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Article Title:

**Departure Points: beginning training in sited-based performance practices**

Author:

Dr Karen Quigley

Address:

Department of Theatre, Film and Television, Campus East, University of York, York YO10 5GB, United Kingdom

Email:

karen.quigley@york.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

This article presents analysis drawn from my current research project, ‘Teaching On Site’. In this project, I explore training methodologies for sited, interactive, and/or immersive practices in universities in the UK. Using interviews with practitioners and scholars in this field as an investigative research methodology, I am analysing the multiplicity of approaches to teaching what this slippery, outdoors, public subject. As I discuss, scholars and practitioners of these performance practices rarely write about their teaching in this area, which has the effect of creating a closed set of pedagogies that become tied to a particular person. I am interested in developing a national and international conversation about ways of teaching site-based practices, and investigating trends and frictions, as well as the implications of these for trainee practitioners. This article's analysis focuses on starting points for student training in this area. From an emphasis on architecture and landscape, to an invitation to improvise with incidental audiences in public space, from historical research into a site and its users, to an offering of private stories from the trainees’ pasts: departure points proposed to those in training engage a range of performative modes, and identify a variety of complex needs as training progresses.

**Possible Keywords**

Site-specific performance, teaching performance, performance pedagogy, qualitative interviews, interactive theatre, performance in cities

**Biography**

Karen Quigley is Lecturer in Theatre at the University of York. Her current book project, *Tracing The Unstageable: Conditions at Theatre’s Limits* discusses moments of resistance to staging in modern European theatre, and is forthcoming from Bloomsbury. Her recent writing on theatre and performance has appeared in *European Drama and Performance Studies* and *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, and in the edited collections *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland* and *Performance and Ethnography*.

**Main Text**

**Starting point(s)**

A glance at a few of the most well-used and well-loved guides to acting technique in the field of theatre practice reveals a range of opinions about the first day or starting point of training or rehearsal. Jerzy Grotowski suggests that ‘[t]he starting point of the training is the same for everyone…An atmosphere must be created, a working system in which the actor feels that [they] can do absolutely anything, will be understood and accepted’ (2002, p. 210-11). Michael Chekhov thinks that ‘[f]irst and foremost is extreme *sensitivity of body to the psychological creative impulses*’ (2002, p. 2). In *An Actor Prepares*, Constantin Stanislavski devotes the first part of the rehearsal process to an observation of his actors’ rehearsal and performance of ‘bits of plays’ that they themselves have chosen (1980, p. 1), allowing him to construct an argument about intuition and rousing the subconscious in the service of truthful acting (or, at least, the opposite of ‘forced acting’, p. 17). Patsy Rodenburg asserts that ‘[a]n actor cannot survive without listening skills. This awareness of listening starts on the first day of training’ (1998, p. 81). If we turn to the words of British theatre directors on the subject, Katie Mitchell observes that ‘[f]irst days are about managing everyone’s fear efficiently so that they can do a proper and useful day’s work.’ (2009, p. 133). Simon McBurney notes that ‘[t]he encounter on the first day is always strange. The beginning is a very secret moment, I think’ (in Giannachi and Luckhurst, 1999, p. 70). Joan Littlewood began a rehearsal process (to which her cast had arrived ‘off book’) by tearing up the script (Leach 2006, p. 121).

Regardless of the differences in opinion about how the beginning of a process should be structured, what it should include, who should be involved, or what the outcome should be, the theatre and performance practitioners quoted, amongst others, all tend to agree that the departure point is significant, that where we start from is important in relation to where we’re going, or where we hope to end up. In terms of teaching theatre and performance practices to undergraduates, the advice continues to be similar. Joni L. Jones observes that ‘[t]he first day of class holds such promise’ (Fliotsos and Medford 2004, p. 195). Richard Schechner refers to a ‘prepared unpreparedness’ in his approach to beginning the teaching performance studies (Stucky and Wimmer 2002, p. ix). With particular relevance to what follows in this article, Joseph Roach notes the significance of Victor Turner’s ‘liminality’ to his initial teaching of performance, invoking Turner in terms of encouraging students to understand performance space, and where performance takes place (or can take place). Central to this pedagogy for Roach is the communication to students of a sense of spatial binaries (e.g. inside/outside) and how these can be disrupted through an understanding of threshold spaces and limbo, and the multi-functional possibilities of the same space or site (Stucky and Wimmer 2002, p. 37-8). The application of such an understanding of space to teaching site-based practices derives from the latter’s consistent emphasis on ambiguity, uncertainty and ambivalence as crucial methodologies of considering the relationship between a site and any performance that takes places within it.

