Biomechanics in lockdown: teaching Meyerhold in the age of Covid-19

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Introduction

In the first few months of 2020, seismic movements in the bedrock of education and training were felt. The global Coronavirus pandemic which started in December the previous year spread from East Asia to Europe and the Americas by Spring 2020, necessitating governmental restrictions of movement (so called lockdowns) in countries on every continent except Antarctica. While the after-shocks of this pandemic will take many years to be fully understood, the impact on teaching and learning at that moment was instantaneous. Entire education systems migrated online almost overnight, triggering pedagogical innovations and platform developments which may otherwise have taken years to be implemented. Practice-based disciplines, including theatre, faced particular challenges in this global digitisation of learning and as such were at the forefront of those innovations. Training moved online and it became commonplace to see practices of embodied transmission being mediated not through a guiding hand in the studio, but via a screen populated with thumbnail images of workshop participants and a 'chat' bar full of comments and emojis.

Except to narrate the birth of digital training in such binary terms (before Covid and after Covid) is to over simplify its development and to misrepresent the history of online performer training established years before the *annus horribilis* of 2020. This essay will focus on the teaching of Meyerhold's biomechanics, over a period of seven years (2014-2021), to examine in detail its capacity for online adaptation, both before and after the multiple lockdowns of the early 2020s. Biomechanics offers a particularly compelling case study to address this issue. As a

form of training originally conceived as a theatrical response to the post-Revolutionary wave of new technology and productivity, how has it adapted to the technological context of the 21st century? As a pedagogy so deeply entrenched in vertical traditions of hands-on instruction and master-pupil dynamics, can it retain its integrity spread across the world wide web in a diffuse and distributed form of democratised learning?

Written from the perspective of the Lead Educator and designer of the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), *Physical Theatre: Meyerhold and Biomechanics* (and its variants), this essay will harness empirical data from a pool of some 30,000 students who have studied Meyerhold's practice online since it was developed in 2014. It will address these questions drawing on the voices of students who have experienced the course and of educators who have utilised it in their own teaching. It will lay out some of the principles of embodied history which underpin the course, and it will assess the relationship between online learning design and the student experience. Finally, it will examine what the most recent changes in online actor training, brought about by the pandemic, and hastily embedded in Higher Education curricula, might mean for online learning platforms such as FutureLearn in the coming years.

Biomechanics and the technology of the times

When Evgeny Vakhtangov declared that 'Meyerhold provided the roots for the theater of the future. So shall the future honor him' (Rudnitsky 1981: 246), he could not have conceived how prescient those words would be. While much has been made of the shift Meyerhold underwent in his thinking directly after the Revolution, perhaps most potently symbolized in the change from naming his actor training 'scenic movement'

in 1913 to 'biomechanics' from 1920 onwards (Leach 2018: 96), little has been said about the *ongoing* technological affinities of Meyerhold's practice. Maria Kapsali in her recent *Performer Training and Technology* (Kapsali 2021) examines tool use (specifically the technology of the stick in biomechanics), drawing on post phenomenological ideas from Don Ihde. 'Ingenuity, curiosity, playfulness and responsiveness' characterise the attitude to such material objects in training, she argues (Kapsali 2021: 112). In this volume, Darren Tunstall, having laid out the context of contemporary movement science and its relationship to Meyerhold, asks the question: 'What could a Meyerholdian actor bring to […] an environment' of Motion capture training and film production? (Tunstall 2022: ?). 'Speed, concentration, stamina, precision – and a feeling for the "essence" of the movement', are some of his suggestions (Tunstall 2022: ?). Stefan Aquilina speaks to how his usual studio-based practice of étude-building and improvisation using the 'bribes scene' of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (Aquilina 2020: 167–70) was adapted for Zoom, suggesting that 'online teaching does not need to be thought of from scratch, but that it is possible to adapt the work and exercises which we are familiar with' (Aquilina 2022: 12). Beyond these short references there are no other essays or books which address the complementarity of biomechanics, modern technology and digital pedagogy to my knowledge, other than my own chapter in *Time and Performer Training* (co-edited by Mark Evans, Konstantinos Thomaidis and Libby Worth). The essay for this Companion builds on that original work, titled *'*Simultaneity and Asynchronicity in Performer Training: a case study of Massive Open Online Courses as training tools' (Pitches in Evans, Thomaidis and Worth 2019), moving attention beyond the temporal aspects of biomechanics and online learning to consider wider concerns of course design, student experience (pre- and post-pandemic) and training

ethos. In taking such an approach I hope to counter suggestions that identify the Covid-19 pandemic period as the singular agent for shifting the teaching of embodied actor training practices online, the 'unprecedented pivot to online and digitized pedagogy' (Vickers 2020: 264) as it has been described, while recognising that the dividing lines between studio and screen will never be the same again.[1]

The genesis of FutureLearn's online course *Physical Theatre: Meyerhold's Biomechanics*

