DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Teaching Performance in the Digital Age: Computerized Technologies, Improvisational Play Techniques and Interactive Learning Processes

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My study examines three participatory learning environments in which computer-based tools and improvisational training techniques comprise innovative approaches to teaching performance studies to undergraduate students. For my analysis, I have selected Projects in Art and Technology: Multimedia Improvisation, Staging Dracula: Digital Literary Adaptation and The DuSable Project. I contend that performance, an interdisciplinary and collaborative art form, is best taught by using a variety of media apparatuses and improv exercises: hands-on experimentation with these tools allows students to embody multiple points of view, discover alternative approaches to developing a character and telling a story on stage and experience heightened levels of immersion, agency and imagination.

Multimedia Improvisation, a class exploring improvisational storytelling with digital tools, was offered by Northwestern University's Center for Art and Technology in the fall of 2003. Digital Literary Adaptation, a tutorial incorporating computerized media as integral components of adaptation processes, was held at the Jones Residential College at Northwestern in winter quarter of 2005. The DuSable Project was a technology-intensive theatre production that took place in the spring of 2004 on Northwestern's campus. In my analysis of the teaching strategies employed in the separate learning environments, I consider how digital technologies and improvisational techniques work

together to formulate an “artlike” teaching operation, providing instructors the ability to connect with and engage students on a deeper level than more traditional means.

My methodology includes archival research, personal interviews, questionnaires, textual readings and participant observation. In each educational setting, I examine the technical tools and improvisatory methods employed by the instructor, identify the ways in which students “played” with instructional instruments and techniques, point to the specific performance skills honed by such methods of instruction and assess the effectiveness of technologically-augmented teaching strategies based on the criteria of portability, adaptability, accessibility and participatory engagement.

Fundamentally, the dissertation is meant to give its readers new perspectives when considering the intersection between computers and performing arts education. Because the work presents case study analyses of the functional application of technology, it will hopefully lead to scholarship about contemporary performance instruction that is more comprehensible, useful and engaging. Ultimately, the tools, techniques and methods evaluated in this work may help to create a new vision of what educators can accomplish with digital technologies in a variety of learning environments. It may lead to the development of multidisciplinary teaching pedagogies, cross-school art making opportunities and curriculums that are better able to meet the needs, interests and ambitions of a new generation of learners.