In the main, the practitioners and teachers quoted above tend to be referring to the work that takes place in theatre spaces, theatre buildings, rehearsal studios, lecture theatres or seminar rooms. But how does training change when those spatial structures are removed? How do we start thinking about teaching theatre and performance skills outdoors, in non-theatre buildings, in urban and rural sites? Where does theatre and performance training go (literally and metaphorically) when the space of training becomes a negotiated, contested and unfamiliar one? And how does this affect teaching and learning? This article discusses the beginning of a research project on training and teaching for site-based performance practices. There is an element of what we could begin to think of as ‘training the untrainable’ attached to teaching and learning in site-based contexts, as the aspect of training that I have been most interested to capture over the course of the project is an understanding (and transmission of this understanding) of the relationship between a site and a performance maker. Is it possible to teach students to have a performative response to a site? How can we encourage students to consider the non-theatrical site as a co-creator of performance practice? With this in mind, using original interview material as a methodology of learning about teaching, I am attempting to suggest that the theatre and performance training that takes place beyond theatre spaces is different to training that takes place within them. These differences gather around various focal points, but include how the body and voice are used in site; how the architecture of the site (and its histories) is co-opted into the work; and, crucially, how an engagement with unintended, incidental audiences, particularly in outdoor and/or urban sites, impacts significantly on how and when training happens, and what it involves. The starting point (or first session) of training represents the fulcrum of the article, as the beginning of a module/degree/course represents a unique moment to introduce ways of working and creating that will be relevant across the period of training.

It is worth bearing in mind that a concern for definitions of performance that takes place outside of designated theatre and performance spaces continues to be a significant aspect of any conversation about it. For example, an oft-cited possible continuum of definition, or a way of ‘[locating] a variety of theatre practices in terms of their relationships to place’ has been noted by Fiona Wilkie as sketched by Stephen Hodge at a conference in 2001 (Wilkie 2002, p. 149-50). This continuum runs from ‘In theatre building’ to ‘Site-specific performance’ with a number of stopping points in between to reflect outdoor performances of extant plays (‘Outside theatre’), pre-devised performance texts inserted into a site (‘Site-sympathetic’), and ‘Site-generic’ work, which has been made for a type of site (e.g. a car park) rather than a particular site (e.g. this particular car park). Hodge’s continuum was raised by a number of my interviewees, with various interventions and extrapolations. This aspect of the conversations usually revolved around terms including ‘site-specific’ and ‘immersive’ becoming increasingly problematic (this is borne out in a number of recent publications including Alston 2016, Lavender 2016 and Hunter 2015). Indeed, something my interviewees agreed on was the generative plurality of definition (terms including ‘site-responsive practice’, ‘outdoor work’ and ‘working in sites’ arose), a necessary terrain of slippage between ways of working and how this work might be categorised or defined, and a movement away from the term ‘site-specific’. As Nick Kaye put it in 2000, ‘site-specificity arises precisely in uncertainties over the borders and limits of work and site’, a statement that still resonates (p. 215). With this in mind, the fluidity of my own approach to terminology in this project arises for a number of reasons. Chief among these is a consideration of my research methodology, and my desire not to conflate the voices of my interviewees. However, in order to maintain a consistency of sorts, I will be primarily referring to ‘site-based practices’ throughout this article. For me, this term encapsulates the sited nature of the work under discussion, regardless of whether the work is considered to be site-specific, site-responsive, outdoors, indoors, immersive and/or interactive. The use of ‘practices’ rather than ‘performance’ or ‘theatre’ is an attempt to capture both the ongoing nature of teaching and learning, the development of a pedagogical practice, and the evolution of a way of making performance.

**Beginnings and reflections**

The first site-based practices workshop I taught was at University of Chester in October 2012. Our site for the day was the Department of Performing Arts building, then housed in a converted former school just outside the city centre. My handwritten notes from that date reveal two central practical exercises, bookended with seminar-style discussions about module practicalities and ways of working, questions of documentation, homework for the week and performances the students had seen. The exercises have been noted as follows:

 ‘1. In pairs, introduce yourself in two-minute anecdotes (don’t interrupt):

* By emptying your pockets and describing them
* Showing and telling any scars/tattoos/piercings you have
* Describing a personal accident
* Relating your earliest memory

2. Go to a place in the building on your own:

* Spend fifteen minutes there
* Pay attention to and absorb as much detail as you can
* Make an intervention there (discuss what this might mean)
* Draw a map of the place
* Think of five things that would make the place better
* Think of three further interventions
* Document and report back’

(author’s personal notes)

In a similarly ill-advised move to my initial approaches to learning to drive a car or apply liquid eyeliner, these notes were the result of time spent trying to learn about the practical teaching of site-based performance by reading about it, having been asked to teach a module only tangentially related to my research and teaching experience at the time. However, contrary to the vast amount of (admittedly contradictory) material available to read about driving a car or applying liquid eyeliner, none of which made the first practices of either easier or clearer, it was extremely difficult to read about teaching site-specific practices, and how performance pedagogy might be applied to sited contexts, beyond a couple of key resources.

