CHAPTER SEVEN

Unravelling Hierarchies: Engaging Performative Pedagogies within a Creative, Transnational Partnership to Enhance Socio-Cultural Resilience

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Anticipation

In May 2018, I travelled to Madrid with a company of undergraduate drama students from London South Bank University to meet a group of student actors from the Centro Universitario de Artes TAI, with whom we had been sharing an intensive, virtual rehearsal process since January that year. Our shared goal was the development of a new theatre adaptation of Federico García Lorca’s *Blood Wedding* for public performance.

This interdisciplinary project brings together a company of student artists from the UK and an EU country working in collaboration with academic practitioners to develop a bi-lingual, public-facing arts event that takes place in both countries at different stages of development. It is modelled on a traditional language exchange whereby students are paired with a partner whom they host, and are hosted by, during two periods of residential ‘exchange’. All participants engage with an element of language learning prior to the start of the project either in a class or online. Pairing students promotes empathic, trust-based relationships strengthening the collaborative process. In addition, the language learning element promotes higher-level engagement with both the creative and social learning involved in developing work for production in a different country.

The work is founded on a commitment to partnership as the key to developing experiential artistic learning according to the principle of ‘Give and Gain’ embedded in the manifesto of Project Phakama. This community arts organisation develops work through the medium of intercultural exchange, which ‘unites communities across difference and diversity through a … non-hierarchical, life-affirming process.’ This project, therefore, seeks to disrupt the dominant, hierarchical educational ideology of ‘expert’ and ‘learner’ by creating a fluid, dynamic and creative discourse between early career and professional artists/designers working in the context of a transnational collaboration towards a mutual goal. The experiential learning at the heart of the project allows us, as Newton observes, to ‘intentionally break down those cultural binaries which can be extraordinarily powerful in maintaining society’s traditional myopic understanding of teaching and learning’ ([2014](#CBML_BIB_ch07_005): 4).

Action

Phase One: Project Development

*Building the company.*

 Recruit participants in equal numbers from both institutions and pair them together to form key creative, social, and bilingual partnerships

 Create individual give and gain ‘audits’ shared across the whole group. This will identify the range and diversity of skills that all participants bring. For *Blood Wedding* we gained, amongst other things, drummers, a graphic designer, a composer, a needlework crafter, a pianist, two guitarists, singers and bilingual speakers and translators.

 Use the audit to create an agreed, collective frame of reference based on the understanding that all participants enter the process as both learners and teachers supported by professional artist/academics in key facilitation roles.

 Pairs create autobiographical introductions for each other shared through virtual platforms.

 Participants enlist as members of an artistic collective with each committing to a process of learning and teaching, facilitators included. The development of a whole-group artistic ‘manifesto’ can aid this process.

 Weekly group sessions take place in separate countries with both groups working on a collectively agreed set of creative, developmental tasks.

*Translation as intervention****.*** Enlist participants as translators. One language should not take precedence over the other. We commit to the process of translation during the workshopping period by allocatingadditional time to ensure all communications have been understood in both languages. This engages the student-participant as expert/educator in the context of the room.

 Students translate for each other in group and pair work

 Students translate for facilitators and/or aid the facilitation

 Bilingual partners teach each other areas of specific textual pronunciation and expression where required.

*Dramaturgical investigation and excavation.*Accepting we can never arrive at a definitive moment of understanding of any text creates opportunities to move beyond a purely structural, semantic analyses. We focused on developing what Victor Turner termed a ‘comparative symbology’, which attempts to discover the ludic capacity of symbols within an artwork in order to ‘play with thepossibilities of form and meaning’ ([1974](#CBML_BIB_ch07_007): 56). At this level the creative process becomes genuinely deconstructive, in order to access the deeper poetic structures of symbol and metaphor beyond the problematics of adapting text in two separate languages. Instead we are seeking the,

liminal interiority … a void in thought shared by performer and spectator … (which) lies in the gaps between words and thoughts, in the background of all language and ideas as a silent beyond-ness, and immanently within knowledge as a generative condition of unknowingness (Haney, [2007](#CBML_BIB_ch07_002): 69)

In order to access this liminal space between the two languages students were asked to:

 Read the play in their first language.

 Identify key passages that resonated with them for any reason whatsoever.