My own training in biomechanics was as short as it was life-changing. Two back-to-back workshop courses with Alexei Levinsky in 1995 as part of the Centre for Performance Research's 'Past Masters' event on Meyerhold (Gough, Rawlinson and Gethin 2005), were followed by a week-long session with the other internationally recognised Russian Master, Gennady Bogdanov in 1997. Both happened to be filmed by Arts Archive training documenter, Peter Hulton (McCaw 2020), and his videos remain a source of amusement for my students when they see the first faltering (tap dance) steps of their teacher, taken over a quarter of century ago (Levinski 1995; Bogdanov 1997). The workshops included the rote learning of biomechanical études (The Slap and Throwing the Stone), although Bogdanov's set of practical tasks was much more eclectic than Levinsky's, the latter training just three key things – dance steps, stick work, and étude work. Despite the later work with Bogdanov, my own embodiment of the études is unmistakably, if unwittingly, 'Levinskian', even after twenty-five years of practicing biomechanics independently. This is most evident in the use of relaxed wrists for the arm extensions, a softer and more rounded shape to the étude's form, including the biomechanical runs which punctuate the études, and an overall stylistic quality which is perhaps best described as humble rather than

powerful. These subtle differences, lost on most, are nevertheless evident in the animated video documentation on the course, derived and translated from a source video of my own version of The Slap.

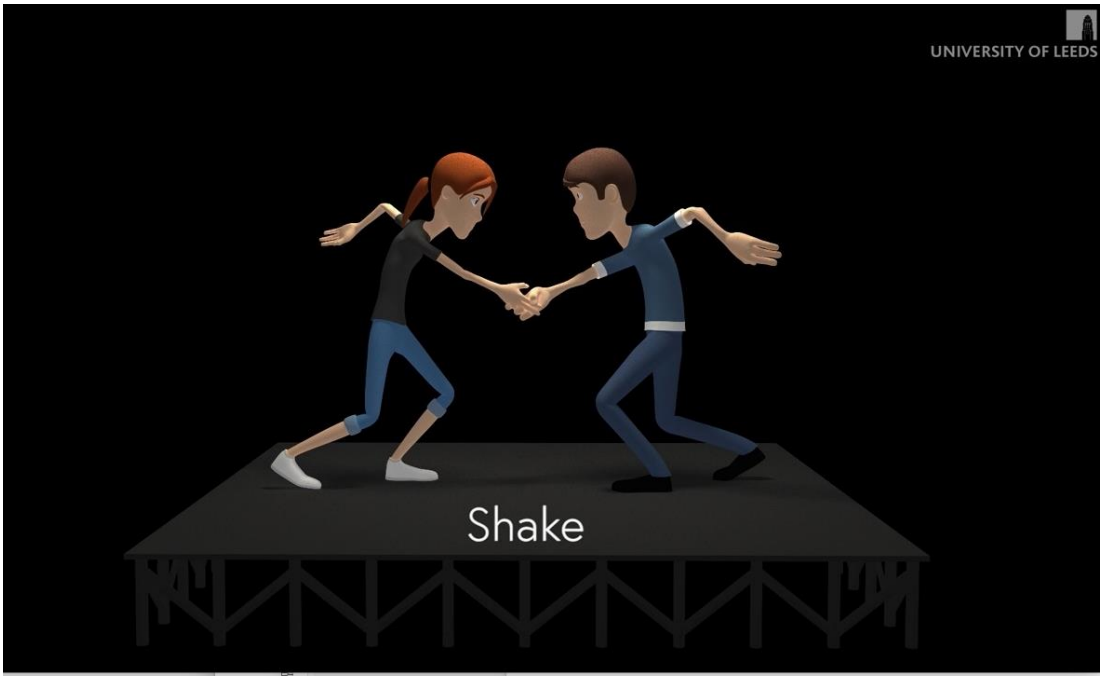

Fig 1. Screen grab of video tutorial from the Exploring the Slap course.

The rationalisation of this practice and its dissemination for teachers and practitioners formed part of a monograph published in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series, *Vsevolod Meyerhold* (Pitches 2003/2018), and subsequently translated into Chinese, Danish, and Farsi. In 2012, following a collaborative project on Digital Storytelling funded by JISC, I was awarded nearly £50,000 of funding by the Leeds Academic Development Fund, a precursor to the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence, to lead pedagogical research into what became termed 'digital reflection', working with colleagues from five disciplines across the Faculty of Performance Visual Arts and Communication (now Arts, History and Cultures). The findings from this work (Kirk and Pitches 2013) suggested that forms of non-textual reflection, such as images and video, can better enable expressions of tacit knowledge

and can provide richer data for reflection on creative practice. Informed by these discoveries, simple modes of digital reflection were adopted for the final responsive task for both the online courses discussed here, with students from over 90 countries invited to upload their own creative responses to the biomechanics tutorials in video and still images. Indeed, some of these responses imaginatively manipulated digital technologies to express the seemingly ephemeral experiences of the training, using colour and montage, for example, as proxies for the feelings of intensity and form created by practicing the études (Pitches 2019: 186).