These sources, though usually focused on performance analysis of practice as distinct from advice towards its making or teaching, agreed on an inextricable link between a performance practice and its site of existence. For example, Miwon Kwon ‘seeks to reframe site specificity as the cultural mediation of broader social, economic, and political processes that organise urban life and urban space’ (Kwon 2002, p. 3). Nick Kaye suggests that ‘[s]ite-specific art frequently works to *trouble* the oppositions between the site and the work… Site-specificity arises precisely in uncertainties over the borders and limits of work and site’. (Kaye 2000, p. 11; 215). Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks observe that ‘[s]ite-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused…They are inseparable from their sites, the only contexts within which they are intelligible’ (Pearson & Shanks 2001, p. 23). Finally, Richard Serra’s assertion that ‘[t]o move the work is to destroy the work’ sums up what can seem to be the key difference between work made for theatre buildings and work made beyond them (Serra 1994, p. 194). Speaking broadly, a conventional rehearsal and production process in the UK, whether for an extant or new play, or for a devising process, tends to see the piece rehearsed in a studio or rehearsal space, and then transplanted to a theatre space which has usually been designed to receive it in some way (set construction, lighting design rigged, perhaps the re-configuration of seating), and onwards to other theatre spaces if the production goes on tour. The rehearsal space(s) and theatre space(s) are different, and these differences make their way into the production process (e.g. adjusting actor positioning in order to stand in the light of a particular lantern, adjusting the actor’s gaze in order to accommodate the level at which the audience are seated). The creation, rehearsal and performance processes for site-based practices require different relationships between the space and the performer, and the starting points for training in these contexts necessitate a range of discrete skills.

Returning to Chester, the class tasks above are taken almost verbatim from one of the ‘Exercises’ sections of Mike Pearson’s *Site-Specific Performance* (2010, p. 84), where he lays out potential maps of action for artists or colleagues who want ‘to undertake research at a chosen location’ (2010, p. xiii). Later sessions owe heavy debts to Carl Lavery’s ’25 instructions for performance in cities’, based on his own new experience of teaching Performance Studies to undergraduates for the first time in the early 2000s. Lavery’s dexterity with what I found intimidating is encapsulated in his assertion that ‘I now regard the lack of method as the birth of the method. I’ve become addicted’ (2005, p. 229). In essence, preparation for teaching on that module led me to a deeper exploration of this corner of the field of theatre and performance studies, and to a serious questioning of why material about teaching site-based practices continued to elide me, particularly when paired with (a) the rise in site-based performance scholarship in terms of performance analysis, critical approaches and practice-as-research and (b) the wide and ever widening pool of how-to resources for theatre and performance practice in almost all other contexts, from physical theatre to acting Shakespeare to producing small-scale tours. The conclusion I reached in 2012 was that there seemed to be an inextricable relationship between practitioners of sited work, and their teaching of site-based practices. In other words, it became clear that practitioners around the country were teaching site-based performance work, but that this teaching was drawing directly on their own practice and experiences, and that a multitude of pedagogical practices were playing out across the UK, none of which were being recorded.

**The Project**

Building on these speculations and reflections, my current research project, ‘Teaching On Site’, the pilot phase of which has been funded by the Humanities Research Centre at the University of York, explores training methodologies for teaching site-based, interactive, and/or immersive practices in university contexts in the UK. Using a series of long-form, semi-structured, site-based interviews (conducted in sites chosen by the interviewee and relevant to their practice) with practitioners and scholars in this field as an investigative research methodology, I am analysing the multiplicity of approaches to teaching what is frequently a slippery, outdoors, public practice. As this journal edition’s call for papers implies, scholars and practitioners of sited, immersive and interactive performance practices rarely write about their teaching in this area, which has the unintentional effect of creating a closed set of pedagogies that become tied to a particular person. My research project is interested in developing a national and international conversation about ways of teaching site-specific practices, and investigating resultant trends and frictions, as well as the implications of these for trainee practitioners.

Methodologically, the long-form, semi-structured site-based interview format has allowed me to capture a range of different voices and practices. The long-form aspect investigates in detail the approaches taken to pedagogy in site-based contexts and permits the conversation to evolve more naturally than a quantitative survey or a completely fixed and structured interview approach could facilitate. The site-based aspect of the interview has sparked reflections and insights that a conversation in an office or café might not have, and also gives a sense of the importance of the triangular relationship between the site, the practitioner, and the pedagogy. As Wilkie puts it in the framing of her site-based interviews with Carolyn Deby and Stephen Hodge:

‘We might understand the use of “sited conversations” as a research choice; a way of working, investigating and collaborating that is not merely incidental to the work that is created’ (Wilkie in Hunter 2015, p. 42).

