

# **A Practitioner's Reflection on an Online Course under COVID-19**

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## **Summary**

In this paper, the author reflects on the delivery of a sub-degree course in hybrid mode under COVID-19 from the perspective of a drama educator. The course aims to equip students with expressive, artistic means to discover themselves and write their self-narratives. The author reviews some students' self-reflected assignments and their encounters in the hybrid learning environment—a mix of simultaneous online and F2F teaching and learning. She finds that students can be seen as “prosumers” of their arts experiences, and raises the question of the nature of “presence” in mediated online learning environment. At the end of the paper, the author reflects on the possible pedagogical implications of her online teaching experiences for drama education.

*Keywords:* COVID-19 pandemic, drama education, hybrid mode of teaching, presence, prosumer, self-narrative

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The COVID-19 pandemic has immense impact on life and living. In the realm of education, it has created new conditions for educators as teaching and learning go online. This short article is my own reflections on delivering a sub-degree course online under COVID-19. The 12-week core course on self-narrative and self-discovery originally designed to be done face-to-face (F2F) on campus embraces a process approach to the understanding of human being as “not yet”. It aims to enable young adults of 18 to 20 years old to (re-)discover new knowledge and feelings within themselves and express their self-narratives creatively through artistic means. Though this is not an applied drama course per se, I deliver the course in the spirit of relational pedagogy embraced by many drama/theatre practitioners of the field in order to maintain “watchfulness, trust of the student, letting the student learn, with the goal of opening the space for the student [to] come into one’s own” (Bergum, 2003, p. 122, as cited in Aitken et al., 2007, p. 6). Students are invited to think and feel at the same time throughout the course period.

Under the pandemic, the course was put online for both the Spring and the Fall semesters in January and September 2020 respectively. During the Fall semester, there was a drop in new confirmed cases in Hong Kong, students could opt to do the course either online from remote sites or F2F on campus. As such, I had classes conducted in hybrid mode with students learning via Zoom simultaneously with those in the campus classroom. Throughout the two semesters, I had been curious about a few things: How could we deliver a course that is student-centred and that embraces a process approach to self-discovery and self-narration online? What could video-conferencing tools offer in pure online as well as hybrid learning environment? What is the nature of digitally mediated teaching and learning? As a critical drama-practitioner-educator, I am also curious to explore what possible pedagogical implications the online teaching experiences may have for the practices of applied drama and theatre education. In this article, I reflect on some of the above questions by looking into moments of pedagogical encounters with my students.

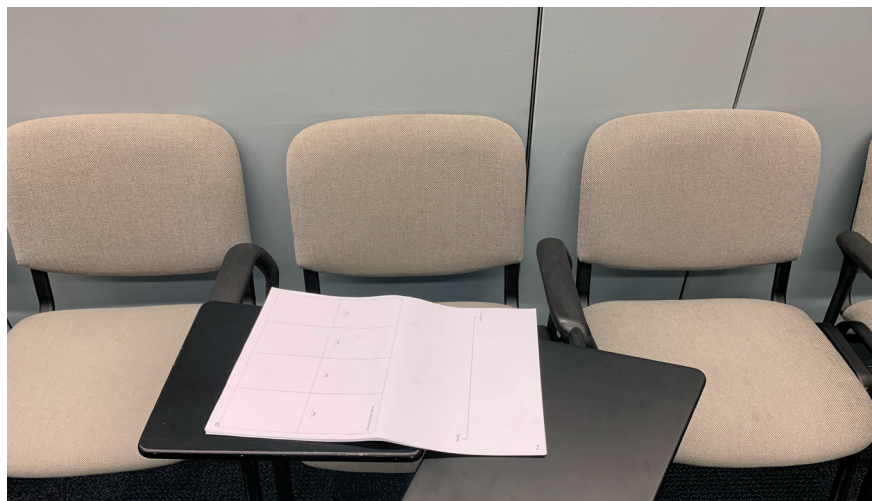
## Managing Classroom Realities: The Who and The What

Hybrid classes—a mix of simultaneous online and F2F teaching and learning—is unprecedented to me and many other teachers across the globe under the COVID-19 pandemic. To make sense of the situation, I looked to professionals in educational technology (edtech) and scholars in online instructions for support and inspirations (see Atherton, 2018; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; New EdTech Classroom, 2020; Stannard, 2020 for examples). Edtech professionals in general acknowledge the challenges for teachers to manage real-time interaction and the two realities presented by the online environment and the F2F context. Suggestions were to manage the content through content-sharing software apps and edtech platforms. Those tips and advice were helpful for novice to online teaching like me. I started exploring interactive apps that could be useful for my hybrid classes.

