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DIGITAL BODIES/LIVE SPACE

How digital technologies might inform gesture, space, place, and the performance of identity in contemporary drama education experiences

Amy Petersen Jensen and Kris W. Peterson

Introduction

Every day, young people purposefully construct, share, and respond to digital stories depicting their own and others’ bodies through a variety of social media platforms. Because of this, contemporary educators must explore the ways that the individual and collective crafting of a digital self might influence personal and collaborative drama education efforts.

This chapter explores how digital technologies influence students’ embodied performance practice. We specifically examine how students manage and then reflect on their own and others’ gestural expression, explorations of space and place, and the performance of identity when participating online and in the co-creation of drama education experiences.

To do this, we describe two curricular activities and the student responses to those activities from courses designed by the authors. Both courses were taught at Brigham Young University in early 2020. By actively engaging with students in a discourse about their digital performances, we hoped that our class members could examine how digital expression influences their lived experiences and also their efforts as creative collaborators in both live and digital settings. This work became even more important as COVID-19 interrupted our regular classroom practice and much of our creative and learning took place in online and digital environments.

Course assignments invited students to examine and analyze their performance of self in personal digital/social media settings and in live and online creative spaces that involved the whole class. Through these assignments, students explored and reflected on their use of gesture, space and place, and performance of identity. To define these terms, we drew on descriptive language from embodied performance theories primarily using Anne Bogart and Tina Landau’s Viewpoints and Laban movement analysis. The definitions that follow provided the baseline for understanding the terms we used in our educational spaces:

1. **Gesture** – For the purposes of our work, we described gesture as a physical means of communicating an action, emotional state, or relationship to others. We relied primarily on the definition of gesture that theatre artists Bogart and Landau set forth in *The Viewpoints Book* (2005), where they describe it as “shape with a beginning, middle, and end” (p. 9). Gesture for them includes behavioral gestures or concrete physical movement.
that can be observed in everyday reality. In compliment, expressive gestures are described as abstract or symbolic movements that reflect “an inner state, an emotion, a desire, or a value” (p. 9). Laban (2008) similarly calls these movement categories “natural working movements” and “expressive movements.” He calls on performers to discover the elements of movement within everyday life and within the inner state.

2 Space and Place – We characterized space and place as the physical environment and the objects positioned within that environment where performers move and interact. Bogart and Landau describe the physical spaces and places in which performers move as “architecture.” When using viewpoints, one’s awareness of the physical environment and its impact on movement is critical. Laban’s definitions of space in relation to the body are also helpful. He identifies a personal space or kinesphere, in which the performer makes decisions about how far their body can reach, the levels at which they can move, and the pathways that the body carves out within that space (Bartenieff & Lewis, 2002; Moore, 2011).

3 The Performance of Identity – Within our classes, we portrayed identity as the distinguishing physical, social, and emotional characteristics of an individual, including the qualities, belief structures, and ways of knowing and performing that they adopt. We also recognized that there is always fluidity in the conception and presentation of self in relationship to one’s social circumstances (Daniels & Downes, 2015). Additionally, we asserted that digital/social media environs allowed for nuance in how individuals performed and stretched their identities in live and online circumstances (Hughes & Parry, 2016; Jensen & Jensen, 2011).

Throughout the chapter, we outline and analyze drama education activities that focus on exploring digital and social media. Our efforts were grounded in the assumption that teachers must engage in digital spaces because these spaces are an everyday factor in contemporary students’ lives. Because of this, we grounded our work in theories that support digital learning and acknowledge students’ persistent access to and affinity for digital technologies as a useful tool.

Digital Media Performance and pedagogies: a context for our work

Arts educators have persistently recognized the complicated role that technology has staked in students’ (and educators’) lives. During the same decade in which digital media educators and literacy experts have been exploring what digital learning looks like in classrooms, theatre artist-educators have played with and theorized about how we engage our students and their digital selves through performance in physical spaces. For instance, Cameron and Anderson (2009) acknowledge the sometimes disruptive power that digital access has on the bodies present in educational settings but also remind educators that their challenge “is to make [digital] access mean something in the education of young people.” They further admonish that “The teacher’s role in the drama classroom of today infused (or not) with technology is the same as it always has been: to provide students with the access to the tools of creation and support their growing control of those tools to create meaning” (pp. 11–12). As teachers encourage students to use digital space as a tool rather than a passive distraction, they can help their students create meaning in the spaces they already exist.