FutureLearn, the first UK-based provider of Massive Open Online Courses (or MOOCs), Continuing Professional Development, and fully online degrees, was founded in 2012, with just 12 university partners as inaugural members, including the University of Leeds.[2] The first free content, significantly before any business model for charging students was established, was made available on the platform in Autumn 2013, and the course for which I was Lead Educator was launched on 10 March 2014, only the third offered by the University of Leeds following courses in Geography and Medicine. To give an indication of the platform's growth since then, in late 2021 there were 1337 short courses available [3] and 108 University partners named on their website.[4] The course was developed in close collaboration with the Digital Education Service at Leeds, then numbering only three people (now over 100) and was ratified following an institutional level quality assurance and approval process. A second run of the three-week course was independently CPD-accredited in 2015, and two further three-week courses ran in 2018 and 2019. In 2016 a variant of the course was created – a stand-alone 2-week course titled 'Physical Theatre: Exploring the Slap', designed for secondary education teachers and students and offered on a rolling basis every 6-8 weeks. The major difference between the two

courses, apart from the time allocated, was that there was no direct interaction from myself as Lead Educator for the Exploring the Slap course. By contrast, the three-week course had daily comments and updates from myself and a number of moderators, including colleagues and postgraduate research students from my own School of Performance and Cultural Industries.[5]

'An Introduction to Physical Actor Training' was, in actor training specialist, Frank Camilleri's assessment, 'among the first – if not the first – to explore the possibility of teaching some aspects of actor training via' an online platform (Camilleri 2015: 25). As such, references have been made to the course in the most recent academic literature on digital performance training (Camilleri 2015; Wake 2018; Allain 2019; Evans 2019; Cervera, Schmidt, and Schwadron 2021), along with a formal review of it in the journal of *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* (Warden 2014). The course formed part of an Impact Case Study for the UK's Research Excellence Framework in 2021 – a national assessment of research power conducted every 6 or 7 years – and the data gathered for that study has informed this essay, including quantitative data from FutureLearn (e.g. registrations, international spread, engagement figures), and qualitative data from the course itself, from focus groups and interviews.[6]

Course structure: from embodied history to reflections on the future

The course as it was originally conceived was divided into three weeks, each with a different focus: Meyerhold in Context; Meyerhold in Action; Meyerhold Today. Thus, the students' learning experience in week 1 moved from historiographical thinking about actor training, through a summary of the impact of pre-and post-

revolutionary influences on biomechanics in Russia, to a consideration of some of the key players in the development of biomechanics (Vladimir Soloviev, Mikhail Gnesin, Irina Meyerhold, Nikolai Kustov) and finally to an examination of étude structure and the lineage of trainers after the first generation. Research tasks for the students and quizzes to test their knowledge punctuated this content. The first week was designed to debunk the idea that there was a 'pure' original source to biomechanics, and instead to make manifest how complicated the process of étude devising was, both in relation to its mixture of well-known historical influences (Kabuki, Noh, Beijing opera, commedia dell'arte) and the many figures involved in the development of the études themselves. To ground the ideas in the learners' experience, the notion of personal embodied histories was marshalled, and used to frame end of week reflections posted in the platform's comment threads:

> So before we move on, let's just reflect on this idea of embodied knowledge or embodied history. What currency does that term have for you? Perhaps you could spend a few minutes in the discussion threads thinking about this. […] You might have done a sport training, [or] movement [training]. You might have had an injury or a particular kind of posture that has a history to it. Can you reflect on that and tell us about it in those threads? (FL Lecture transcript, 2014)[7]

In its first run in 2014 this question elicited hundreds of responses, more than any other video prompt,[8] with learners offering diverse personal interpretations of the term 'embodied history', from the influence of ballet, tap, gymnastics or martial arts training, to early memories of skirmishes with dogs; from shoulder and spine injuries, to complex reflections on the nature of knowledge itself and the extent to which the individuality of embodied knowledge may be in tension with academic abstractions

and categorizations, such as genre. Starting with the personal and the experiential and using it as a prompt for historical consideration of biomechanics echoed the historiographical approach described by Gilli Bush-Bailey and Jacky Bratton in an essay published three years earlier: a dedication to 'doing history backwards' and a recognition that the contemporary performer is 'an embodied palimpsest, through which earlier approaches might be perceived' (Davis, Normington and Bush-Bailey 2011: 103–4).

