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POSTGRADUATE CERTIFICATE IN TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Cylch Dysgu 3 | Teaching Cycle 3

Group Work and Embodied Ethics

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Teaching Cycle 3:

Group work and embodied ethics

Module overview and account of issue

DR34030 Production In Practice: Devising TheatreS - a third-year, 30-credit module within the Department of Theatre, Film and Television - is seen by many students as the culmination of three years of practical work.

In that module, groups of students work closely with a member of staff to devise, develop and stage a piece of original work for a public audience. The nature of these practical projects is informed both the particular expertise of the staff-member assigned, and by the prior modules undertaken by the student. Traditionally, the nature of work undertaken by students within the applied performance strand of the third year devising module has been highly independent. Unlike other practical projects in which the staff member acts as an (artistic) director or co-collaborator, the role of the staff member for applied performance project is as a facilitator and supervisor. Working in a small group, this process requires that students self-identify and take on various (and often multiple) roles as actors, designers, stage managers, technical operators, liaison officers, and producers. This element of third-year study within the department has strongly emphasized value of small-group learning as developing the precisely the skills which are demanded in employment and research where graduates need to work in teams, build on others ideas, manage time and processes effectively etc. (see, for example, Race 2002: 140-1). Furthermore, the status of the work as piece of applied theatre

Following department-wide restructuring of degree provision, this particular module is no longer offered within the university, though new, equivalent practice-based modules have been introduced which explicitly distinguish between director or staff-led productions, and student-led / staff-facilitated projects.
demands that the performance address a specific audience, with the ambition of articulating or mobilizing specific intentions (Nicholson, 2005); this, in turn, often involves staging work outside of the department in schools or community centres.

In autumn 2009, I was tasked with facilitating a group of seven students who had previously completed a level 2 module in Applied Theatre, as discussed in the previous teaching cycles. Working over six weeks, the group would devise, write, research and then stage an original performance. I would have regular weekly contact with the group (in the region of 2-4 hours per week) but the majority of work would be undertaken independently by the students outside of contact time. The students would be assessed through a mix of summative and formative tasks: through continual assessment of the workshop development, research, devising and rehearsal process (50%), the active manifestation and development of rehearsal work in performance (30%), as well as a group oral exam (20%).

From the outset of the project, I was conscious was that I had dual responsibilities within the group’s process: on the one hand, I would act as a mentor to the student-led production, offering support and guidance; on the other, my presence in the rehearsal room was as an observer and critic of that process. To rephrase this problem with slightly different emphasis: while my presence was intended to support the students’ successful completion of the module’s learning outcomes, I did not want to control or dominate the group’s creative and critical process. This awareness was, in turn, informed by the distinction offered by Fry and Marshall (2003) between the roles of supervisor-as-teacher and supervisor-as-facilitator, and their argument that the nature of projects and dissertations ‘clearly offer[s] a teaching and learning strategy which passes the onus for learning onto the students, thus requiring supervisors to reposition themselves away from the role of the teacher’ (2003, p. 108).

Given the nature of the contact hours I would be, at best, an absentee leader; much of the value of the module was (and is) in giving students the freedom and responsibility to develop their own work through the application of skills and knowledge acquired earlier in the degree. I was particularly conscious that previous student cohorts had sometimes struggled during the group oral to articulate their own critical and creative contribution to the process, or to engage critically and reflectively with the devising process as a whole. While students had sometimes produced very successful practical work, they appeared less able to engage academically with their own process or its broader context.
Finally, I was also conscious of the specific demands of applied performance work - which engages with specific communities in the belief that theatre has the potential to 'address something beyond the form itself' (Ackroyd, 2000). Accordingly the conscious intentionality of applied theatre - the ambition to 'work some change in the world' - brings with it specific and highly contextual questions of ethical conduct. As Helen Nicholson observes

If the motive is individual or personal transformation, is this something which is done to the participants, with them, or by them? Whose values and interests does the transformation serve? (Nicolson 2009, p. 12)

Though these questions had indeed been addressed in past third-year projects, I was concerned that the measure of ethical practice had primarily been assured by the presence of the facilitating staff-member - in other words, students' own responsibilities to examine their practice had been dulled by the presence of a 'parental' figure who would monitor their conduct and stop them (so to speak) from going too far, too fast.