Artist-educators outline many possible ways that digital tools might create new meaning and add to existing meaning-making processes used in drama education settings. For example, Wotzko and Carroll (2009) identify digitally based social media platforms as “a new
stage for performance” (p. 169) that potentially influence the ways that we use our bodies and structure drama. They assert that by combining improvised drama approaches and digital media tools, young performing artists might “create a new narrative model for online drama and digital theatre” (p. 181). Alrutz (2015) examines digital storytelling as an applied theatre practice that engages young artists in creating “new knowledge around self, others, and society” and also “foster[s] dialogue and action around issues of identity, culture, and community” (p. 4). Jensen and Alrutz (2018) build on these notions. They assert that digital storytelling provides new opportunities for young artists to “negotiate their [own] stories in the context of others” by recognizing that digital media stories are always illuminated by the artist’s “sense of identity, belonging, and relationships with others.” They add that “collectively creating and exchanging digital stories can reshape both what we know and how we know it, as well as the ways we see ourselves, each other, and society” (p. 65). Importantly, Zdriluk (2016) finds that intermedial interactions in which digital and social media tools are used to tell drama stories feel “authentic, familiar, and consistent with” young people’s lived experiences (p. 13).

We see our limited exploration of how digital media can inform understandings of gesture, space and place, and identity as building on the ideas presented above.

**Practice theory: a methodology for our work**

In this chapter we use the word *practice* to describe the experiences and knowledge-building necessary to make meaning. Drama education practitioners often refer to collaborative performance work as “practice” and may use various definitions of the term. Practice for this study includes the ways we *use media* within digital and drama education contexts by applying its associated ideas, beliefs, and methods. It also takes account of the ways we *do media* by assimilating its understandings, procedures, and affectivity.

To comprehend what we learned from the *practice* that occurred in our classes, we examined that work through the lens of media practice theory. Media practice theory grows out of social science practice methodologies. Theorists assert that practices develop as a result of any cultural production that involves routinized behavior, collective understandings, and coordinated performances (Schatzki, 1996). Individuals are seen as carriers of the performance practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005). Media practice theory builds on these philosophies to consider what people understand about media, what they do with media, and what they create individually and together with media (Couldry, 2011; Roig Telo, 2013).

Media scholars Christensen and Røpke blend these ideas into three identifiable components, stating that the core criteria for identifying a media practice include the following:

1. Bodily mental activities (individual and social interactions) are routinized and repetitive.
2. Activities incorporate components such as understanding, know-how, states of emotion, motivational knowledge, and usually also objects, which are all interconnected.
3. Interconnected activities and components are perceived as meaningful entities in a given society or culture.

*(Christensen & Røpke, 2011, p. 238)*

These criteria guided our analysis of the activities we assigned students. Using media practice theory, we hoped to draw out the specificities of how the individual students in our courses used their bodies, developed understandings, and envisioned their digital and social media identities as interconnected and meaningful components of their performance practice.
Our classes and activities

The activities and work we represent here took place in two theatre education classes at Brigham Young University, a large private university located in the western United States. The courses we report on took place during winter semester 2020 (January to April).

The Acting Pedagogy course was chosen specifically for its curriculum, which affords opportunities to explore digital and in-person performative qualities such as identity, gesture, time, and place within performance. As part of this class, students explored and performed various acting methods, deconstructed each method’s main ideas, and then constructed and taught workshops as a way to synthesize their learning.

The Media in the Contemporary Classroom course was selected because it engages pre-service teachers in the creative processes and critical discourses within media and technology education. The course is anchored in the study of media creation practices and critical media literacy. Students dialogued regularly about the ways that media theories and practices related to their creative efforts and their teaching. The course culminated in a devised performance that integrated drama techniques and media tools as a means of storytelling.

COVID-19 and the impact on our courses

Two-thirds of the way through winter semester 2020, the United States began to experience the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like most academic institutions, Brigham Young University moved from in-person classes to live remote classes. Before the pandemic, we had planned to research the students’ awareness of their digital performative identities and gestures, time, and space, and how these correlated with or were directly informing in-class performances. It is interesting to note that while students spent quite a bit of time online before the quarantine, being forced online held a more significant weight. The absence of connectivity and the shared space of live performances prompted a reevaluation of students’ identities as artists and individuals. It also prompted us to rethink some of our pedagogies associated to both classes. In our conclusion we identify some possible strategies to consider when integrating online and live drama activities into drama education settings.