Week 2, Meyerhold in Action, led the students through practical exercises: first in relation to footwork, then stick and ball work – balances, throws, and catches – before an animation of the pair étude, The Slap, was introduced to give an overview of its dynamic and structure. This overview, a still from which is pictured above, named the individual actions of the étude, identified the rhythmic underpinning of all the actions,[9] and explained how active and passive partnership operates in the étude along with how these statuses swap halfway through. Learners were then asked to focus on six paired actions: Preparation to Shake + Shake; Preparation to Slap + Taking Aim; The Slap + Return to Neutral. Again, these were introduced through animated video tutorials, and students were invited to comment on their experiences on the platform. The week concluded with an exercise in digital reflection – following guidance on how to document the training (either in prose, still images or video) – and, over the weekend, there was a first sharing of these documented experiences, using a social media platform outside FutureLearn. Despite the pace in learning, and the very early need to share experiences, many learners contributed to this step, and in doing so a series of reflective layers was constructed, both within the learning platform, and on the social media site. This was a typical example:

> At first, I found it challenging to remember the exact constituent movements and limb positions well enough to perform them smoothly within the rhythmic structure. I found it hard to keep my balance. However, gradually, operating to a learnt and repeated rhythm is adding grace, movement, flow and sureity to my performance […]. I am learning how to distribute my weight appropriately for the movement I am making and can see that, with practice, the sequences would eventually become 'second nature' or embodied in me. They would become an immediately accessible, working tool.[10]

As the lead educator, I also selected comments to respond to, in order to distribute the points of learning and move them beyond the individual. In all this, although the content of the étude was drawn directly from my experience with Russian masters, the mode of learning was radically different, with the voice of the participants foregrounded in ways that would be impossible in the studio, a point to which I will return.

After an exercise in guided reflection, using selected étude documentation from learners, the final week moved beyond personal training, and pulled back focus to practitioner interviews and panel discussions of Meyerhold Today. The former included interviews with Terence Mann, Anna Fenemore, and Maria Kapsali. The latter drew in expert observations from Robert Leach and Amy Skinner, with an additional contribution from Terence Mann. This discussion material was designed to prompt a final summative discussion focused on the future, stimulated by three prompts:

- What do you consider the future of performer training to hold?
- What will be the dominant approaches?

- How will technology play a role in this, if at all?[11]

Six years before the enforced move to digital training brought about by the pandemic, there are some interesting observations in relation to the future of training in this popular thread: a recognition that hybrid training, combining both online and face-to-face will develop further; a concern around the viability of formal Drama school training in relation to debt and lack of flexibility in delivery modes; and the sense that technology and learning will continue to develop, a view encapsulated in one learner's comment from 2014:

> How will technology play a role in this, if at all? In the way we disseminate the training. This MOOC is a case in point, it has reached professional and non-professionals, it has spread Meyerhold's ideas to thousands of people in dozens of countries, who have passionately discussed his ideas, although some of us hadn't heard of him 3 weeks ago!

A final test to consolidate the learning on the course concluded the last week, designed to synthesise the three weeks' combination of history, practice, and contemporary commentary. Successful completion of these tests was mandatory for the formal accreditation offered at the end, although many learners did not seek this accreditation.

Learner demographics and engagement: pre- and post-pandemic

In starkly quantitative terms these two online courses (the three-week and two-week variant) have exponentially expanded the demographic and international reach of biomechanical training, moving it from the seclusion of the studio (a ratio typically of 1-20) to the openness of the FutureLearn platform (1-2000, on average across the

four, three-week courses). In the period 2014-2020, the two MOOCs reached over 29,000 students, from more than 90 countries,[12] with students ranging from less than 18 years old to over 65. Demonstrably these were mainly learners who would not be able to access studio courses in biomechanics led by the two Russian masters, Levinsky and Bodganov, or by the small coterie of their disciples. Over the years, perhaps inevitably, the pool of potential learners diminished, and the last full course, offered in 2019, had just shy of 500 registrations, compared to 3500 on the first run. In 2020 it was decided not to offer this three-week course again and a slight redesign of the two-week course was planned. At the time of writing, this redesign is still yet to be completed, as the business-as-usual activity at Leeds University's Digital Education Service was overtaken by the events of the pandemic and inhouse need was prioritised.

A closer examination of the Spring period of 2020 is revealing. Over the life of the non-interactive teachers' course (2016-2020), an average of 297 learners joined each run of Exploring the Slap during 2019. In March and May 2020, the period when the UK and other parts of the world were in full lockdown as a consequence of COVID-19, each run attracted 1080 and 1199 respectively, nearly a four-fold increase in take up and engagement on the previous year. Ostensibly more revealing than the registration statistics, however, are the engagement data, captured below for the January and March offerings of the course in 2020:

Physical Theatre: Exploring the Slap				
	27th Jan		23rd March	
Joiners	389		1080	
Leavers	43	11.10%	86	8.00%
Learners	299	76.90%	944	87.40%
Active Learners	154	51.50%	616	65.30%
Social Learners	38	12.70%	166	17.60%
Learners with ≥50% step completion	65	21.70%	311	32.90%
Learners with ≥90% step completion	33	11.00%	196	20.80%