As such, I approached my third teaching cycle with the following primary ambitions:

- to identify the question of ethics in practice as an active concern within the student group’s work;
- to better support the students on the module in making connections between the development of their own critical/creative processes, and the wider academic discourse of applied performance

A plan highlighting proposed teaching practice, intended outcomes and methods of evaluation

My initial plan was structured around recursive discussion through structured seminars, staged through the six-week project. Following the first week of discussion and planning - in which I would lead the student group to begin to determine the outline and primary intentions of the performance project - I would select a small number of key critical texts in response to the particular themes and performance conventions of that nascent work.

My choice of texts would seek to a) engage with the key ethical concepts and questions which might be at stake for the students' particular project and b) identify examples of professional 'best practice' which the group might drawn upon in their own work. These texts
would be provided to the students to read outside of contact hours, and then used as the basis for short (45 min) seminar-style discussions.

The seminar discussions would be structured around three questions:

- What particular choices or values can we identify in the reading? (either explicitly through the identification of intentions, or implicitly in the work's performance conventions)

- What are the implications of this writing / performance work for your own practice?

- Which ideas or techniques might be adapted for use in your own work?

Later seminar sessions would return to both the critical material as well as the students' own responses to these questions: as such, the students would be encouraged to test their own thinking and practice by reflecting on the impact of (for example) two weeks of practical work following an initial encounter with a particular text.

Though not focused on threshold concepts, this model drew upon notions of 'recursiveness and excursiveness' within Land et. al (2005) by seeking to create 'loops' through which the group might encounter and later re-encounter material, offering 'different "takes" on the conceptual material'. Similarly this plan's emphasis on my own role in selecting key materials might reflect Cousins' (2007) assertion that such student-centred teaching nonetheless 'squarely places subject specialists at the centre of an inquiry into the difficulty of their subject'.

More directly, the choice of questions in the seminar sessions was informed by the ETHICS Project's identification of three possible approaches to teaching ethics: pragmatic, in which ethical issues are introduced via a consideration of their practical consequences for the student; embedded, in which ethical concerns are presented holistically, as an integral part of some broader area of concern such as fitness for practice or professionalism; and theoretical, in which the ethics of real-life or life-like situations are then presented in terms of the application of moral theory (see ETHICS Project / Illingworth 2004).

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The ETHICS Project was a one year initiative funded by the LTSN (now the Higher Education Academy). See http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/ethics/
My intended outcomes were:

for the student group to actively engage – practically and in discussion – with the question of ethics in applied performance in relationship to professional practice, as well as their own;

to prepare the group to think both critically and reflectively about their own work through reference to the wider practice of applied theatre;

In particular, these intended outcomes were informed by the criteria through which the oral examination would be assessed:
1. The ability to reflect upon and analyse critically the effectiveness of the devising, rehearsal and performance processes from the perspective of the individual and the group

2. The ability to identify significant moments of discovery and development for the individual and the group

3. Ability to engage critically with the devising/production! performance process through a developed and sensitive understanding and analysis of appropriate performance vocabularies, working methods and relevant contexts

4. The ability to analyse the effectiveness of the group's and/or directors' or facilitator's ideology and method

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**Fig. 3.** Oral examination criteria for DR34030 Production in Practice, 2009.

I would evaluate the impact of my teaching practice through a) a focus / discussion group at the close of the project, after the examination period and b) observations during and assessment of performance in the oral examination.
Practice and interim modification

Through the first week of discussions and debate, the group quickly identified several key characteristics of the performance which they would devise over the following five weeks:

the work would be performed off-campus, in the Morlan Centre in Aberystwyth

the work would be performed in Welsh and English to a mixed-language audience

the project would initially be based on the model of *verbatim theatre*

These choices began to indicate both the practical scale of the project, and the critical territory within which the challenging question of ethics and ethical practice would examined.

In verbatim theatre,

the word verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or re-contextualised to form a dramatic presentation... (Hammond and Steward, 2008)

Verbatim theatre is an established mode of professional theatre practice; contemporary companies and playwrights working with verbatim techniques include David Hare (Via Dolorosa, 1998; The Permanent Way, 2004), Richard Norton-Taylor (Bloody Sunday, 2005) and the Tricycle Theatre, London.