The Acting Pedagogy assignment and student responses

The assignment described next occurred early in the Acting Pedagogy course. The self-analysis activities in this assignment set the stage for future conversations in which students assessed how their digital media use, especially their identity performances and the associated skills, affected their live performances. For this chapter, the assignment description is abbreviated.

Please watch/evaluate/deconstruct at least 5 examples of yourself in a digital performance… It should be any place where you have created a representation of yourself or where you might interact with others digitally. As you watch, consider and then discuss how you think your digital identity might influence how you create gesture and explore your space and place in live performances.

Performing a digital self: expressing confidence and happiness through digital gestures

Digital/social media design constraints direct users to practice standardized mental and physical routines to interact with others on these platforms. Within this context, the Acting
Pedagogy students curated a digital identity for their audiences. Every student reported carefully selecting or editing their gestures within digital spaces, especially to appear confident and happy in their posts. As Lola stated in their reflection, “I have always been overly conscious about the way my actions affect others … and don’t feel that my digital self is overtly connected to or affected by my live self.”

Throughout their responses to this assignment, students describe constructing gestures through images that represented confidence and happiness. Most prevalent was the use of gestures to present a positive persona. At least half of the students acknowledged posting smiling pictures or videos of themselves when they felt completely the opposite in real life. Where and how they placed themselves in the digital frame also informed their efforts to represent confidence. Mila reported performing confidence by asking a sibling to be in their video so they didn’t feel so vulnerable in their post. Both Ana and Dava posed in the frame in ways that drew attention to their faces in particular. They took up the space of the frame as a performative gesture that they believed suggested confidence. In these descriptions, students depict a digital practice in which they manipulate the medium’s conventions to create digital selves and associated gestures that directly appeal to the perceptions of others.

**Performing a digital self: safe passage**

Students also recounted using digital technology to create personas that would give them the confidence to interact with others in live spaces. For example, Dava developed a digital identity precisely to control a specific audience’s perception of themselves. Dava, an international student, was traveling home to visit their sister. The travel occurred during a time of great unrest in their country of origin, and the sister was concerned that Dava would not be able to make it through border control. To mitigate their sister’s fear, Dava constructed a digital identity on an international social media platform. This included fabricating political posts that supported the government. With the posts in hand, Dava entered the country with the necessary proof that the visit would not cause issues with government entities. When the time came to pass through border control, this digital identity gave Dava a gateway to perform the calmness and confidence they needed to pass through the border without incident.

**Performing a digital self: calibrating audience response**

Students believe they have to calibrate their gestures to present an appropriate level of confidence for their audiences. Relative to stage performances, these online performances have a slower feedback cycle. Students receive feedback from their online audiences in the comments or likes they get in each post, which are often asynchronous. The feedback reinforces the students’ performances, and they continue to calibrate their posts to receive the feedback that got them positive likes or comments in the first place. For example, Lola, who wants to appear confident but not too confident, softens a video’s confident gesture by captioning it with a manufactured vulnerability. Lola recognizes the video and its caption’s lack of authenticity but seems unsure how to bridge the gap between performativity and authenticity.

The primary reason cited by students in their desire to post mostly positive and confident posts was a fear of judgment on the Internet. As Brewer (2017) discusses, the students receive only intermittent rewards from comments or likes. The intermittent rewards our brains receive from social media are the same as the intermittent rewards our brains receive when we play slot machines. So, the students, in their performativity, are participating in behaviors that occasionally reward them, but also present a risky dependence on others’ reactions to their performance.
Several themes emerged from student responses to the assignment. One is that students have difficulty creating authentic performances in both digital and in-person spaces. The students are aware that digital identities are not an accurate reflection of the self, but they consistently self-direct the learned behavior by continuing to perform on social media and by becoming audiences to others’ digital identities. As audience members, they like, comment, post, or view each other’s performances, thereby giving other online performers/performances the rewards they set out to get.

Another theme is that students have trouble identifying authentic performances in digital and in-person spaces. The Acting Pedagogy students seem very aware that some sort of digital social contract has to be adhered to in order for digital connections to have the desired impact. For them, there are definitely construction blueprints for using gesture, space, and place in digital environs. The problem is that none of the students are very clear on what those instructions are, and most of them share that they are not very good at sussing out which identities are constructed inauthentically.