Fig 2: Learner engagement statistics comparison 27th January 2020 and 23rd March 2020

Since their inception, online massive open online courses have been notable for having very large non-starter rates (Khalil and Ebner, 2014), for encouraging passive learner behaviours, and for the tendency of students to stall after the first weeks of content being delivered (Jordan, 2015). This simple comparative table evidences, at least in the very first weeks of the pandemic, how behaviours changed in relation to students' online commitment. There is a modest dip in those leaving without any engagement (Leavers); and a similar size uptick in those at least starting the course (Learners). Most notable, though, is the extent to which students moved through the entire course, completing up to and beyond 90% of the content in the first fortnight of the pandemic – nearly doubling the percentage of these high 'completers', when compared to the course offered in January 2020.

It would be tempting to rush to conclusions based on this tight window of data. Learners across the world who were experiencing enforced isolation from government lockdowns in North America, Europe, East and South Asia, had time on their hands to complete free, online courses, including the Exploring the Slap MOOC, and were much more inclined to complete the entire course, as the distractions of everyday life had been reduced so radically. This was the time in the UK, for instance, where outside activity had been reduced to one thirty-minute period of exercise, with company restricted to one's cohabitants. It was the beginning of a

deeply challenging period of upheaval in education globally, with classes moved online for 1.2 billion students and a resultant mental health epidemic to complement the viral pandemic. According to the study 'Online education during COVID-19' conducted in India, these students:

> started diverting themselves to various creative activities and taking up courses that are helping them to learn new technical skills. By using emotional intelligence and distancing from boredom and depressive thoughts, students were trying to cope with negative effects arising from the current pandemic situation. (Chandra 2021: 229)

Undoubtedly behaviours changed and attitudes to online activity – from fitness classes to purchasing and viewing preferences – were rapidly revised in the context of a global shutdown of alternative cultural and education activities.[13] But, at least in relation to the biomechanics course, the picture was more complex. While there was a short-term enhancement of registrations, and an attendant uplift in completions in the period cited above, looking back over the learner analytics for the full period of the course's existence reveals that over-90% completion levels were significantly higher on many of the runs from 2016 onwards, peaking at 31% of the cohort in June 2017. In other words, for that particular run of the course 132 students out of a registration pool of 427 completed at least 90% of the two-week course, by no means a large drop-out rate for MOOCs. To add to the irony, and as a reminder, this version of the course has no synchronous interaction from the Lead Educator. Indeed these 'automatic' courses, repeating on an 8-week cycle, with a life of their

own, have on average significantly higher completion rates than the three-week interactive course.[14]

Teaching biomechanics online

If tutor contributions and, more notably, the peculiarities of the pandemic can be discounted in relation to the high levels of student engagement, there must be other factors at play – course structure and content for example – and it is these details to which I will now turn to assess the promised relationship between online learning design and the student experience. Given the focus of this Companion, I will restrict these observations to three key themes in relation to teaching biomechanics online, underpinned with user-testimony,[15] although doubtless the findings are more generalisable: i) training the trainers, ii) experiential embodiment, iii) the rhythm of online pedagogy.

Training the trainers

While, as already noted, the model of pedagogy adopted by FutureLearn is one of a Lead Educator delivering video tutorials with support from tutors and mentors, many of the so-called students on these courses were in fact teachers themselves, looking to enhance their own professional practice. In the comment threads, this group indicated how their practices changed when engaging with Meyerhold online: 'It has been eye-opening' said one, 'and given me a whole new way to look at teaching drama in the classroom'.[16] Most prominently, they valued highly the access to new resources and the associated opportunity to enhance their own approaches to reflective, inclusive learning. Responding to the mode of digital reflection, a teacher of post-16 students testified:

> My first efforts of keeping it simple for my young learners has just been uploaded. It is also a first pass at documenting a process such as this […]. I will be encouraging the students to think about their studies of theatre and scripts in such ways in the future.[17]

And another observed:

> This is my second time teaching Meyerhold to Year 12 [16-17-year olds]. It has been so much more interesting using the videos in the course. I'm watching groups of students interpreting the work of Meyerhold for their assessment task. One group in particular have shown an amazing understanding of the physical requirements and have worked constantly to create precision in their work. They have used discipline and also playfulness in the workshop they're devising.[18]

Another noted how pupils' awareness of physical stamina was enhanced: 'By breaking down the actions it also helps to focus the actor and brings them into the moment on stage. Having facilitated the learning of The Slap with my Year 12 class it becomes apparent that they have a new respect for the physical performer and the level of fitness needed'. [19] A further UK teacher stated: 'I am planning to build upon this course, research further and develop a BTEC scheme of work on biomechanics'.[20]

Ideas of embodied history also influenced teachers working across cultures: 'The issues raised here make me think of many of the conversations I have

had in the cross-cultural drama workshops I'm involved in (I'm from the UK, my students are from China) […]. It's fascinating to think about [how] embodied knowledge can be linked to the gestures of a particular culture and/or the movements of a particular acting style'.[21]