In her discussion of this, Wilkie invokes the archaeologist Barbara Bender, who referred to ‘multivocality’ in 1998 as a way of explaining that dialogues around how to present and interpret the past should include a multiplicity of voices. The term has evolved in archaeology over the past couple of decades to embrace the inclusion of a range of perspectives at all levels of research, from design and methodology through to dissemination, curation and output (see Bender 1998, Hodder 1999; 2000; 2008, Joyce 2002). A similarly heteroglossic dimension has become increasingly significant to my project, as the below analysis will attempt to honour, and as I hope a larger phase of the project will capture. As will be discussed towards the conclusion of this article, other directions for analysis of this material include the relationship between the different voices and an approach to feminist pedagogies, which, amongst other things, similarly aim to appreciate discrete voices and micro-narratives, as distinct from a one-size-fits-all pedagogical approach.

The interview sample for the pilot study consisted of seven interviewees, who volunteered to be part of the project when approached by me, and who are all working or have worked at universities in the UK. I interviewed three men and four women over a five-month period between May and September 2016. The interviewees ranged from Senior Lecturer to Professor Emeritus in terms of the posts they hold or held at their institutions, and of the six institutions at which they work or worked, two are Russell Group institutions and three are ‘post-1992’ institutions. One of the institutions is in Wales, one in Scotland, and four in England (two in the north, two in the south). All interviewees were, at the time of interview, involved in or had previously been involved in teaching site-based performance practices to undergraduate students, and all had published writing on site-based practices (either their own, or the work of others) in academic journals, monographs or edited collections. The interviews lasted between 48 and 105 minutes, and an average of 65 minutes. We spoke looking out of windows onto city squares. We spoke on a high ridge looking down into a train station. We spoke in a woodland glade, on the edge of a canal, in a park, on a walk into the city centre. The conversations meandered, lapsed into silence, were enriched by anecdote, supported by the work of others. They were observational, funny, analytical, confessional, thoughtful, playful and utterly distinct.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Having completed the pilot phase of the project, an aspect of the interview material I want to examine in this article deals with starting points for student training in site-based contexts. Each of the interviews conducted as part of the pilot phase invoked a different and innovative manner of beginning, with exciting levels of variance and surprising places of connection. From an emphasis on architecture and points of sight, to an invitation to play and improvise with incidental audiences in public space, from historical research into a site and its users, to an offering outward of private stories from the students’ own pasts: departure points proposed to those in training engaged a range of performative modes, and thus identified a variety of complex needs as training progresses. The value of analysing and publishing these pilot study findings is twofold. Firstly, it initiates a conversation with the field of theatre and performance studies about the project and its aims and objectives, in advance of a broader conversation at the larger project stage. This allows me to situate my thinking and research practices within wider contexts (these contexts include theatre and performance studies, site-based practices, pedagogy and qualitative research). Secondly, and more broadly, working with a small sample size of qualitative research emphasises the range of different voices even at the pilot stage. I am keen to preserve the individuality of each interviewees’ responses to our conversation, rather than presenting an overarching set of principles or a grand narrative of site-based pedagogy, and the small sample size enables a testing ground for this process.

With this in mind, the rest of the article will discuss interviewees’ approaches to the initial establishment of a site-based practice with undergraduate students, usually at the beginning of a module or course.[[2]](#footnote-2) Four thematic strands have emerged from this initial analysis:

1. Architecture and Landscape
2. Play and Audience(s)
3. Histories and Contexts
4. Body and Self

While these taxonomies are not fixed, nor are they exhaustive, they present an interesting example of the extent to which the teaching of site-based practices differs across the country, and begin to hint at possible ways of capturing this data without conflating it unhelpfully. They also enable an understanding of what the student learns in relation to the different interventions or approaches discussed, and how this teaching and learning might differ from other approaches in the field of theatre and performance.

**Architecture and Landscape**

Across all seven interviews, the significance of architecture and/or landscape was discussed at length, albeit in different ways. This seems obvious: the link between a site-based performance-making practice and the site in/with/for which the practice is taking place is inextricable. As Juliet Rufford writes,

‘the work’s relationship to site affects all aspects of its composition – from dramaturgy and narrative to choreography and design, from its internal organisation to the metaphorical bridges it builds to sites outside itself, and from its aesthetics to the politics at work in its choice of site and use of space’. (2015, p. 78)

Thus, the ways in which we might begin to transmit an understanding of these relationships from teachers to learners strikes at the heart of what it is to teach site-based performance practices. For example, one interviewee noted that

 ‘I have often drawn in this initial session on a little exercise we did when walking in Wales with Mike Pearson…he does this exercise where he asks people to stop the walk and…in pairs, or in small groups, to imagine the most appropriate performance they could think of that could happen in this space, whatever that might be… and then you come up with the most inappropriate performance. And it throws up all sorts of things, particularly [when] stopping outside the Cathedral. There are different spaces butting against each other. There is leisure space, historical and religious and commercial space, and people come up with inappropriate things that they might do relating to the religious space, for example. And then you start thinking about what’s appropriate, what’s inappropriate and very often what is site specific here.’ [I#4]

