Book Review

Da-Shiva Francois

Teaching Performance Practices in Remote and Hybrid Spaces, edited by Jeanmarie Higgins and Elisha Clark Halpin. Routledge, 2022. 230 pages. $42.95. ISBN 978-1-0032-2905-6.

The editors of *Teaching Performance Practices in Remote and Hybrid Spaces*, Jeanmarie Higgins, chair of the Department of Theatre Arts & Dance at the University of Texas at Arlington, and Elisha Clark Halpin, an Associate Professor in the School of Theatre at Pennsylvania State University, divide their book into four parts. They address topics on compassionate pedagogy, adaptation of dance and movement principles to an online space, doing theater online, and how educators can teach design and production by considering both tangible elements and the temporary aspects of the now. This review offers a condensed summary of each of the four sections. It starts with a brief overview based on the editors' introduction, then a more in-depth exploration of key elements in each section, and concludes with analysis and recommendations of the reviewer.

In Part I the focus is on adapting to online teaching (due to COVID-19), stressing a shift towards a caring pedagogy. It advocates for releasing rigid expectations of rigor and embracing a compassionate pedagogy. It further addresses issues such as academic ableism and navigating the challenges of teaching trauma, as well as the evolving nature of professionalism and the need for adaptability in response to students' and staff's mental health needs. Part II explores the unique challenges and advantages of teaching dance and movement online, with a central focus on the body. New teaching practices, inventive approaches to dance space, and a reimagining of traditional pedagogies like using social media and live streaming are examined. Part III advocates for the benefits of hybrid teaching in archival research, featuring experiences of new play dramaturgs, a director's adaptation to a disrupted production, and a playwright's perspective on virtual performance. Lastly, Part IV covers Michael Schweikardt's remote design pedagogy and discoveries in online teaching by costume design professor Charlene Gross. Next, with online stage management experience, lighting designer Christina Thanasoula demonstrates the adaptability of digital performance to online environments. The section concludes with a case study by Professor Meg Hanna-Tominaga, highlighting challenges and showing the importance of flexibility and clarity in managing the hybrid stage management classroom.

The editors' introduction sets the foundation for a new teaching approach in theater courses designed for non-arts majors, where students submit creative works and engage in discussions online, without traditional quizzes or exams. Departing from conventional assessment methods, instructors adopted a labor assessment approach, granting an A to students who completed all assignments. Their smooth transition to online learning during COVID-19 underscored the importance of prioritizing joy over rigor in education.

In Part I, Chapter 1, Jane Barnette, an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas, challenges the transactional models of educational practices, advocating for a shift from a rigorous to a *compassionate* teaching approach. She introduces the concept of "ungrading" as an alternative to traditional grading, aiming to alleviate students' learning anxiety. Barnette,

quoting digital pedagogy pioneer Jesse Stommel, writes, "most meanings of the word 'rigor' have no productive place in education, unless you believe school (and disciplinary culture) should be about policing, punishing, and gatekeeping—again with the effect of excluding already marginalized voices" (Barnette 11). She positions her argument as a manifesto against oppressive forces by using joy in teaching and learning, heightened in the face of collective trauma and challenges during the 45th presidency. Gwendolyn Walker defines the Alexander Technique (AT) as a method for letting go of harmful habits and fostering better habits through a meditation on release (Walker 85). While many dance and movement principles rely on live presence, Walker demonstrates that AT can be effectively taught online through kindness, imagination, and exploration. Using photos to aid posture comprehension, she encourages students to verbally reflect on their discoveries, promoting a concept of self-kindness involving the technique of noticing, celebrating, pausing (inhibition), and redirecting. Through this process, students gain confidence and engage in constructive self-criticism.

Part II focuses on applying dance and movement principles to an online space. Michele Dunleavy, for instance, found an interesting limitation to teaching online with tap dancing. She argues that the challenge of teaching tap dance remotely, particularly through platforms like Zoom, is difficult due to the inherent reliance on synchronous sound and movement, disrupted by latency issues. The absence of synchronized group dancing and the inability to hear students simultaneously hinders the sense of community and the teaching of musicality. Furthermore, she mindfully notes that, "zoom fatigue was not on the radar in these early days [of the COVID-19 era] . . . I had concerns over the amount of screen time . . . so I prioritized creating assignments that got them away from the computer and out of the house" (Dunleavy 103).