There is evidence that, for some trainers, they had reconceived the position of Meyerhold in the curriculum, with the documentation of Meyerhold's practice online seen as influential in their understanding of theatre and in how they may teach it in the future:

> I am certainly going to expose my students to Meyerhold and his techniques…I am much more convinced of the important influence of this work than I was at the start. I shall continue to research and follow through on what I have learnt. [22]

And:

> I have new teaching tools which is always exciting and want to consider the best way of integrating them into my teaching as well as practise them more first. [23]

These sentiments were echoed beyond the UK. Secondary school drama teachers in Brisbane, Australia for instance, piloting the course with their students, noted (in a focus group) its value in presenting 'absorbable chunks' of information that they would return to for further exploration. These teachers also agreed that they were 'so inspired' as the course gave students 'a fundamental, that can then springboard into

other thing[s]' concluding that they had 'never felt more engaged about the value of the *historical*'.[24]

Experiential embodiment

It is a truism to remark on the essentially 'felt' nature of biomechanical training. Self-evidently as a corporeal practice, biomechanics has to be experienced to have an impact. For this reason, the riskiest element of designing the course was always going to be in relation to how effectively the principles of biomechanics pass from the original embodiment of a historic practice (my version of the Slap étude), through its documentation as an animation, onto a digital platform for dissemination, and finally to the re-embodiment of these principles in the students' training. Given the design of the course, and the opportunity for students to comment on their own experiences throughout, either on the work with props, or directly on the étude, there is much testimony to draw on in relation to this conundrum, from professional and semi-professional actors, and from those with more general interests; a tiny fraction of this testimony is shared here.

Those from the former group identified new understandings of some of the key principles of biomechanics, such as self-mirroring and *tormos* (the brake):

> As an actor […] these exercises are allowing me to move about convincingly on stage making it look less like a premeditated move when I do an action, less like I am thinking it and more like my whole body is doing it. [25]

And:

> I think the exercises have given me a greater self-awareness regarding my movements, both on stage and in my everyday life, and the need to control them.[26]

Performers with little visibility in established biomechanical circles such as those working in Brazil, Iran, Israel, Lithuania, and Bangladesh reported appropriating techniques embedded in the course in their own professional practice. For example, a Bangladeshi actor and university teacher noted a new opportunity to blend biomechanics with her existing teaching of physical practices (gymnastics, martial arts, circus, and acrobatic skills):

> Even recently, Meyerhold was hardly practiced in Bangladesh, except in a few HEIs. Even in these, the core materials were drawn from half-baked notions of Meyerhold as a physical theatre practitioner who worked in a manner that had no value for emotion, and hence, was situated diametrically opposite to Stanislavsky.
>
> After the course, I now see clearly that Meyerhold had not jettisoned emotion entirely, but started off from the body to activate emotion as a result of action […]. The clarity that I have thus gained through the course is tested not only through my work with my students but also in my work as an actor.[27]

More generalist learners report a range of positive reactions to the form of learning embedded in the online course, reflecting on their embodiment of the training in non-traditional spaces:

> It was a very positive experience, in some ways more positive than learning such skills in a studio environment. At home on my own, I really felt I was in a safe space to try the physical activities as many times as I wanted. [28]

And, rather more amusingly:

> Last night I was lying in bed on my back, eyes closed, knees bent, practicing the foot movements for the second exercise. I was working at quite a pace when my husband gently touched me on the shoulder. He thought I was asleep and having a nightmare about running from something chasing me. It's a strange thing to start explaining biomechanics at midnight! [29]

Two strong themes emerge from reviewing the qualitative commentary on these courses in relation to embodiment. The first is that, while the experiences are undoubtedly less intense, and punctuated by other more mundane aspects of ordinary life without the protective and isolating walls of a studio, students nevertheless *do* report felt experiences and changed behaviours stimulated by the online training. The second is that rather than diluting them in anyway, these experiences are strengthened and enhanced by the historical component of the course (the emphasis on 'doing history backwards'), as one learner captured vividly:

> When in the beginning we were speaking of theories and terminology, my reaction was that some professionals over-analyse everything and make the art of acting too complicated and mechanical. Now, after working on just these first few exercises, I have reversed my original thinking and see not only the

practicality of practiced movement but begin to see how body training and control become part of the art of acting. [30]

The rhythm of online pedagogy

Thinking of the rhythm of learning in this environment, helps to bring the two themes discussed above together and directs our attention back to what is known as 'teacher presence' in interactive pedagogical theory: that which 'focuses on the design of educational experience before, and facilitation of learning during the course' (Goshtasbpour, Swinnerton, and Morris 2020: 231). While it may seem that there is much less control over the temporal experience within an online teaching environment, as students are able to drop in and out, adjusting their engagement in line with the rest of their lives, the rhythm of the course remains surprisingly important in determining student engagement. It is established by a combination of the following things: the structure of the learning steps; the balance between directly engaging and reflective tasks; the balance of downloadable content from the tutor and uploaded content from the student; and the dramaturgical arc of the course as a whole.