This invitation to the students to consider the particular architecture and/or landscape of the site in which they find themselves continued to be a productive departure point for another interviewee:

‘What I would do is really ask students to think about what is particular about this place without even starting them thinking about what it is we might ever do to…What are the particularities of this place? What immediately strikes them about it? And then go on to really think about the dimensions of the place, the layout of it. The acoustics of the place. Measuring it out. And very often I’d say, “Okay, a group of us are gonna stand here. You lot go and stand over there. What does that look like? What does that begin to do?” And then to think about what the site might recommend. What is it that we already know about it? What might we find out about it? How might that then inform whatever it is that we want to do here?’ [I#3]

It began to emerge from these observations that the initial work being done in sites with undergraduate students was thought-based and imaginative, encouraging momentum towards how the architecture or landscape might be investigated performatively. There was a shift from emphases on text, story, character, movement, ensemble, theme or other traditional theatre and performance departure points to a focus on looking at, thinking about and collaborating with the details of a site, and letting those details influence how the practice emerges. The above image of different groups of students standing in different parts of a site and developing an understanding about the dynamics of that space also suggested an early prioritising of the ways in which site-based practices encourage new and radical ways of thinking about spectatorship as well as performance.

The idea of scale of performance in relation to landscape was another starting point for two interviewees. One noted an initial starting point of ‘mak[ing] stuff that was about landscape rather than site, thinking about really huge, panoramic performances and what those would look like’, and drawing influence from the scale of filmic images: ‘I remember asking [the students], “How could you make performances that would be like the films of Tarkovsky?”’ [I#6]. The significance of architecture and landscape as departure points for training in site-based performance practices was also evident in the material students were encouraged to read and think about as they began the module. Relevant examples from the interviews included the work of Janet Cardiff, Wrights & Sites, Graeme Miller’s *Linked,* Lone Twin, Sue Palmer, Ontroerend Goed, Tania El-Khoury’s *Gardens Speak*, French & Mottershead’s *Afterlife* and Blast Theory, and writing by Kristin Ross, Mike Pearson, Fiona Wilkie, Deirdre Heddon, Matthew Gandy, Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre and John Wylie. Thus, in some ways, it seemed that for those interviewees for whom architecture and/or landscape were crucial departure points, the approaches taken reached into a recognisable theatre and performance studies pedagogy of reading and looking at the writing and practice of others, alongside trying elements of the practice with a tutor. The emphasis on freedom, experimentation and imagination could be traced to improvisation training (e.g. contact improvisation in dance, or comedy/storytelling improvisation in theatre), while also seeming very different to approaches to other kinds of theatre and performance. At this stage, the body was not being trained in any particular way, nor was there any sense of a product of training being important yet.

However, I would argue that the observation skills frequently taught regarding how to observe or work with a theatre space are usually to do with the theatrical possibilities of the space or building, and limited by constraints (a seating bank, gantry, ceiling, walls and/or floor). Crucially, this is often in relation to a particular text or performance, and not about other events, interventions or moments that could take place there. As outlined above, a way of encouraging students to think about the architecture and/or landscape at play in their practice creates a different approach to learning. Ultimately, what is being learned through this teaching in relation to architecture and landscape is a focus on the specific and the detailed, an embracing of intervention (both appropriate and inappropriate) and possibility, and an awareness and observation of space, how it occupies and how it is occupied. In a way, this teaching and learning builds on Alan Read’s desire that we move away from

polarised caricatures of contemporary architecture, from hapless visions of artists at sea in public contexts, from preordained conceptions of the city, towards more complex understandings of the involutionary nature of the contemporary, the presence of the arts within any architect’s fashioning of form…and the consequent grasp of *specificities*, distinctive cities, rather than amorphous urban backdrop settings to the works of the mystically-unhinged individual talent. (2000, p. 2, original emphasis)

**Audience(s)**

In a number of the interviews, the significance of the relationship between site, performer and spectator was an important part of the first instances of teaching and learning. In my own experiences, which were mirrored by those of my interviewees, students who are new to site-based practices tend to be uncertain about moving out of the studio or theatre space and into site-based contexts. They may have absorbed rules or conventions of theatre practice as part of earlier training, which may not apply to the extra-theatrical site in which they find themselves, and this can be challenging. When this is acknowledged and discussed, students usually prioritise concerns about how to work with the kinds of audiences they encounter in site, particularly those audiences whose spectatorship or participation is incidental, in their roles as passers-by, for example. In the interviews, one interviewee reflected on this aspect of their teaching in terms of the necessity of embracing the dual role of the sites under investigation, recognising ‘two different spaces. The space of the site and the space to come to back to as a community of performers. So you reflect on it. You talk about it. You evolve the ideas.’ [I#1] Another interviewee noted that their students began

‘shifting their ideas [about audience] to the site of the body, about what it means to try to engage a participant or an audience member in thinking about what it means for them to be in this space, rather than telling the story of someone else in the space’. [I#7]