Of central concern, then, would be the students' role in 'editing, arranging and re-contextualising' material, whether taken from their own lives, from interviews with others or from other, public documents such as newspapers and broadcast media. Readings selected for the seminars were drawn from two texts: *Verbatim Verbatim* (Hammond and Steward, 2008), which takes the form of a series of edited interviews with practitioners working in verbatim and documentary theatre; and *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Forsyth and Megson, 2009), a critical anthology examining developments in documentary performance in
the UK and across the West. Perhaps more significantly, discussion of ethical standards within verbatim and documentary performance were directly informed by Aberystwyth University’s own ethics guidance, including institutional Guidelines for Research Involving Human Tissue or Participants which emphasise active informed consent, confidentiality and the rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy of possible participants.

As the project continued, I became increasingly aware of the demands on time produced working at an external venue and by the need to engage the students in further performance skills training workshops. Constraint on available time in which to complete the project meant that I was forced to reduce the overall number of seminars: three hour-long sessions at roughly ten-day intervals, rather than a larger number of smaller sessions on a weekly basis.

Relevant data and feedback

a) Focus / discussion group

An edited transcript of the focus group is available in appendix E, from which the following material is excerpted. Though three of the group of seven students had agreed to take part, only two were available on the day of the discussion. The focus group session focused on a number of moments and exercises from the six week process, focusing on the initial planning sessions, the seminar discussions and the final oral exam. The session was structured around prompts to memory (‘do you remember when...’) followed by more specific questioning of recollections.

1. Both students voiced the opinion that the aims identified for the project had undergone a process of recursive revision over the course of the seminar sessions, seemingly as later knowledge demanded reconsideration of earlier decisions:

   Student 2: Each time we had to refer to the aims they changed slightly ... just to link everything in a bit more.

   Student 1: [agreement]

The devising process - which involved a small number of recorded interviews, for which informed consent was sought and given - was also subject to internal departmental review to ensure best practice. Under the limited conditions agreed for the use of the interview material, which included anonymity and the right to withdraw, both transcripts and original recordings have now been destroyed. As staff-member, I provided direct oversight for the conduct of the project.
They just changed a little bit.

Because we started out saying we were definitely going to change people's attitudes... and then we realized that we actually couldn't... so we had to re-write them to reflect what we were doing...

.to be a little bit more realistic. [laughter]

That realization ... that radically changing people wasn't within the scope of this project [laughter] when did you think you realized that?

I think it was... we'd done the script and were working on everything together... they were on the wall... it might have been the case that someone just looked at it and went 'hang on a second, that's not quite right.' I can't remember.

I think it was when we were doing the ethics... getting all the opinions of people... I think it was around then that we really

Because we'd done more research and had more of a [performance] piece.

There was also evidence that a conscious recognition of choices made within the devising process within the cycle of the production had provided valuable context for the development of knowledge and ethical practice:

Once you'd met the people you were working with, it became a lot more personal, because when you're sorting out the forms, it’s just a load of bits of paper that you’ll give to faceless people. But once you've spoken with people and they've shared their memories, their stories... personal stuff. You really do want to take care of what they've told you. I was really quite precious about the material I’d got and transcribed and everything. Because you've got a connection to it.

I kind of felt a responsibility to look after it and .. make sure it wasn't taken out of context..
Similarly, discussion of early planning meetings - in which the group had considered using a local newspaper account of a sexual assault - recalled the centrality of empathy and awareness of the sensitivities of others in the project's trajectory:

Student 1: I remember when [student] and I were walking home in the first week, the story you mentioned and that people wanted to use it, and thinking that actually we couldn't because the person who it had happened to might be in the audience.. or the people that did it might be there.. so we voiced that to the group and everyone cottoned on that it wasn't a good idea.

Student 2: When it's in a newspaper, it's really impersonal. And then you start to think about it, and you think about it, 'hang on a second, that person goes to this university.. they might be a drama student.' You don’t know. 'it's just so anonymous. It could have been anyone of us.