For the online biomechanics courses, this combination was consistently revised and refined as the design team took learner analytics, comment threads, and the extent to which students were prepared to share their own content on board. Thus, the three-week course, which originally had content-sharing at the end of the second week, moved this event to the beginning of the third week in later iterations, after 2014. This was adjusted further for the two-week teachers' course, with the more contextual, historical material moved to 'further reading' links, along with the panel conversations. As mentioned above, the completion figures indicate that, for the majority, the shorter course was more manageable, a point which should also be

viewed in the context of teachers' likelihood of using it as part of structured learning within their schools, and therefore providing further motivation for completion. Qualitative commentary is less definitive, and several students on the first version of the shorter course in 2016, found the pared back version 'thin' and relatively unsatisfying; others referred to the loss of online educators and missed the opportunity for more direct interaction.[31]

Across the two courses, however, the dramaturgical arc remained essentially the same, and loosely paralleled the biomechanical rhythm of an étude: a development from historical and theoretical pre-investigation (*otkaz*, preparation); to practical, immersive activity, followed by the performance of that activity to others (*posil*, action itself); to the guided moment of reflection at the end (*tochka*, moment of pause before the next action), prompted by three questions.[32] True to biomechanical form, the existence of an *otkaz* built expectation and consistently prompted palpable excitement and anticipation before the practice was experienced in the second week.[33] At the time of the first version of the course, the use of platforms outside of the MOOC platform, to allow learners to upload content was extremely unusual, if not unprecedented. Now, it is commonplace, at least in virtual learning environments such as Blackboard or on newly augmented online teaching like Microsoft Teams. The opportunity to do so in the overall dramaturgy of the course, was, I believe, pivotal both at the level of learning design, and in marking a shift in the dynamics of biomechanics teaching itself.

For the former, the content sharing constituted a climax of sorts, the ultimate conclusion to the rising action of training, compressed into a fortnight. Seeing examples of others' work, drew attention away from the pseudo-definitiveness of the animated version of the étude, humanizing the practice, and revealing biomechanics

in process, with all its flaws and successes. For the latter – the dynamics of teaching – shared student content underlined the given virtues of a social media platform, its essentially collaborative, network-building capacity. Students decided whether or not to upload their versions of their training, and could do so either in writing, stills or video. Once shared, commentary on the études was open to all, (although the Lead Educator's voice was clearly always going to be valued differently). Observations were expressly focused on students' documentation choice rather than perceived ideas of étude quality or expertise, and this served to support the comparison between Meyerhold's original documentation and the newly created material. 'Teacher presence', then, was distributed very differently to the way it traditionally is in the master practitioner's workshop, or in what Bryan Brown has lucidly identified as the Russian archetype of the authoritarian *masterkaya*: 'a skills-based learning environment where the individual takes precedence over the collective' (Brown 2019: 10). In these online courses, by contrast, mastership was both consciously downgraded – in the animated version of the étude for instance – and inadvertently redistributed, into the voices of the participants, voices which inevitably dominated in the context of *massive* open online courses and their comment threads.

Conclusion – rethinking assumptions of biomechanical training

In early 2021 theatre critic and philosopher Rustom Bharucha produced a series of video-lectures. In it, he made the following provocation about the value of the pandemic: 'I look upon the virus as a catalyst, literally a foreign element, which enables me to rethink some of my deepest assumptions of theatre'.[34] In Spring 2020 I, like many of my theatre colleagues across the world, was forced to rethink how I could teach my key practical sessions with the studios unavailable and students

practising from their bedrooms and dining rooms. Irrespective of the seven years' experience I had in teaching biomechanics online, my 'deepest assumptions' included disbelief that students would engage without my presence in the room and the opportunity gently to mould their bodies into the form of the étude, just as I had had my body moulded by Levinsky in 1995. But sure enough, as I broadcast my session from my kitchen, asking students to use whatever they could lay their hands upon for the throwing exercises, the group lifted my spirits, and perhaps their own, by unquestioningly entering into the ethos of a biomechanical workshop. My live demonstration of the étude elicited 15 different versions all visible as thumbnails on my screen and I was able to provide detailed commentary on each of them, whilst the rest of the cohort watched, using the chat function to offer their own thoughts making connections with the historical material we had encountered earlier.