As this aspect of beginning to work outside of a designated theatre space was frequently the newest part of site-based work for the students (who had, in many cases, already worked with ideas of devising, and ways of performing with/to a variety of audience configurations within theatre spaces) there was an understanding across the interviews that the process of working in site needed to be built up gradually for those in training, in order to support the new learning that was taking place. For example, one interviewee noted that

‘just going out to the site for ten minutes, testing an idea and coming back avoided the students being disappointed or feeling vulnerable…over time, if they’re testing ideas, ten minutes one week, twenty minutes the next, they can grow in confidence and then be out all day by the end [of the module]’. [I#1]

Two participants reflected on a practice of encouraging students to reflect on their site-based work almost immediately after sharing performance work in a site, and observed that having a discursive moment in or near the site was crucial to the development of the students’ skills in site-based work, particularly in terms of working with audiences. As an interviewee described it,

‘You’re constantly tracking it...and reflecting on the present moment…So if you use that technique reflect[ing on the work] immediately, a student might say, “Well, actually, a lady came right up into my face… and she interrupted me”…So we then find solutions in the moment about how to deal with that there and then…[for example] by saying, “Well, [she] probably didn’t realise she couldn’t interrupt you because she’s not in a theatre.”’ [I#1]

A number of interviewees were also concerned with the ethics of site-based work, particularly when playing in urban sites. This was framed in various ways, but usually centred around a consideration of other users of a site, and the safety of the students in training. The relationship between users of the site was negotiated in various ways across the interviews:

‘I [teach] students…how to respect an incidental audience and how to understand that relationship with them, as it’s their space first, or it’s a shared space. It’s not a space we’ve marked out on the floor, a theatrical line or a boundary to say “this is the performance space”’. [I#1]

This kind of comment clarifies one of the most significant aspects of teaching students about site-based theatre and performance practices in relation to audiences. It also makes a crucial distinction between theatre audiences and passer-by or incidental audiences. Indeed, this learning can be harnessed as a way of encouraging students to make work specifically *for* a site’s users, alongside their engagement with the site itself. As the same interviewee continues, they prompt the students to

‘create more narratives, so that if someone who has five minutes to spare or even thirty seconds to spare from their lunch break going to buy a sandwich, they’re still entitled to see the work or they still get a glimpse of it’. [I#1]

The interviewees also discussed early teaching about how spectators might engage with site-based work. The idea of responding to unexpected conditions / audiences / responses is a clear feature of working with undergraduates in this context, as is the sense that the idea of an audience can be a more fluid entity than it is at the theatre. As one interviewee put it:

‘[We talk about] what happens if I go there [to the site] and you don’t? What would I tell you about it? What if we go? What if you two go together? What if we all go together? Or what if nobody goes?’ [I#3]

This approach to audience briefly unspools traditional theatre and performance training, where the audience is crucial, and the performance is, in many ways, for them. Regardless of whether a particular performance involves audience interaction, this remains a fundamental aspect of the work of the theatre and performance maker (and thus the trainer and trainee). However, what is being taught and learned here is a sense that audiences can also be incidental to a piece of performance, and that their needs in a shared space (particularly when making work in shared urban sites) are completely different to what is required when they are invited to a particular space at a particular time, even in a participatory or interactive context.

**Histories and Contexts**

In the interviews, questions about the first day or the first class with students on a site-based module frequently began with a description of an introductory theoretical or discussion session. In order to establish definitions (and their dangers, as noted above), ways of working and engaging, and practical considerations, an initial session in a lecture or seminar format proved helpful. Other tasks for the first class included a questionnaire, a research task, or the devising of phrases of movement or ideas in the studio to take into the site. Despite the fact that the seven interviewees raised concerns about giving concrete or closed definitions of what site-specific performance or site-responsive practices might be, mean or do, it seemed important for all interviewees to construct some kind of theoretical ground for their students to depart from. Research in this context began to mean a range of different things. For example, one interviewee noted a playful and fluid relationship between historical research and a site:

‘Rather than looking at a site and saying, “that’s of historical interest”...we would make some work and see where that work was welcomed or suited and then we might then add another layer of history or story once we’d found out more about the site that the students had arrived at, we developed a dramaturgy that way’. [I#1]

Four of the seven interviewees referred to research presentations given by students to supplement their budding practical work. One interviewee discussed a questionnaire they work through with students at the start of the module:

‘I usually produce a questionnaire… what is this site, who inhabits the site, who is at home in the site, how do people move in the site, how do you feel in the site, what are its physical features, would this differ from one time of day to another, from one month to another? [I’m] getting them to think about lots of different aspects of the site, but I think asking them to then convert that information into something that produces performance is really hard. You can get them to describe what’s there, you can get them to analyse what’s there, but that creative processing is what you’re trying to teach.’ [I#2]

As the above fragments show, there is sometimes a paradoxical relationship between the pedagogical impulse to provide theoretical context for the material under consideration in the module, and the particular requirements of site-based performance practices, which necessitate an imaginative and observational approach to a given site. As frequently arises in other aspects of theatre and performance training, the presentation of performance material can be more daunting than thinking, talking or reading about it, and this can potentially hold students back at the departure point. What is being learned, therefore, is an understanding that research questions can be answered through practice and performance, the beginning of a training in practice research, practice-based research, and/or practice-as-research.