Later on, a conversation with a student, Pillar<sup>1</sup>, and some other students' experiences in a relevant arts workshop have brought me another perspective to hybrid teaching that I was too preoccupied to notice: the role of the students. Pillar had always attended F2F lessons ever since the pandemic situation and the College policy made it possible for her. In one instance, she attended class online and came back to campus for F2F class in the subsequent lesson. Very often, students would switch online once in a while for reasons including feeling sick and the need to stay home. I checked with Pillar for her reason.

"You attended class online last week. Were you not feeling well?"

"No," she replied, "last lesson we had the drawing workshop. The classroom chair's got a tiny writing tablet that won't make drawing good. So I stayed home to use my desk." (See Figure 1)

**Figure 1***Writing Tablets in the Campus Classroom*

What Pillar said immediately reminded me of the intermittent problems with the visualizer at the beginning of the arts workshop we had that morning. Students were being guided through the process of narrating their life stories in the form of non-figurative drawing. That morning, Pillar was one of the students in the Zoom room who complained that the visualizer problem had interfered with my demonstration and facilitation of the workshop. It took me some time to fix the problem, and that had unexpectedly engaged the students in the physical classroom to help test out viable technical options.

The anecdotes have significant meanings for me with regard to hybrid teaching. Initially, I thought it was me who were to manage the hybrid class. It has turned out that it was the students on-site who helped me handle and solve technical problems through collective wisdom and actions. Without doubt, these students' knowledge in media technology enable them to offer me help. Pillar's decision to do the arts workshop from her own site for want of better drawing experiences shows that she is a highly motivated self-directed learner. The offer of online and F2F options makes it possible for her to make arrangements for the kind of effective learning she desires for. Preoccupations

with the teacher's role in managing hybrid class realities may overlook, if not neglect, the role of students as active learners managing their learning in the digital environment.

## **Learners' Prosumption of Artistic Experiences**

In the digital era, active users may be recast as "prosumers" active in generating their own contents for consumption as is the case of digital storytelling (Wales, 2012). Yet, whether active learners like Pillar and the helping students in my hybrid classroom may pass for prosumers remains to be studied. The term "prosumer" was coined by Alvin Toffler (1980) to discuss modern technologies and their effects on cultures in capitalist economies. The discussion has caught on and attracted attentions from scholars in sociology of art and culture, media and cultural studies (Chen, 2012; Chu, 2010; Nakajima, 2012; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Tse & Tsang, 2018). Some of these studies have called for a more critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions of "prosumers" as active media users with equal opportunities in the production process in the digital era (Chu, 2010; Tse & Tsang, 2018).

Scholars, however, proclaim in general that prosumption is not a new phenomenon. It has existed well before the digital era, in forms like putting the consumers to work to bus their own tables at the fast food restaurant while eating there (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010); artists consuming paints, canvases and other artists' styles and ideas in their creative processes (Nakajima, 2012). Prosumption of art, as studies show, not only redefines what kind of art to be produced, by and for whom, but also promotes a co-creating culture that values an "inclusive community logic" (Chen, 2012, p. 572).

The self-narrative course I am reflecting on entrusts the arts as legitimate forms of knowing and the artistic process a source of knowledge. The drawing workshop that Pillar eagerly participated in is demonstrative of this essence. From the perspective of prosumption, students are prosumers

engaging themselves in cultural production of their self-narrative for self-reflection, i.e. self-consumption per se. This is evident across some students' art experiences written in their self-reflected writings.

Yannes who lost her loved ones in recent years shared how the arts medium has been a healing for her. (See Figure 2)

**Figure 2**

*Yanne's Representation of Her Life Stories*



It grieved me when I was doing this [drawing] exercise. Looking back at that moment [when my father passed away], I used black and blue denotive of a dark colour sky, and connotat[ive] of the dark and rainy mental world [inside me]. It also showed my feeling when I was doing this exercise because I am still unable to accept that my father has passed away. I am sad and I miss my father. On the other hand, I found comfort and tranquility while I shared that particular moment of my life in this exercise. I could see my growth. ... .. (Yannes, Excerpt from My Story Assignment, 2 November 2020)

Yannes consumed pastels, brushstrokes, colours and shapes on the drawing paper while producing a self-representation of her life instances and emotions. Geraldine shared a friendship experience that once devoured her (See Figure 3).