2. Both students affinned the value of the critical and further reading in confining both the legitimacy of verbatim practice, and illustrating the ways in which they might be developing their own 'style':

Student 2: For me it was interesting because I could see that there was something similar and to be able to identify the ways [in which] what we were doing were really similar, and the ways in which we could say 'no, that's not what we're doing in the slightest.' So it was interesting to see how we were making it our own. Our own style.

Student 1: It was useful to see other people had done these kinds of projects and they were successful.. so it was.. confirmation that we could do it.

Student 2: Not just some crazy idea. [laughter]

There was also a sense in which the students' understanding of their own choice of performance convention – fictional characters whose lines were based on real world dialogue from interviews - had invoked a particular kind of commitment to the community which they were attempting to represent:
Student 2: I think we took the verbatim work on and thought... if we want to represent the community. I think we wanted to be an objective to work from an objective point. We didn’t want it to be ‘oh, we’re students doing a play about the community’ and be really bias [sic] because it would be all from our point of view. Even if we try to balance it, it’s from our point of view. If we use the words of people from the community, their words, then it’s a more objective viewpoint. It came from wanting to be... fair, I guess. And impartial.

3. The students also indicated that active engagement with the choices they had made during the production process had formed a useful ‘rehearsal’ for the tasks involved in the oral examination:

Student 2: I think it helped that we had already talked about the processes we’d gone through. You get used to talking about your work from an objective and critical point of view. We talked about this, and this came out of it. It’s much easier to think back on conversations than on your own thought processes.

Student 1: It was helpful to practice, almost, getting your thoughts in order... we knew what we were talking about because we’d sort of talked about it before.

Student 2: I’d done the oral before for A Country Wife [an earlier student production] which was completely different ballpark, because in that you’re very much out on your own and you’re thinking ‘what did I do? What did I do?’ and going back through months of notes. But because we’d gone through the process, knew what the key points were, where things had changed. So, it was a lot easier to work through that process.

b) Oral examination observations

The oral examination was undertaken as a group examination in the presence of a second marker from within the department, Charmian Savill. The oral exam was structured around three questions, asking the group to a) consider and describe their own role in the devising
process b) to consider where their process might have been improved if they had more time, or the opportunity to repeat the exercise and c) to articulate their understanding of the ethical issues raised by verbatim theatre practice.

During the exam I observed that:

- the students all made reference to the seminar discussions as an important element of their development during the production process
- the students were able to identify their own choices, and the consequences of those choices (as well as the ‘road not taken’)
- the students appeared able - without prompting - to identify their own choices in relationship to existing professional practice, and to begin to assess the success of their own work on those terms (including where, in their opinion, the project had fallen short of their own ambitions)

**Implications for development of teaching practice**

While it is possible to identify the influence of the seminar discussions within the project’s development and the students’ own progress, it remains difficult to determine their overall impact. One might speculate, for example, that the student group may have come to similar realizations without active prompting to engage in reflective discussion. However, the conscious and unprompted reference to these seminars within the oral exam - as well as the usefully self-critical quality of their performance in that assessment - suggests a valuable role for in-process discussions to prime, trigger or simply begin reflective analysis. A key part of this processes success, I think, was the responsiveness of the model to the students own practice - that is to say, the seminars were designed in response to the particular choices made by the students, and later informed by the consequences of those choices.

At the very least, the building a reflective cycle into the process of practical projects offers opportunity for students to prepare for assessment which is grounded in reflection and self-analysis. While this may involve the simple rehearsal of justifications or accounts ("I remember when we did this.. we did this because.."), it can also be understood as training the skills of critical acknowledgment which underpin that process: the ability to recognise and
identify significant moments within the development of a project, and the (oftentimes reflexive) relationship of those moments to each other.

Finally, while I am keen to refine and repeat this process - and engage in a larger scale process of gathering feedback - I am conscious that, as noted elsewhere in this portfolio, that students within the discipline of drama and performance sometimes resist the inclusion of seminar discussion and perceive it to be an unwelcome replacement for practical work. Accordingly, the success of further cycles in this mode may depend on building strong and persuasive links to the students’ own practice, so that reflective seminars emerge clearly in response to the needs of students, describing a trajectory back to the improvement of that practice.