**Body and Self**

The relationship between autobiography and site-based performance practices has been well-documented by performers and scholars. For example, acknowledging (as my interviewees did) the continuing challenges and limitations attached to the term ‘site-specific’ and its associates (including but not limited to ‘site-responsive’, ‘site-generic’ and ‘site-sympathetic’, see Wilkie 2002, p. 150), Deirdre Heddon uses the word ‘autotopographic’ to describe ‘performances that fold or unfold place, particularly outside places’ (2007, p. 90). For Heddon, ‘[a]utotopogaphy, like autobiography, is a creative act of seeing, interpretation and invention, all of which depend on where you are standing, when and for what purpose’ (p. 91). None of my interviewees suggested that their work with students involved the bringing of dramatic literature into sites (creating what Wilkie refers to as ‘outside theatre’ in 2002, p. 150) or the use of pre-written texts (though pre-devised phrases of movement were, in one case, transposed from the studio to the site in order to illustrate different ways of approaching a site). Rather, students were encouraged to construct thought experiments, imagine performances, create narratives from conversational prompts, and use the site and its potential audiences as collaborators in all endeavours. Thus, the significance and specificity of students’ own bodies and narratives in the sites in which they worked were paramount. This was worked through in a number of ways in the interviews conducted. For example, following our interview, I#4 took me on a walk from the campus of their university to the city in which it is located. This is part of the first session that I#4 runs with the students. They walk in pairs and are given specific conversation prompts, using a structure influenced, again, by Pearson’s *Site-Specific Performance* (2010, p. 84):

‘We start by walking into the centre of town and they just talk to each other. They talk about their shoes and the journeys that their shoes have been through and why they chose their shoes’. [I#4]

Another interviewee focused on imagination in the early training sessions:

‘In the park, on the benches, I ask them to…remember something that might have happened on the bench in front of a mouse, for example…things that kind of enabled them to think about different ideas of memory in this particular site’. [I#2]

This emphasis on personal stories and voices is evident in responses from interviewees about asking students to imagine performances for the various sites they work in/with in initial sessions. As with observations about architecture/landscape, this teaching is encouraging the learners to think about scale, economy, appropriateness, inappropriateness, possibility and impossibility:

* ‘it was…imagining the city kind of gone…and trying to imagine what these things might be like without us’. [I#6]
* ‘Asking them to imagine making two more performances. One that is very large scale and one that is barely perceptible to the entire environment that they are in. And then we visit the Tourist Information Centre. We imagine that we are visitors to the City Centre, to the City. Try and figure out what the City Council are telling us about the City’. [I#4]
* ‘[I ask them] what happens if we’re completely insensitive to place? What if we fill this church with coal?’ [I#3]

With these reflections in mind, it seemed that gently spurring students towards ideas for performance, and reminding them of the value of the personal and autobiographical in site-based performance practices became another kind of starting point for teaching. Other sections of the interviews went on to discuss the performance-making in sites that arose from the departure points mentioned across the article, and the ways in which initial prompts to imagine and share ideas became part of a wider performative network of images, stories and meaning.

Finally, as with any effective reflection, it is also valuable to acknowledge challenges and difficulties with starting points for teaching site-based performance practices. Interviewees discussed practical challenges such as the time of year of the module/course, the need for students to wear appropriate clothing for outdoor work in inclement weather, and the necessity for sites to be within a certain distance of the university campus, to facilitate timetabling. We also explored the challenges attached to defining what this aspect of theatre and performance might be called, or might be said to do. As mentioned above, all interviewees noted concerns about the term ‘site-specific performance’ and were reluctant to taxonomise the field in any particular way. These concerns are borne out in the literature about this aspect of theatre and performance, although, there as here, continue to be generative rather than inhibiting, across various combinations of teaching, practice, research and writing.

**Responding and reflecting**

In terms of what this analysis reveals about starting points for the teaching of site-based performance practices in universities, and how my project might contribute to the field’s understanding of teaching and training in site-based contexts, the above emergent themes suggest variance and convergence. For example, an additional conclusion drawn from analysis of interview material from the pilot phase of the project reveals the extent to which teachers of site-based performance practices tend to draw on their own performance-making experience in their teaching. All but one of my interviewees self-identified as a performance practitioner, and gave examples of their use of their own work in module contexts, either as a case study in a lecture format or in a practical session in a site. This approach is familiar from other kinds of practical theatre pedagogy, especially in design and directing, and indeed from teaching more generally, across many fields. As AS Byatt notes in *Babel Tower*, ‘[a]nyone’s idea of teaching and learning…comes from his [*sic*] own experience of being taught’ (1996, p. 142). However, what seems significant here is the way in which the nebulous experience of having a productive and imaginative relationship with a site, which is what teaching site-based performance practices tends to be trying to evoke, is frequently being transmitted to those in training via the teacher’s own experience of relating to that same site, or other sites.

