



“Keeping Them with Us”: Constructing Equitable Online Spaces for the Theatre Classroom

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Abstract: We draw on notions of space-making as relational and constituted in interaction to explore how teaching artists construct space as power is redistributed in the online theatre classroom. We use case study methods to illustrate how the shift in power has impacted the design of online learning environments. Findings highlight tensions and possibilities for how power is negotiated and the importance of student voice, with implications for the design of more equitable online learning spaces.

Introduction

In the wake of COVID-19, the shift to online instruction has raised new questions, tensions, and possibilities for how power is distributed amongst teachers and students in the classroom. Such a shift in power can be observed through the way space is created within online settings. In the arts, which often involve voluntary activities and tap into learners' inherent interests, it is especially compelling to explore how power has been negotiated within online learning spaces and how that shift has impacted the design of online learning environments. In this poster, we turn to teaching artists who have shown to be adaptive and innovative during the present pandemic times (Dahn et al., 2021) to address the following research question, *How do teaching artists negotiate power relations in the co-construction of online spaces for theatre learning?*

Space-making: New possibilities and tensions for the online theatre classroom

This poster is grounded in notions of space-making as both physical and socio-culturally constituted through interaction (e.g., Massey, 2005). The shift to online learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has presented new possibilities and tensions for making space together in classrooms. The theatre/performing arts classroom in particular presents a special case in which power is negotiated, highlighting student voice and positioning students as authors of their own learning. While conventional teacher-student power relations tend to be hierarchical, with the teacher holding authority over the student, some pedagogies disrupt this dynamic by granting students more power in classroom interactions (e.g., Matusov et al., 2019). The shift online presents such an opportunity for reshaping classes as a more equitable and shared space, and positioning students as having voice and agency (Mills & Comber, 2013).

Methods

Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE) is a Chicago-based, non-profit arts organization that fosters long-term partnerships between Chicago Public Schools teachers and CAPE teaching artists toward inquiry-driven arts-integrated curriculum in K-12 classrooms and afterschool programs. Our study is part of a larger project, situated in the context of CAPE's initial shift to online arts instruction between March and August 2020 following teaching artists' transition to remote instruction. We focus on a summer theatre class as a case study to understand how teaching artists negotiated power relations in the co-construction of online spaces for theatre learning.

We took an illustrative case study approach (Stake, 1995) to investigate the transformed power relations between teachers and students within the digital space, the resulting tensions, and the impact on the construction of space. Through one CAPE teaching artist's experience, we illuminate key components of the digital space, as impacted by a shift in power. Theatre teaching artist Sonja had been with CAPE for 4 years and for her summer theatre class with elementary school students, she co-constructed with her teacher partner and students a virtual space toward addressing the following inquiry question: *How can theatre help us process our experience of quarantine?* Through an iterative thematic analysis of a semi-structured interview with this CAPE teaching artist and a multimedia reflection post written by the teacher-teaching artist pair, we highlight emergent themes around the construction of online spaces for the theatre classroom during unprecedented circumstances that altered existing power relations.

Findings

Shifting power relations toward more equitable online learning spaces

The collapse of the physical space to an arguably more restricted, digital one within the theatre classroom prompted teaching artist Sonja to consider the question of what learning is now available when “there is no ‘room’,” what was once essential for rehearsing and performing in a shared space, and for taking chances. By its very nature, the digital space has the potential to constrict learning opportunities, due to the sizable lack of a shared physical space to support collective inquiry, characteristic of the theatre classroom. As Sonja mused, “without the room uniting us (...) how do we go after things that are individually challenging or difficult?”

Indeed, students in Sonja’s summer class were less likely to go outside their comfort zone and engage in the same way they would have in the physical theatre classroom, with some deliberately turning their camera away when approached to participate in a task that made them uncomfortable. As Sonja noted, “You could start talking about democracy. Power, you know, all these other things that have shifted when we all have the same screen, space on the screen and anyone can just click their thing and be gone.” The digital space thus embodied a shift in power, with students electing in which activities to participate and becoming authors of their own learning. Though the space for learning may have been restricted by the digital platform, in limiting risk-taking and experimentation, it also allowed students to participate and engage in ways that they see fit, constructing a more equitable learning space.

Foregrounding the relational nature of space-making

Despite the noted challenges and tensions, opportunities emerged in the relational nature of space-making, which necessitated a change in expectations and a prioritization of class structures that honor students’ needs. Keeping students engaged and present thus became the highest priority in constructing online spaces for learning, involving the construction of a social space that recognizes the limitations of the present and nurtures an atmosphere that looks to “protect the fragile ecosystem of our collective.” What that essentially meant was “meeting kids where they’re at,” as to “keep them with us.” In the case of Sonja’s theatre class, the collapse of the physical classroom was mirrored by the collapse of existing power relations, which guided the construction of a space that was predicated on relationships that aimed to build connection as the primary goal in the design of the learning space.

Sonja and her teacher partner supported the relational nature of space-making through embodied activities, foregrounding the social space of the online classroom, by prioritizing routine in the form of regular check-in’s with students and theatre games, reminiscent of pre-pandemic times. To preserve the performance aspect of a theatre class, in constructing the digital space, Sonja and her teacher partner centered individual performance through first, having students memorize monologues, and later, having students write and perform their own original monologue around their quarantine experience. In shifting the focus of performance to the level of the individual, individual experiences and student voice were highlighted and honored. Constructing digital spaces for theatre learning in particular, which is highly reliant on establishing a connection, could thus benefit from self-expression in opportune places.

Toward sustaining connection for its own sake

This study explored the shifting power relations within the digital space and the resulting tensions and implications for the construction of online learning spaces. Sonja’s case foregrounded that “connection for its own sake” is more than enough, and “may potentially be both the most urgent achievement, and the lowest common denominator,” considering that students can opt out at any point. The digital theatre classroom observed a shift in power and a more equitable class structure, which is arguably unique to the theatre classroom, with the arts often elective and voluntary, making it especially pertinent to keep students present. In reshaping expectations and meeting students where they are at, teaching artists could support students in their learning and together turn challenges into opportunities.

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