For Bharucha it was the pandemic which acted as a catalyst for reassessment. My assumptions about theatre practice had already been radically rethought, directly after the first run of the massive open online course in 2014. Running my class from my kitchen last Spring, although using synchronous technology, rather than recorded video, reminded me that, just as with the Exploring the Slap and Physical Theatre courses, it is the embodiment of the ideas which is foremost, rather than the medium through which that embodiment occurs. It also reminded me that the power of the études lie in their simple underlying rhythm and clear structure, in short in their formal beauty. These are characteristics which carry across media, and the many thousands of comments documented for the impact case study, and drawn on for this essay, testify to that fact. What is lost, is the undeniable influence of mastery and individual charisma, very much in evidence in Levinsky and Bogdanov's practice and in many of their students. Pair work and larger ensemble work are clearly also absent

from this training, although some students did manage to work around that, co-opting partners and flatmates. What is gained is (the beginnings of) a distributed power base in workshop studio practice, the very antithesis of the *masterskaya* in fact and arguably much more akin to the Studio or *studiinost* in Brown's formulation: 'one organised around the interdependent relations or ethical bonds between people' and which is 'inherently collective and communal' (Brown 2019: 9). Along with the Moscow Art Theatre First Studio, Brown offers the Vakhtangov studio as archetypes of this kind of training ethos, reminding us of the foresight the latter had in relation to Meyerhold. If 'Meyerhold provided the roots for the theater of the future' (Rudnitsky 1981: 246), as Vakhtangov observed, then I offer this examination of digital biomechanics as a 21st century analogue of the atmosphere of *studiinost*, confident that the pandemic neither triggered or constrained this spirit, even if it will inevitably play a defining role in nourishing it in the coming years.

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Endnotes

[1] See also the recent edited collection *Towards a future theatre: conversations during a pandemic* (Svich 2022: 6): 'The digital highways of theatre […] are pushing the field to places it maybe never thought it could go, at such an accelerated pace, out of urgency, necessity and fearlessness'.

[2] See the *Times Higher* for the announcement: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/futurelearn-picks-league-table-stars-for-debut-line-up/422182.article

[3] https://www.futurelearn.com/courses (accessed 26th November 2021)

[4] https://www.futurelearn.com/partners (accessed 26th November 2021)

[5] These included Maria Kapsali, Anna Fenemore, Tony Gardner, Carole Kirk, Peter Gray, Clare Daněk, Kelli Zezulka, Mark Shields, Laura Griffiths, Dionysia Bouzioti, Duncan Marwick.

[6] The authoring of Impact Case Studies is a huge, collective effort. I'd like to acknowledge my gratitude to the Impact team in the faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures of the University of Leeds and particularly to Dr Lucy Hodgetts and Dr Ceri Pitches, for gathering data, constructing narratives, writing and revising text, and documenting evidence.

[7] Downloadable transcripts were included as additional resources, along with links to further reading: https://ugc.futurelearn.com/uploads/files/0b/c4/0bc4079f-c6ac-4c52-b568-1d55af8896ff/Approaching_theatre_history_transcript.pdf

[8] 277 comments to be precise.

[9] That is *Otkaz*: or preparation; *Posil*: action itself; and *Tochka* (or *Stoika*): pause before the next action.

[10] https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/physical-theatre/1/steps/5665

[11] https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/physical-theatre/1/steps/8203

[12] The top ten countries (measured by visits) to the 2014 course were: 1. United Kingdom 2. United States 3. Spain 4. Russia 5. Hong Kong 6. Australia 7. Greece 8. China 9. Colombia 10. France. The bottom ten were: 81. Kenya 82. Morocco 83. Mauritius 84. Paraguay 85. Somalia 86. South Sudan 87. Uzbekistan 88. Vietnam 89. Samoa 90. Yemen 91. Zambia

[13] See for instance this survey of US online behaviour changes, pre and mid lockdown (2019 and 2020): https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/coronavirus-pandemic-drove-life-online-it-may-never-return-n1169956

[14] The 90% completion rate for the three-week course is 11.75% over four runs, compared to 18.3% over 42 runs of the two-week course.

[15] Participant comment data in this section, hereafter FL comment portfolio 2014-18, has been anonymised and is derived from course runs: 2014, 2015, and 2018.

[16] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[17] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[18] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[19] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[20] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[21] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[22] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[23] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.

[24] The Focus Group was held at Queensland University of Technology on 2.5.14.

[25] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.
[26] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.
[27] Email communication 28th June 2020.
[28] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.
[29] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.
[30] FL comment portfolio 2014-18.
[31] https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/physical-theatre-exploring-the-slap/1/steps/82483
[32] These were: Can you see the intention of the documentation from the approach taken? What are the various advantages and disadvantages of documenting in writing, images and moving pictures? What things stick in your mind after having looked at these artefacts and why? https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/physical-theatre-exploring-the-slap/1/steps/48105
[33] I have documented the counter-intuitive 'eventness' of this phenomenon elsewhere (Pitches 2019: 185).
[34] 'Theatre and the Coronavirus – a speech-act in nine episodes' Episode 1: https://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/v/interweaving-performance-cultures/online-projects/Theater-and-the-Coronavirus/Episode-1/index.html