I never thought to recall this incident. I avoided thinking of it [so] as not to admit my false [sic: fault] in the incident. While I was drawing, I felt my mind being cleared and [my] brain chatter switched off. Pens brought my hands across paper to depict my thoughts and emotions deeply kept under my subconscious. I felt as if the lines I drew were telling me that, "Breakthrough the barrier of emotions. Leave the cage of your thoughts." I felt free. I was able to face my past, my false [sic: fault] and, myself. (Geraldine, Excerpt from My Story Assignment, 2 November 2020)

**Figure 3**

*Geraldine's Representation of Her Life Stories*



For Geraldine, her non-figurative drawing spoke to her. The oil pastels seemed to take on a life of their own and took her in directions she never intended to go.

Alex attended the course purely online and did the workshop via Zoom. He recalled a turning point in his life when he fell in love with books and Chinese literature. He engaged in self-talk when looking at his own drawing (See Figure 4).

I had never thought that I want to be a writer in the future before. Yet, ... I made a choice which may [have] affect[ed] my whole life:

studying Chinese literature. When I was doing this [drawing] exercise and try[ing] to recall my memories, I questioned myself: What if I didn't try to read at that time? What if I still couldn't get along well with my friend? How would my life [have] become? However, it was all gone. Every choice in our life can affect the future severely. Life is the process of discovery ... of ourselves, others and the future. ... (Alex, Excerpt from My Story Assignment, 5 November 2020)

**Figure 4**

*Alex's Representation of His Life Stories*



Prosumption of art is a meaning-making activity (Chen, 2012). This is true with Yannes' and Geraldine's experiences. Alex eloquently expressed that in yet another piece of assignment.

I seldom recall my memory as I think that the past has gone, it is meaningless to fixate on it. Yet, I found that I seem to be closer to myself after recalling my past. ... I saw myself changed. ... From naughty to quiet, from timid to brave, from outgoing to shy. ... The past is meaningful. It is the evidence that I am creating a new self. (Alex, excerpt from Journal Assignment 2, 3 December 2020)



These students are prosumers of their artistic experiences, producing and consuming the self-narrative using oil pastels, colours and brushstrokes as the medium of self-expression. In these self-reflected reports, students show signs of “aesthetic engagement”, displaying heightened awareness of and connections with the self and revealing qualities of attentiveness, self-acceptance, risk-taking and human presence in the here and now (Bundy, 2002, 2003).

## **“Presence”: Neither Singular nor Straightforward in Hybrid Learning Environment?**

In the physical classroom, students’ presence in the drawing workshop was observable, and their energy felt. During the workshop, I could see moments when Yannes, Geraldine and some other students were extremely absorbed in their drawings, and moments of spontaneous exclamations among students as they saw their own and one another’s artworks developed. Those moments indicated that these learners were aesthetically engaged in their tasks and they were unlocking their creativity. They also showed a learning community in the shaping. Individual students were connected through the shared artistic encounters in one another’s presence. Yet, at the same time, I felt unsure of the processes of Alex, Pillar and other students who were doing the arts workshop online. They seemed only remotely present in the virtual classroom. These students’ aesthetic experience and engagement in the workshop were not immediately felt and remained unknown until they wrote about them in their subsequent self-reflected reports.

Cormac Power (2008) theorizes “presence” in theatre. He argues that “presence” in theatrical art is “never singular or straightforward” but “complex and multiple” (p. 89). He identifies three modes of presence. First, the fictional mode of presence, or theatre’s making-present. Theatre has the ability to make-present the fictional phenomena, by using actors and stage props to pretend to be the people and objects of a fictional world (p. 53). Second, the auratic mode of presence, or theatre’s “having-

presence". It means that a theatrical performance can "seem to convey an authority or even an "aura" to an audience via its actors or the energy by which the performance is conveyed" (p. 45). Auratic presence refers to "an abstract quality that can be attached to people, names, objects or places which have more significance than appearance might suggest", Power said (p. 47). In theatre, auratic presence can be manifested in different ways e.g. through the fame and reputation of the actors, playwright or artwork, and the audience's expectation and knowledge of them. Auratic presence can also be constructed in the act of performance. The actor can construct his auratic presence "through his manipulation of space and materials, including his own body and posture, as well as the way in which the actor confronts his audience and engages their attention." (p. 49). The third mode of presence that Power identifies is the literal presence of the spectator (or spectator's being-present) in the theatre where both the actors and the spectators are literally present before an object of contemplation or performance. The literal mode of presence/being-present is about spectators' experience or "reading" of the theatre event (p. 87). By discerning the modes of presence in theatre, Power posits a framework for understanding and analyzing the potential of theatre to "put presence into play" and the "distinctiveness" of theatre as a representational form against other forms like film and literature (pp. 9, 15).

