to support the students' belief in the role. As colleagues who have used team teaching many times in the last few years, we played off each other. The Museum became MOO COW—the *Museum of Objects, Collections of the World*, drawing on previous research (Luton, J., 2017). The key to this was the willingness for the students to suspend their disbelief and to accept their role as experts. As the professor appeared on screen for the first time one student asked:

- Where has Miss gone?

Accepting the Head of Department as the professor, students across two of our Year 9 classes shared some interesting stories about their objects, helped by her questioning in role. They listened to each other, supported and gained confidence from each other's successes. Our willingness to accept and encourage ideas, even hesitant ones, was of primary importance. Team teaching contributed the support of a second adult fully engaging in this game of imagination. Students who had microphone issues used the chat function in Teams, and their responses were read out by the professor who added a lightly comedic commentary. By the second lesson, the majority were actively participating and engaging—turning on cameras even if briefly. While the strategy was successful, we found it to be exhausting. The distancing of the virtual space and the lack of whole class interaction meant it was more akin to a stage performance than a drama classroom. It emphasised the skills of "teacher-as-performer" rather than "student-as-performer". Although students' responses were imaginative and playful, we felt detached from the embodied interactive activity of the drama classroom where we all thrive on shared creativity.

Consequences and outcomes of teaching drama remotely

The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2016) suggests that the skills of creativity, communication and collaboration are vital for students in the 21st century—the very skills that we know are inherent in drama education. To teach these "soft" skills that foster social and emotional engagement, the WEF prioritise "play-based learning", "fostering nurturing relationships" and taking "a hands-on approach" (2016, Exhibit 3). We suggest that relying on drama teaching online has the potential to deny students access to these important practical skills. Students who are expected to be digital natives have struggled with communicating and sharing ideas when facing a camera alone. Sometimes we forget that Year 9 students are still children, who, while willing to engage in imaginative play, are also adolescents who yearn for the approval of their peers. The embodied language of the "real" classroom is lost in the remote virtual space, making it much scarier to participate in class. If a student's camera is turned off, we cannot see them and we cannot know their response to our participation. Students may believe their peers are laughing at them or sending messages via other mediums. They watch themselves on the feedback and make negative judgments. In a "real" classroom we have protocols and rules of engagement to mitigate against this happening. We rely on face-to-face communication to read others' body language, to understand the nuances of conversational engagement, and subsequently alter our behaviour. Although this is the generation used to taking selfies and pre-moderating their interactions online, it does not make them confident communicators. One task for accelerant students asked them to present a specified poem to video, as if for pre-school aged children, to encourage an imaginative, embodied and interactive approach. The video was only to be seen by the teacher. While many of the class did indeed submit their work, a significant number of students did not. Our recent experience suggests that students are missing out on the ability to collaborate and interact with their peers in a "real" space. They begin to rely *on* others rather than working *with* them to create, develop and realise ideas.

There are many reasons why a student may not participate fully in online learning. However, drama becomes especially difficult to facilitate because we are predicated on interactive communication and the use of bodily and facial expression within a shared space. As Davis and Phillips (2020) describe, and we concur, "considerable effort is required by the teacher to create and maintain a sense of 'teacher presence' within and across online spaces, and to generate feelings of warmth and a sense of community" (pp. 75–76). When the world returns to a degree of normality, we worry that this generation might struggle with these essential communication skills as they strive to be connected to their community. Being together in a drama classroom or doing the school production allows us to engage physically and emotionally with other human beings and to be creative and playful with them. Whereas the online space may allow us to meet electronically and is often touted as the way of the future, it does not and cannot replace the living, breathing aspect of collaborative, active participation in drama. It has been interesting and comforting to find that academics researching drama education across the world have also found teaching drama online a difficult and challenging environment (Davis & Phillips, 2020; Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2020). A sad outcome and consequence in the school is that remote learning in drama has affected the numbers choosing to take the subject at Year 10, in what has always been a successful and thriving department. Without the embodied experience, students have little knowledge on which to base their choice. To them, drama must appear just another sedentary subject rather than a social and emotionally engaging experience which can heighten their communication and creative skills.

While we consider ourselves to be creative educators willing to experiment and try different approaches, confident in using technology, we feel the last few weeks and the past two years has left us like Sisyphus rolling his rock uphill. Nevertheless, Sisyphus was certainly determined. We too shall continue to seek ways of engaging our students in online drama while yearning to interact again in a real space.

Postscript

In November 2021, when we were able to return to the actual classroom, we decided to team-teach and to combine every Year 9 and 10 class. The school ruled that no assessments were to take place to ensure the mental health and wellbeing of everyone. Although we were all masked, and classes were noticeably smaller, we felt a renewed energy and vibrancy in the space. Free from curriculum and assessment restrictions, students actively engaged with their peers throughout each lesson. Students were no longer

an "absent presence" (Gallagher et al, 2020, p. 639). This is what we had all missed in the remote classroom.

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