Despite this, students do demonstrate an awareness of how digital media can promote positive connection to audiences. Indeed, Francisco recognizes that digital identities are sometimes created with the specific motivation of connecting with other human beings. Francisco uses pithy dialogue on Twitter as a means to attract other like-minded individuals. Lola admits to venting on Twitter, since the online forum is a space that feels safer for expressing a broad spectrum of human emotion. Ana connects to others by posting timely messages about body positivity on Instagram. Dava shares inside jokes with their friends and siblings by posting gesture-based WeChat stickers in a group chat. In these ways they exhibit shared understandings about the unique affordances and limitations that each digital/social medium offers them as they work to create a connected and positive persona.

**Performing a digital self: transferring digital expressions into live spaces**

Students also described their digital media activities as interconnected with their performance in live spaces. In response to this assignment, most students recognized that they had rarely overtly reflected on ways that their digital gestures might affect their live interactions with others. This potentially reduced their ability to leverage those digital gestures in their lived experience. Hayes (2019) states that, “For the student actor without grounding in an awareness of her or his unique lived bodily experience, performance can become an arena for constructed actions with little connection to the actor’s felt meaning” (p. 91). Similarly, students’ lack of awareness of meanings associated with digital gestures can reduce their meaning and efficacy in digital environs, and subsequently in live spaces too.

Using digital gestures like emojis and WeChat stickers can be effective substitutions for gestures. They offer users flexibility in expressing themselves (see Gawne and McCullough, 2019). However, we found that the frequency of use had some unintended and adverse effects on the students’ real-life interactions.

One notable example came from Dava’s interactions with family. In response to the assignment questions, Dava discusses how WeChat stickers are often used in their family group chat. Dava’s parents would write, and Dava would mostly respond with a sticker instead of any other written dialogue. If the response required a bit more engagement, occasionally the parents would receive two stickers. This minimal response became so second nature that Dava began to mimic the stickers’ gestures in Instagram photographs without realizing it. Dava reports that, eventually, this use of stickers had an impact on their live interactions with others. For example, when their parents came for a visit, Dava found themself responding to
their conversations in real life with one- or two-word responses, thus adversely affecting the student’s face-to-face communication with their parents. Dava’s example illustrates that gestures practiced in digital spaces can also carry meaning into live performances of self. Digital media use, then, including the ideas, beliefs, and methods associated with media, became integral to interactions in live spaces.

The media in the contemporary classroom assignment and student responses

Groups of five or six people will collaborate to devise, produce, and digitally perform a 20–25-minute Digital Media Performance … Perform your work for others in an online setting that you determine will best suit the stories that you intend to embody. Then write an artist/educator statement that explores … the ways that you explored gestures, space, place, and the performance of identity in a digital environment.

The assignment described above is the culminating project for the Media in the Contemporary Classroom course. Before students began the devising processes related to this assignment, they had practiced sharing and receiving a variety of aural and visual stories using digital technologies. They had also explored how they presented themselves through digital media and probed the authenticity of those digital expressions. Students also participated in drama-based storytelling processes, including story circles, verbatim theatre, and viewpoints. Through these mediums, students had experimented with vocal and embodied gestures and explored creating physical space and place. All of that work had been completed in physical proximity to each other. However, because this assignment occurred at the end of the semester, students collaborated to develop and perform the creative assignment while quarantined in live but remote settings.

Students in this class practiced doing media by working together to create digital performances in online environments. They collaborated in three groups to devise a digital performance. One group used Google Slides to create a social media guidebook that explored tips for performing an authentic self in social media spaces. Sections of the guidebook were devoted to images and stories that they gathered from others (including professional influencers) and stories that they had created themselves. Another group’s performance was located on the social media sharing application Instagram. Students used the image, text, and video capacities of the application to share what it feels like when there are large shifts in our world experience. The last group developed a Zoom-based video performance that explored loss and moving on from it.