Power's theorization of presence as complex and multiple rather than singular and monolithic in the field of theatre studies has relevance for applied drama and theatre education. In applied drama/theatre settings, when the teacher-facilitator narrates the dramatic fiction to build context, works in roles to make-believe and manipulates the dramatic elements of language, space or time in the physical space, she could be understood as creating "the auratic presence" in the literal presence of her participants.

Power's conceptualization of presence helps throw lights on the pedagogical encounters in my hybrid classes, too. In the case of the arts workshop above, the physical classroom could be understood as the theatric space, in Boalian sense (1995), where the students were literally present with their fellow coursemates before the visual representation of their life stories

as a work of art and an object of contemplation. As for students in the Zoom room, their written reflections have suggested that they were literally present in their own arts processes contemplating their own artworks and life stories, in the presence of the instructor mediated through the online platform.

During the course period, there were moments when students did indicate that they were in one another's presence simultaneously in-class and online when working on the same activities. In one instance, I invited students in my hybrid classes to do an online jigsaw puzzle individually in real-time using their own digital devices. The purpose was to create some common experiences before reading a set text that rides on the author's first jigsaw puzzle experience. For the sake of time management, I asked students to type in the Zoom chat box when they finished the game so I would know when to insert a break, for how long and when to screen-share a Padlet for them to denote their experiences.

Surprisingly, the small task in the chat box—telling the instructor when you were done with the jigsaw puzzle—triggered responses among students and quite a number of them wrote about that on the Padlet. Some students posted their own delightful moments like having “found the way to finish the puzzle quickly”, and being able to “finish another puzzle that use[d] less time” (See Figure 5). Apart from personal moments, other students denoted their moments in response to how speedy their fellow coursemates managed to finish the puzzle. These responses varied a bit, though. One said she was “motivated” to go on even though she found herself bad at the puzzle; several students felt like they would never make it and wanted to give up, and one student wished to ask for tips on completing jigsaw puzzle fast.

Figure 5

Students' Jigsaw Puzzle Moments

Jigsaw Puzzle Experiences				
a) Moments of delights or excitements? b) Moments of surprises? c) Moments of frustrations? d) Moments wanting to give up? What happened next?				
a) Moments of delights or excitements?	b) Moments of surprises?	c) Moments of frustrations?	d) Moments wanting to give up? What happened next?	e) Other moments
Finishing it	when i saw someone just use 46 seconds to finished.	I didn't know if I can finish the puzzle on time		tipss yess need lol
when my classmates finished so early lol ... it was exciting and i was motivated to do it even im so bad %.%	seeing the zoom chat box that someone was faster than me	The puzzle pieces are messy.	when someone finished the puzzle and i wasnt even close to	I feel annoying, when i saw the puzzle are mess.
	heard that some classmates have already finished the puzzle in a few minutes	Too many puzzles and i don't know how to start it.	The timeline is close and there are lots of puzzle have to fill.	
found the way to finish the puzzle quickly although it was too late	accidentally combine 2 pieces	I can't control my touch panel well to move the puzzle.	I can't figure it out how to put the puzzle in tidy, however i feel ambitious to take this challenge.	
finished the puzzle.	I am surprised that many people could finish it very fast.	when i couldnt figure out the next one ...	My classmates finish the puzzle one after another however i have not yet. I insisted and cheered for myself.	
finish another puzzle that use less time	Find the puzzle piece that I needed at that moment.		There were too many puzzle pieces, it was hard to finish	
When I learn a new skill to play the puzzle at the end.	finished the puzzle		when i finished the puzzle, then i saw someone just used a few seconds to finish it	
when i find the spider man	I actually figured out some in that short amount of time which i didnt even expect and got surprised lol . Becuase it takes me long hours to even do half..		7 min is too short for puzzles	
when i was able to finish one side of the puzzle	Find the difficult piece		there are too many puzzles they are similar , i can check it one by one only.	
When i finished the game. (DingDong)	find the final piece			
when i was able to figure out the next				
feel happy in the whole jigsaw puzzle experience.				

Students’ quick remarks on the Padlet suggest that human presence exists in an IT mediated hybrid learning environment. This pedagogical encounter prompts further the question: what are the nature and specificities of the IT mediated mode(s) of human presence? How are these modes of (mediated) presence similar to and different from those we used to have in the F2F classroom and the drama classroom? Ethnographic studies on learners’ online experiences should help find some answers to these questions.