 Identify any images or metaphors that created particularly strong visual and/or symbolic ideas.

 Work first with a partner to create a series of choreographic motifs to express these images and symbols and develop a movement pattern linking the individual motifs.

 Teach the virtual partner the resulting choreographic ‘score’ in a live one-to-one Skype session. At this point the agency of participants is fully engaged both in the artistic generation of the material (as author, composer, choreographer, designer) and in the teaching of this to a fellow company member engaging each participant as both ‘expert’ as well as ‘learner’.

 Gather together additional artistic interventions that emerge from the give and gain audit. For example, a student may compose a sound or musical score that others may play or sing. This work should be developed collectively before phase two begins.

At the end of phase one, which is developed over weeks and preferably months, the group owns a collective ‘bank’ of material derived from the symbolic and semantic landscape of the text. In addition, participants have collated/curated other interpretative forms such as music, percussion, vocal scores, objects and props and key elements of scenic and visual design, and have developed key ensemble working practices.

Phase Two: Project Realisation

*Centrality of play****.*** This phase sees the first ‘exchange’ period where students work intensively to bring together all the material developed in phase one and generate new material in preparation for a work-in-progress showing/experience with an invited audience. Our movement director, Ed Richards (Obra Theatre company member, LSBU lecturer), used play to access the ludic statenecessary for intense creativity to occur.

 Participants stand in a circle. One has a ball. They take turns to throw the ball and to catch it.

 The facilitator must stress that dropping the ball is not evidence of ‘failure’ but simply part of an organic process.

 Everyone must accept that they will drop the ball, and this is key to the exercise.

 Focus on becoming available to the room—participants must not strive to make anything happen, nor to impose any pattern or structure.

 Everyone must accept a level of chaos and confusion without panicking or resisting it.

Repetition of this exercise develops a practiced complicity within the group that allows them to develop a non-judgmental, inclusive, shared creative space in which each participant becomes fully available to and for the work.

*The pre-expressive flow state.*We worked with notions of ‘flow’ both in the process and as a precondition for the performance. In the early stages a facilitator may initially guide the work by offering areas on which to **f**ocus but eventually the work should happen organically, with neither leader nor followers.

 Participants begin by walking around the room. The guide asks them to focus attention on the following: breath, feet, floor, weight and centre. Take care to observe what happens in the body if the centre shifts. This continues for some time.

 Begin to open awareness to others but, as with the ballgame, make no decisions. Simply respond and be available.

 As the work progresses add in layers such as stopping/sitting/falling working towards a continuous free flow of movement in and around the space.

This work was used both developmentally and artistically, and was incorporated into the movement vocabulary of the finished performance, creating a sense of presence and liveness in the room.

*Pencil scores*. Pairs worked with notions of ‘impulse’ to develop physical scores, which developed into a ‘fight’ scene representing conflicting worlds within the play.

 Take turns to use a pencil to find contact with your partner’s body

 The partner must avoid contact using the most minimal movement possible

 Once the ‘score’ has been established, expressive intention can be layered on.

 Pairs teach another pair their score to create group ritual sequences.

Phase Three: Project Production

This final phase is where the creative production happens. The end of the first artistic residency provides an opportunity for an open, dialogic forum with the audience in order to evaluate and feed back on the work in progress. This feedback can then be applied developmentally in the next phase of the work, which takes place during the final residency, focusing on preparations for the public-facing event or performance.

Analysis

I have initiated this project in various forms across the EU and beyond, and in all cases the impact for participants is significant. Company members develop as artists, collaborators, creative agents and, equally importantly, as friends. The early stages of development, which engage the partners’ virtual interactions, are essential for positive relationships and communication but also form a bedrock for the creative process as students become tutors in order to teach each other artistic material developed independently in their separate group rehearsals.

Locating creative practice within a European partnership engages the participants as agents of their own creative learning whilst simultaneously empowering them to forge fully invested identities as European and global citizens, offering a model of social resilience and renewal in these challenging times. For the *Blood Wedding* ensemble, it is only the beginning as the fledging company that emerged from the process, *TransformArts!,* tours the work to the International Youth Arts Festival, in July 2019, beginning their wider journey as artists and citizens beyond the immediate scope of the project itself.

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