Analysis of student creative work and reflective responses to the work

Creating performance(s): collaborating and creating in live remote and digital spaces

Collaborating to create in live remote and digital spaces required students to become well versed in new procedures and practices. Students were generally inexperienced in this type of creation. Roig Telo (2013) writes, “New forms of performing a practice can conflict with established ones, fostering a negotiation process with the potential to change the meaning of the practice” (p. 2329). This was certainly true for these students. Students initially experienced frustration because of the stark differences between their online collaboration spaces
and the live ones they were more used to. Because of the pandemic, students felt isolated and alone. Some were living in difficult circumstances. One student had the pressure of learning to take care of a newborn baby who had arrived mid-semester while simultaneously collaborating online. Another’s father lost his job, and income was of paramount concern. Others were sharing physical space and computers with family members and were often dealing with unreliable Internet connections. Samantha described these added difficulties, listing the challenges which included “increased constraints communicating with each other over Zoom, filming and recording and creating digital media on different brands of devices, and sometimes spotty wi-fi.” Students were also apprehensive about the types of stories they would be able to tell and how others would receive them. For example, Joyce worried about authenticity in storytelling, stating that “share[ing] someone’s personal story and experiences may feel crafted or less genuine than a face-to-face [performance].”

Students eventually found a new equilibrium. As Roig Telo states, “Spaces for negotiation and debate, decision making, transparency processes, and mutual recognition become essential to the consideration of a creative project as participatory” (2013, p. 2329). Despite challenges, students experienced an increase in creative collaboration capacities. Julee writes, “I did learn a lot about digital communication and collaboration, which is actually what a lot of our presentation was about, so that was a cool parallel!” and Kenneth adds, “By using Zoom, I learned how to communicate and collaborate virtually, and I feel more prepared to teach a lesson virtually if needed in the future.” They also found value in performing stories in new modes. Of this, Joyce writes:

In some ways using a digital medium to share someone’s personal story and experiences may feel crafted or less genuine than a face-to-face discussion. However, in this day and age and with the circumstances of the coronavirus forcing us to remain inside, social media is the way we can still find connection when everything else has been stripped away.

Like Joyce, other students were able to assimilate the practices associated with media creation and found connection through the practices associated with digital technologies.

Devising digital landscapes: creating space and place

Jensen and Jensen write, “Aspects of virtual and physical identity can be shaped and reshaped by young people to their advantage as they embrace their own capacity for multimodality and therefore act tactically, creating space for themselves in environments defined by the strategies of governing entities” (2011, p. 38). We found that when students intentionally studied the affordances and limitations of various technologies, they could better determine creative ways to imagine space and place within their selected digital performance environs.

Students absorbed information about digital media environments that aided them in making practical decisions about space and place when selecting digital tools. Informed by their understanding of technology and its constraints, they reported taking great care to develop visual spaces. Stephani writes, “[W]e definitely used space. We tried to make sure we had nice [Zoom] backgrounds and had to use what we had during the quarantine.” Joyce describes similar efforts in her group, saying,

[W]e were limited in the ways and spaces we could gather together as a group. Consequently, we chose to use Instagram [as our devising platform] because this medium
allows for multiple users to access the same account remotely, which worked well in the current circumstances.

Using the conventions of the digital tools they selected, students also made choices about how they wanted to evoke meaning through their creation of the digital space that audiences would encounter. Many described using their developing understanding of technologies to determine ways that they might manipulate a particular digital landscape to tell an important story. For example, Joyce states,

> Instagram is a popular social media platform for sharing an idealized and edited version of one’s identity. In this project, however, we chose to share the raw, unedited parts of life, as told through the experiences of the members of the group and the interviewees.

Students also had to consider how their bodies interacted within the digital conventions of the space in which they were creating. Hughes and Parry (2016) write, “While the body is central to gesture’s incipient power…. the potential of gesture to be mediated through different technologies is important to the way it produces common places inclusive of the human and the non-human” (p. 94). Renny’s comment indicates that she understands the necessity of finding a “common place” between the digital mechanism and the stories of the people she tells. She says:

> We tried to tie in individual threads into a larger fabric, so to speak …. Instagram is a very fluid platform, and we liked it because there were facets to it that might not be available to others, such as posts with captions, story highlights, and comments. We were able to delve into the stories of the people we interviewed, as well as put in some content in the Story Highlights that inspires us in our individuality. Additionally, the ability to comment on posts and express a feeling of connection fosters community.

**Performing others: telling others’ stories digitally and online**

Telling digital stories requires students to see and hear through digital means. Practicing new modes of seeing and listening aided students in their perceptual development. The Digital Media Performance assignment invites students to identify personal stories and interview and record others’ stories as they develop a theme or central question. This aspect of the assignment draws on Megan Alrutz’s (2015) assertion that important contextual learning can occur when youth create personal stories using drama tools and media techniques. In *Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth*, she writes:

> [T]he process of devising theatre and media support the exploration of personal stories to widen or deepen … frames and reference points … They literally see their stories – themselves – in images and on-screen next to other people’s stories … narratives that exist beyond themselves.