Though beyond the scope of this article, another avenue for analysis of the interview material includes an approach to thinking about its diversity of voices, and how these can be discussed in relation to feminist pedagogies. The connection between feminist pedagogies and teaching site-based performance practices seems inextricable, and plays out in a number of ways. Generally though, I’ve found that the teaching described in the interviews tends to adhere to

‘the groundbreaking feminist pedagogical premise that as we teach each other, we learn as well. The roles of teacher and student morph, moving in and out, rejecting the illusory and exclusionary patriarchal notions of perfection and control.’ (Armstrong and Juhl 2007, p. 10)

Each interview refers to variations on the concept of learning about, or more about, a site, from their students’ interactions with it. Thus, I notice that my own teaching practice in site-specific contexts, and that of the men and women I have interviewed, tends to revolve around this basic tenet of feminist pedagogical practice, while remaining cognisant of avoiding ‘static hierarchies’ (for instance, contexts where the teacher-student relationship is completely reversed). I see further broad traditions of feminist pedagogy emerging, including: the practice of making gender relations visible in the classroom and particularly in site (the specificity of this body in this site seems to be significant to the generation of these conversations); stimulating a sense of social change in the classroom/in site (particularly relevant to discussions of other users of a site, as introduced briefly above); drawing on students’ own experiences in order for them to begin to position themselves in society; linking these experiences to relevant literature and practice; encouraging collaborative work that potentially engages a wider community. These references to practice have not always been specifically labelled as feminist by my interviewees, though one notes that ‘I’m teaching through a feminist lens, always’ [I#1], and another states that ‘being a feminist seems to be part and parcel of it for me, really, I don’t have another way to frame the work’ [I#2]. The work of mapping the full interviews onto specific aspects of feminist pedagogy remains to be done, and the use of the anecdote in teaching (and its status within the interview material) is a key aspect of this argument that will be drawn out in future writing.

The significance of this pilot study can be understood in four main ways. Firstly, the diverse voices gathered through the interview methodology represent a broad range of experiences and knowledges, revealing a rich variety of approaches to teaching as it functions in site-based contexts. This provides a useful alternative to many other methods of learning about teaching theatre and performance, reading material about which tends to privilege a single voice in ‘how to’ style. Secondly, this teaching and learning work can also be extrapolated to the starting points of other kinds of theatre and performance training – teaching students to observe their surroundings, make things up, ponder (im)possibility, think about the self, tell stories, consider scale and size and reflect on their practice are important facets of any training in our field. While the teaching of devising more broadly may consider many or all of these facets, the crucial difference is a sense that ideas and their generation and exploration are prioritising response to or work within a site, rather than prioritising the creation of performance. The end result (a performance) may be the same, but the process is different. Crucially, as this project opens up into a wider national and international conversation, and as my analysis moves from a consideration of starting points for training towards a fuller sense of the training process, I hope that the connections between teaching site-based performance practices and other documented theatre and performance teaching practices will continue to cross-pollinate and inform each other.

Thirdly, the analysis suggests ways of working with audiences and their participation (incidental or otherwise) in site-based contexts, especially when this facet of the work does not operate as expected. It also invokes the politics of operating in non-theatrical, public spaces (interacting with other users of sites, questions of accessibility), and how this is being folded into training. Finally, the research material indicates that an emphasis on ambiguity, ambivalence, incongruity, uncertainty, built-in failure, trial and error is helpful to any theatre or performance training practice, in a methodological sense as well as a content-based one. In our field, these features are usually discussed in relation to companies who build a sense of failure into their performance work when it is being performed to an audience (e.g. Forced Entertainment, Elevator Repair Service, New York City Players, Goat Island, every house has a door, Haranzcak/Navarre, written about in Bailes 2011, Gorman 2011, Ridout 2006 amongst many others). However, a suggestion that the very start of training in performance practices could include such thinking and playing reaches back to ideas of training the untrainable mentioned at the beginning of this piece, and sparks thought that positioning students in relation to a positive sense of impossibility might create a conversation about training productively there. Situated side by side, these four features confirm the generative capacity of capturing the voices of those who train undergraduates to see site and space in new ways, reaffirming the challenges and rewards of training in this slippery, liminal context.

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1. For the purposes of this article, transcribed material will not be attributed to named interviewees, but rather Interviewee #1-7, or I#1-7 as will appear in the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These were the two terms used in the interviews to refer to units of undergraduate study at different institutions. The term ‘module’ will be used henceforth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)