Christopher J. Staley breaks down the notion of performers embodying both specificity and polysemy, pointing (deixis) at something and nothing simultaneously. Despite acknowledging limitations like floor-based exercises, the author maintains that remote instruction can still foster meaningful teacher–student connections. He notes the challenges and discoveries in adapting Suzuki's method of actor training. Staley shows how the imaginative aspect of Suzuki training, particularly the actor's need to imagine others on stage while performing alone, resonates with the isolation experienced in 2020–2021.

In Part III, the authors highlight the common perception of teachers being skeptical of students' academic motivations. They respond to this issue in Chapter 11, "Building Trust Across Miles." Kristin Leahey and Shelley Orr share a successful experience with compassionate pedagogy, in which they took a student-centered approach and valued the creative process over results. In the Fall of 2020, they noticed the emergence of Zoom theater and its ability to grant students agency, leading to women of color, queer women, and female playwrights to have more opportunities. They incorporated the "Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning Online" infographic developed by social workers to help with online teaching. Leahey discusses how they applied "Practice compassion by conveying warmth and support in your communications with students" from the infographic (Leahey 130). The dramaturgs could "dream" a palette that they could share and collaborate on with the entire artistic team and then share with the wider audience if the plays were eventually staged. By mentoring and advising the projects, she taught the importance of relationship building and unity in production. Dramaturgs took charge in adapting to remote teaching by attending more rehearsals, participating in production planning, and translating new works for online audiences.

Part IV of the book covers aspects of digital performance pedagogy that goes on backstage. To begin, Michael Schweikardt, a scenic designer, addresses the challenges of the shift to digital learning by creating a separate analog space to maintain a connection with materiality, utilizing drawings as a tangible record of artistic thoughts. Charlene Gross suggests improvements in teaching theatrical stage makeup by adopting a non-judgmental approach. She underscores anatomical features by decoupling methods from gender, aiming for inclusivity in the online learning environment. She presents five conundrums related to digital space and suggests positive reinforcement as a solution. She gives tips on overcoming this conundrum: recording sessions so students can go back and view; utilizing projects like the "drag transformation project" and "the gender reversal project" aimed at breaking gender binaries; fostering nuanced discussion about gender; and encouraging self-expression through persona creation, which broadens opportunities for guest participation (Gross 178).

Christina Thanasoula contributes to the field of lighting design, exploring the differences in designing for human and digital eyes. Her project, the opera *Juditha Triumphans*, exemplifies the interdisciplinary approach needed for both traditional and digital dramaturgy. Adaptations for online streaming, such as repainting surfaces to control light reflection, reveal challenges and opportunities in this evolving field. Meg Hannah-Tominaga discusses the adaptation of stage management to online spaces, using recordings and videos to help students apply techniques. She applies emotional intelligence to address the impact of students' emotional states on management and utilizes Zoom as a tool for low-pressure assignments. She found

Zoom convenient because "there was no need to have the students go one at a time; students could rerecord if they made a mistake (or be fine with their mistakes), and I could grade at my convenience. This proved to be a very low-pressure, low-stakes way for students to gain experience and confidence" (Hannah-Tominaga 193). The students' experience increased their confidence in calling shows and managing rehearsals remotely.

While well-constructed, the book's arguments often rely on student testimony and empirical evidence, indicating findings rooted in exploration and imagination, which may not be universally replicable. Another topic that demands closer consideration is the limitations of online space, which pose challenges for many students, considering issues such as internet affordability, reliability, and digital fatigue. However, by embracing flexibility, as advocated by the authors in this volume, digital theater and other disciplines stand to benefit from hybrid and online pedagogy. Remote performance faces difficulties due to the inherent need for risk-taking and failure in artistic processes. The possibility of ungrading or adopting a no-grades approach is viable for creative disciplines that thrive on unhindered creativity. A potential reluctance to embrace this radical change may stem from a broader societal issue—namely, the importance often placed on education as a means for earning a living rather than uncovering truths and navigating the world with confidence.

Another notable departure in these essays is the absence of dissenting voices. The authors did highlight the limitations of online pedagogy, notably Christina Thanasoula's concerns about costly technology, like lighting, and Michele Dunleavy's challenges in teaching tap dancing online. However, a wider variety of opinions could make this a more comprehensive study. While it is beneficial when articles align in agreement, a more compelling and persuasive argument emerges when addressing opposing viewpoints.

In sum, this excellent volume is filled with valuable tips, guidelines, research, and experiences, which the authors offer to practitioners who are interested in enhancing their performance pedagogy techniques. Furthermore, other disciplines can also gain from adopting compassionate teaching practices in this post-COVID era.