*(p. 55)*

Collaborating to collect and record others’ personal stories helped students to refine potential thematic ideas and questions. Elisabeth illustrates her own process, saying, “It was frustrating at times because I knew we wouldn’t use everything we gathered, but I think that going out and gathering with a more open mind actually led us to a more genuine final product...
because we were searching out ideas and feelings instead of pieces of an already-envisioned product."

Students worked carefully to represent the lives of others accurately. Renny articulates one of these choices: “We explored the way gestures and space were used when we filmed our verbatim performances. We agreed that we wanted to try to dress and act like the people we were representing, while allowing their real voices to be shown. We all attempted that in our own spaces. We didn’t want to use our own voices because we felt like their voices – tone, inflection, even accent – were a big part of their stories.”

They also practiced crafting emotion by using digital metaphors and symbols that would reflect an authentic portrait of the person whose story they were sharing. For example, Carol communicates her attempt to capture her grandfather’s true essence by pairing his digitally recorded voice with an image that references a way he describes himself. She says:

This image was included in the question about using “five words to describe yourself” (a component of the Instagram thread). My grandpa stated that “I like to work hard” and chose a workhorse as his object. I included this picture because it is the exact one that he references in the interview. It hangs above his office and was his father’s. This image is not just randomly selected but has a deeper sentimental value which I have come to appreciate.

Listening to others and seeing them through digital means gave students opportunities to consider the implications of representing the gestures and identity markers of another person. In gathering digitally recorded stories and then working to authentically represent those stories, students developed affective ties to those whose stories they told.

Dialogue and reflection: creating digital-creative identities

Digital practice that includes feedback and reflection can potentially shape both students’ creative and personal identities and their capacity to act as collaborators with other creators and with intended audiences. Jensen and Alrutz (2018) state, “Dialogues and reflections on storytelling in theatre/education contexts, coupled with the act of making media and creating performances from autobiography, world events, and other familiar stories, offer opportunities for understanding ourselves and others as well as seeing how power and responsibility function in our representational practices” (p. 78).

Students came to value peer feedback as a means of shaping their creative and personal identities. Once the students had developed their projects, they participated in an initial review of their work. One group had produced a stylish digital product, but peers let the group know that the personal stories they shared lacked genuineness. The feedback was difficult for the group to hear. They were proud of the product they had created and were aware of the challenges they had overcome to produce what they had presented. Eventually, they reconsidered the feedback and revised their work. After the final performance, one group member, Kate, wrote:

In my own experience, it is sometimes difficult to be vulnerable or open within group projects such as these, especially when the group is assigned. I was assigned to be in charge of the section of the project about being vulnerable on social media. (Lol, ironic right?) During the first “preview” of our [project], I included no personal story of my own. I focused primarily on the stories of others … in looking back over my contributions to the project I felt that something was off.
In this instance, Kate embraced the personal power she had over artistic choices. Kate, along with her collaborators and her reviewers, actively participated in conversations that led to a successful revision of their creative project, but Kate also felt personally responsible to evolve as a creative artist.

She continues:

I took [the feedback] as a starting place and decided to add in my own experience… It is one of my most influential experiences with vulnerability and social media. I am happy that I chose to include it in this project, as I feel it makes my contribution to it much more authentic to myself.

Notably, when allowed to examine her practice over the course of the project, Kate evolved in her ability to accept and incorporate feedback into her artistic processes.

**Conclusion**

The classroom activities and the associated student responses laid out here allowed us to examine the various ways that digital and social media explorations might inform drama education performance practice generally. Using digital tools during a global pandemic, which forced most interactions with others into online environments, reinforced the necessity of intentionally integrating digital media as a performance tool within our drama education work. To this end we believe that our classroom-based research aids drama educators as they adjust to a world in which blended delivery of instruction is now normal and even expected. When adapting and evolving in-person performance curricula to online environments, educators might consider the following pedagogical approaches.

