

Play to stay: Pedagogical imperatives to go online or go home: Drama therapy students say, “We wanna go home!”

Bailey, Sally

Conference Panel Paper

Publication Date: 2013

Conference: Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Panel: Play to stay: Pedagogical imperatives to go online or go home, August 3, 2014, Orlando, FL.

ABSTRACT:

Certain academic courses do not lend themselves to being taught online. Areas of study, such as theatre, therapy, and drama therapy, need to be taught face-to-face in an in-person classroom setting. Students who will be working with others in artistic and therapeutic situations desire and require the live contact as their learning environment, reporting that they miss out on much of the non-verbal information that computers cut off, even when meeting on screen in real time.

Keywords: Online Learning, Ethics, Drama Therapy, Embodied Teaching, Embodied Learning, Therapy, Theatre, Theater.

URL for this item:

Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference
ATHE Panel: Play to Stay: Pedagogical Imperatives to Go Online or Go Home
August 3, 2014

Drama Therapy Students Say, “We Wanna Go Home!”
by Sally Bailey, MFA, MSW, RDT/BCT
School of Music, Theatre, and Dance
Kansas State University

As the director of the graduate drama therapy program at Kansas State University, potential graduate students often ask if they can do the MA in Theatre with concentration in Drama Therapy online so they don't have to relocate to Kansas. I say, “NO! Drama Therapy is an embodied approach, and you have to be embodied and with other people to learn how to do it correctly! You have to learn to read body language and process the nuances of nonverbal communication.”

I am not anti-online teaching. In many subjects it works even better than an independent study off-line because of the ability to upload videos, lectures, recordings, articles, charts, and

photos. I am not an online novice. I regularly teach a playwriting class online, so I am aware of the pluses and minuses of working through the Internet. In the case of playwriting, many of the tasks involved require the student to work on his/her own and submit work electronically to be read and critiqued by the professor and other students. The biggest drawback for playwriting students – and it is an important one – is that it is very difficult to hear your play read out loud unless you are meeting in real time. Most of the time if online students want to know what their words sound like, they have to gather friends in their own living rooms for a reading outside of class time. Those friends may or may not be theatre people, able to do cold readings well, and they may or may not have an understanding of play structure in order to provide valid and constructive feedback after the reading.

I, like my colleagues on this panel, have read many articles and attended many workshops where I have been advised that young people today are digital natives and that if we professors don't adjust to the way they want to receive information, we will lose them. I have also been pressured to put courses online in order to stay on the cutting edge and reach the greatest number of students. But I am here to tell you that in terms of "people studies" like theatre and therapy, not all students want to "go virtual." A lot of them, once they have a taste of online learning, want to go back home to their tribal *homo sapien* roots and be in the same room with other students.

Here is my story:

My Adjunct Ethics Instructor had been traveling to K-State and offering Ethics in Drama Therapy in a weeklong intensive version, meeting 9 to 5 with students for five days in a row in the month of June. This meant my Ethics Instructor, who lives in Florida, would travel to K-State every other year to teach students in the program and additional students from out of town who

would leave their work and family lives for a limited amount of time to take the course.

However, in a course like Ethics there is so much material to present, discuss, and process that after the second day, students reported feeling as if their heads were ready to explode. There had to be a better way to deliver the material.

I hoped an online version could reach more students and spread the material over a semester when it could be processed more slowly. My Ethics Instructor was videotaped during an intensive course to capture her lectures. These were edited and posted online. She created discussion boards with threads to get thinking started. During the semester students met online in real time once a week in a video-audio virtual classroom called Wimba to discuss all they had been reading, watching, and posting about.

We have now run the course online twice. Each time the students have hated it – not because of the topic (they find ethical dilemmas fascinating to talk about), not because of lack of interaction (they are able to talk and text to each other through Wimba), but because they can't be in the same room with each other. They want to see how everyone else is reacting – not just the disembodied face and torso of the one person speaking on the screen. They miss being able to interrupt each other in the heat of the moment, being able to immediately share an insight, and experiencing the sights and sounds of nonverbal reactions of the group through their own bodies. The give and take of truly engaged discussion is curtailed by the technology. They feel as if they are starving for a type of human connection that just is not possible on a computer screen.

I have a gut feeling that learning about domains involving human interaction needs to be done in the real world. My suspicion is that this has something to do with our mirror neurons that are the biological basis for empathy and understanding the intention of others (Gallese, Eagle, & Migone, 2005; Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs, Gallese, Buccino, Mazziotta, & Rizzolatti, 2005).

Mirror neurons work better when we are in the same room with our collaborators, as opposed to viewing them on a screen, because when we are embodied with others, we receive the most accurate, complete, felt information (Ruyschaert, Warreyn, Wiersema, Metin, Roeyers, 2013). My students want their mirror neurons to be stimulated by all the bodies, actions, sounds, and faces of their fellow students as they think, feel, and struggle with the material. These students are hungry for community in the flesh. Interacting through a machine doesn't give them the connection that they want and need. It, instead, creates a distance that is experienced as a disconnect.

I believe my students are responding to their intrinsic instincts as theatre artists, therapists, and drama therapists, and I am proud of them for articulating those experiences to me. As consumers, but more importantly as future professionals who will have the emotional safety of clients in their hands, their instincts should be respected and listened to. The teaching of certain courses should not be hijacked by the money that can be saved or by the efficiency of reaching more people simultaneously or by the glamor of being in step with 21st century technology. Theatre, therapy, and drama therapy necessarily involve human touch and human presence. Learning how to become proficient in any one of those fields requires that students practice making connections with others, communicating in person rather than virtually, and becoming aware of the rich diversity of non-verbal communication that happens in a room full of people.

Can drama therapy be taught online? My students have spoken: No! Drama Therapy needs to be taught in an embodied manner or part of the information that needs to be learned gets lost between one computer and the other.

References:

- Gallese, V., Eagle, M.N., & Migone, P. (2005). Intentional attunement: Mirror neurons and the neural underpinnings of interpersonal relations. *Journal of the American Psychological Association*, 55 (1), 131-175.
- Iacoboni, M. Molnar-Szakacs, I., Gallese, V., Buccino, G. Mazziotta, J.C., & Rizzolatti, G. (2005). Grasping the intentions of others with one's own mirror neuron system. *PLoS Biology*, 3 (3) 79e downloaded January 23, 2006 from www.plosbiology.org.
- Ruysschaert, L., Warreyn, P., Wiersema, J.R., Metin, B., Roeyers, H. (2013). Neural mirroring during the observation of live and video actions of infants. *Clinical Neurophysiology*, 124(9), 1765-1770.