## **Implications for Applied Drama/Theatre Education**

### **Potentials and possibilities of text-based communication online**

Working with technology in an online environment would require intentional planning on the part of the teacher. In discussing success in an online learning environment, Conrad & Donaldson (2011) argue that instructors need to shift their role from simple course deliverer to “activity architect” with the goal of providing increasing opportunities for learners to move from newcomers to online learning to become initiators, i.e. self-directed learners (p. 10). They maintain that when courses first moved online, it is significant that

the online learner must quickly establish comfort with the technology, comfort with predominantly text-based communication, and comfort with a higher level of self-direction than in a traditional classroom. If this comfort level is not reached, the learner will walk away from the course in frustration. (p. 8)

Yet, much to my surprise, individual students in my hybrid classes seemed to be quite comfortable texting in the Zoom chat box and posting on Jamboard and Padlet. They were even more responsive in class activities online than they were back to the subsequent F2F classrooms. In the applied drama context, Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy (2020) have similar observations in their action research on conducting online process drama workshops with undergraduates and post-graduates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research findings have shown that the chat feature in the online platforms “allowed everyone, even the more usually silent participants to contribute simultaneously” (p. 4).

My own teaching observations together with Cziboly & Bethlenfalvy’s findings suggest, on the one hand, that the learners are comfortable with text-based communication, which might be the result of the texting and instant messaging practices enhanced by electronic mobile devices and social media

(Tulane, Vaterlaus & Beckert, 2015). On the other hand, our observations indicate that something is at work on these platforms in engaging the participants aesthetically online. Further exploration of the specificities and aesthetics of online platforms may help understand the kinds of potentials and possibilities of such platforms may offer for the development of applied drama education online.

## **Drama participants as prosumers**

With respect to planning and implementing applied drama/theatre education online, the notion of prosumption could be particularly useful. Prosumption is not a new phenomenon in the field of applied drama/education. It has been in the field well before the digital era as participants in the dramatic elsewhere take actions and observe their own actions as “spect-actor”, the Boalian sense (Boal, 1995). For instance, process drama, the art form and pedagogy I am interested in, embraces the essence of sharing power with the participants by inviting them to co-create the fiction of the drama and co-intent the dramatic actions from within the fiction (Law & Pratley, 2018; Prentki & Stinson, 2016). It requires that the facilitator carefully plans the dramatic structure with which students could go through processes of thinking, forming, experiencing and responding in and out of the dramatic roles for the purpose of exploring and examining human conditions under particular circumstances (Bowell & Heap, 2013, 2017; Burke, 2013).

Then, the question follows: how could applied drama facilitators “architect” activities and opportunities for the participants to own the forms—both the dramatic conventions and the digital media—early and with comfort to generate dramatic content for whole-group experiencing, collective listening and self-reflective thinking, in the manner of a prosumer. Practice and research on practice would help us find some answers to the question.



## **IT mediated or enhanced human presence**

An IT mediated remote learning is a test of the teacher's beliefs ranging from the beliefs in the ultimate goal of education, the nature of human experience, the importance of wait-time in pedagogical encounters, to the role of feeling and emotion in teaching and learning. Conrad and Donaldson's (2011) idea on establishing comfort with the technology quick and early is equally true for the instructor as for the learners. State of comfort (or the lack of it) may point to emotions and feelings that could unveil the instructor/facilitator's own experience and interaction with technology. In hindsight, my uncertainty of students' online workshop processes comes as a mix of doubt about and discomfort with how the hybrid online environment mediates human presence (or absence) for me and my students. In the course of writing this teaching reflection, I have come to realize through students' class participation and their self-reflected reports that online platforms could create social presence for the participants online.

As a drama practitioner-researcher, I am interested in exploring further how applied drama/theatre practitioners can make the best of the online learning environment to create their own presence and those of the students for dramatic exploration of the human conditions. Continual reflective practice research, action research and ethnographic studies on the teachers' and the learners' user experiences in online and hybrid learning environment would definitely benefit the field. Collective efforts as such would prompt directions for applied drama/theatre design and pedagogical development in the new digital online platform.

## **Notes**

- 1 All names in this paper are fictitious to protect the privacy of the students.

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# 一個教育工作者2019冠狀病毒病疫情下的線上教學反思

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## 摘要

本文作者從戲劇教育工作者的角度反思2019冠狀病毒病疫情下一個副學士課程的混合教學情況。該課程旨在讓學生通過藝術形式發現自己，書寫自我敘事。從學生的自我反思功課和網上實時及面授混合學習模式下的互動，作者發現學生展現了「產消合一者」既生產又消費自己的藝術體驗的特質，並提出以網絡科技為學習環境下「在場」是何種性質的問題。文末，作者進一步反思這個在線教學體驗對戲劇教育於網上實踐教學所蘊含的意義。

**關鍵詞：**2019冠狀病毒病大流行、自我敘事、在場、混合學與教模式、產消合一者、戲劇教育

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