*Educators should consider how students’ regular interaction with digital/social media already affects their creative abilities and interests in drama education settings.*

We found that when students identified the mental and physical routines they associated with digital and social media, they were better equipped to see the nuanced ways that *using media* could influence their creative efforts. Students noted that their regular interactions with digital and social media screens had a direct impact on how they shared information about their mental or physical selves with others. As digital performers, they posted half-truths, taking up space, or gesturing or writing in such a way that only a degree of their true feelings was evident. They rarely posted the big emotions they felt off-screen. Each gesture was edited and cultivated by the student before audiences ever saw it. In both classes, our students reported spending countless hours thinking about and crafting a “self” behind closed doors, with no human feedback or interaction until they had shaped a representative self that seemed acceptable. The forced mental and physical isolation of those real emotions became a routine practice for many students. In several cases, their first inclination was to forego authenticity or vulnerability and instead share the idealized and edited version of self that they believed the digital/social medium required. The ways they used media, then, became a part of their performance practice. John Lutterbie describes performative gestures like those the students curated as “material carriers of meaning” (p. 42). With this in mind, drama educators might consider the ways that our students carry digital and social routines and practices into live performance spaces. We could also consider what affordances and limitations students’ regular interactions with digital/social media bring into drama education settings. Questioning ourselves about how we might use media within drama education sites can lead to new storytelling and story-sharing processes that help students reengage with...
vulnerability and embrace genuine stories while incorporating media tools and techniques into drama spaces.

*Educators can develop classroom activities that invite students to investigate their own digital/social media personas by inviting students to make connections between their imaginative efforts as they move between digital/social and live interactive environments.*

Acting as creative collaborators, students developed new shared understandings about digital/social media practice. They wrote about their personal engagement with digital/social media and crafted stories with digital/social media tools. Creating and then writing about those creation processes made students more aware of their capacities to tell stories in these spaces. When thinking about the development of their digital selves or creating digital stories about others, students became personally and collectively aware of how they could shape gesture, space, and place to frame identities. For example, in Amy’s class, the students’ common perceptions about digital and social media tools and techniques allowed them a shorthand as they collaborated. Their ability to talk confidently about the affordances and limitations of unique digital tools helped them to make practical decisions about the types of technologies that best suited the stories they wanted to share. Student responses to their creative work demonstrate a confidence in their ability to select technology tools that informed their presentation of gestures, space, and place. They were able to do media in a drama setting because they had already assimilated its understandings, procedures, and potential for affectivity while engaging with it independently.

Importantly, we intentionally encouraged students to see their work as interconnected with others’ digital and social media practice. This especially occurred when they critically assessed how their digital understandings affected their live performances, particularly their performance of self. For example, Kris invited students to think critically about the impact of their digital/social media understandings when she asked, “What are some of the components of your digital identity that are performative? How do those performative elements help or hinder your [drama] work?” Using this question, students explored the performative aspects of both their digital and live selves. They found that both positive and negative aspects of digital creation processes had an impact on their lives and everyday performances. Considering this, drama educators might acknowledge how useful their students’ prior knowledge about using digital/social might be in creative spaces. When creating with digital/social media tools, educators should facilitate explorations that move beyond their students’ creative know-how. They can also share activities that allow students to consider the personal motivations that influence their imaginative efforts in both digital/social and live interactive environments.

*Educators can integrate storytelling methods that value both drama techniques and digital tools to expand and strengthen students’ interest in using both technologies and their bodies to tell stories.*

We noted that integrating digital and social media activities into drama education practices can provide new, more intentional meaning-making opportunities. For example, in our classes, students confronted the possibility that the casual digital gestures they created could have an effect on others in both online and live interactions. They recognized that the careful curating of a perfect digital self often caused them to forego authentic communication with others. This type of curatorial behavior could influence the way they presented themselves in live performance spaces. Students described having realizations about their own digital/social media use that challenged them to reconsider how they crafted digital/social media stories. However, our students also successfully incorporated media into their creative drama practice. They took ownership over the ways they used digital technologies to tell their own stories and the stories of others. Students recounted that integrating
storytelling methods (like verbatim theatre) that valued both drama techniques and digital tools helped them to expand and strengthen their interest in using both technologies and their bodies to tell stories that mattered to them.

Young people use media every day. They do media so regularly that it is infused into all of the ways they practice. It certainly impacts the ways that they conceive of gesture, space, place, and identity. Reckwitz (2002) writes, “When we learn a practice, we learn to become bodies in a certain way” (p. 250). As drama educators, it is essential to work with the texts and tools that matter to our students. It is also our responsibility to engage them in critical dialogues that summon them to authenticity and vulnerability in both online and digital/social spaces. We hope that drama educators will approach digital and social media experiences as opportunities to further stretch and play with the notions of performance and bring about new possibilities within educational drama settings.

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