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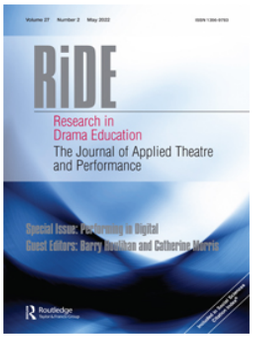

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Curious about theatre: finding the human connection in a digital learning project collaboration with Curious Monkey Theatre Company for applied theatre university students

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ABSTRACT
This article uses a theory of recognition and empathy to examine how human connection online is developed in digital applied theatre practice and pedagogy. Theatre activities and university teaching were challenged during the pandemic 2020. Here, the work of Curious Monkey Theatre Company and a collaborative digital learning project for university students, Curious About Theatre, show responsive adaptations. Artistic Director Amy Golding describes the online performance and creative activities with community groups. The author's strategies designed to substitute in-person embodied student learning in community-based practice outline how an applied theatre lecturer taught in a virtual classroom through technology-enhanced learning (TEL).

KEYWORDS
Community theatre; applied theatre; theatre pedagogy; teaching theatre; teaching online

Many of you will have a story like this, where plans changed in 2020.

This article looks at how applied theatre practice – and the teaching of it – adapted in a pandemic. In March, I arranged a visit for theatre degree students to attend a performance with Q and A of Curious Monkey Theatre Company's new play 'Here' about people seeking sanctuary. The play, written by Lindsay Rodden and directed by Amy Golding, was at the start of its UK tour. The after-show event would have allowed Northumbria University applied theatre students to engage 'behind the scenes' with the company's creative processes. The visit was part of a wider initiative with classroom-based learning and artist workshops I collaboratively designed with the company to facilitate understanding of their participatory projects and freelance roles Figures 1 and 2.

Of course, none of this took place because something more important happened. When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down theatres and live-contact teaching in many parts of England, digital substitutions were designed for activities that usually occurred through live, embodied contact.

Although the tour of their play did not go ahead and theatres went dark, Curious Monkey Theatre Company continued to operate throughout 2020. Participatory work with groups of refugees and migrants on their 'Arriving' project and young care leavers

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Figure 1. Participatory activity with Curious Monkey and Happiness Project. All photos reproduced with permission of Curious Monkey.

in the 'Leaving' project shifted to online and socially distanced delivery. Their new play 'Here' was swiftly adapted and filmed as a Zoom performance, screened in June 2020 as part of a refugee arts festival.

At my university in the North East of England, all teaching went digital, save for a couple of optimistic weeks at the start of the new academic year in September 2020. Online learning through a technology-enhanced learning (TEL) platform was adopted. All in-person learning about theatre, student projects and collaborative experience in schools and community groups was halted.

When writing in early 2021, digital substitutions for real-world spaces are still in use due to the pandemic and lockdown. After months of social distance, we crave a return to embodied contact, but theatres are still closed. With university studios and classrooms empty of bodies, many students indicate that digital replacements for in-person learning are their second choice.

This article addresses the impact of the pandemic within applied theatre practice and on learning *about* applied theatre, each essentially founded in relational processes. Artistic Director of Curious Monkey Amy Golding highlights that 'human connection is the bit that's really important to our work' (2020). Teaching applied theatre reflects this priority. Given the imposition of digital mediation during the pandemic, I reflect on how we can sustain human relations through online communication. The article will discuss Curious

Figure 2. Theatre set model for 'Here'. In December 2020, the set was still standing in the empty, 'ghost lit' theatre at Northern Stage, nine months after the scheduled opening.

About Theatre, a digital learning project collaborating with Curious Monkey that allowed students to benefit from close ties with socially engaged artists. Students learn how the company continues to nurture and value relationships with participants through socially-distanced creative projects. The article also discusses the substitute learning strategies designed to sustain relationships with communities online, so students can continue to build expertise through the experience of applied theatre practices.

The article draws on and quotes from an online 'in conversation' in December 2020 between Amy Golding and myself. This event was framed within a university research event and attended by students of applied theatre, lecturers and researchers.

To debate issues of participation and relationality in the article, I propose the concept of 'recognition' to help understand how these adapted digital interactions operate. Whilst more challenging to create, I suggest that human connections of quality are possible through digital collaboration, evidenced within all links explored here (between theatre artist and practitioner, lecturer and student). The analysis draws on ideas from psychoanalysis about 'recognition' (Benjamin 2018) to describe the nature of these relationships and how they can operate effectively. A notion of recognition describes how we can first attune empathetically to understand the experience of another, then use a sense of distinctive *otherness* that can more productively build a mutual sensibility. Relationality expresses how relationships can be sustained even in digital form.

In my exploration of applied theatre artists (2020) I discussed (amongst other qualities) the notion of empathy within how artists attuned to community participants. This was common across all practitioners I surveyed, enabling them to make positive creative connections. By making themselves available to – and engaging with – community participants through collaborative creative practices respectfully and with (personal and social) responsibility, the artists also gain rewards through the work. The ability to be responsive was manifest through political and inter-personal aspects of their work, informing activist and humanist aims and outcomes. Responsivity also expressed the motivations that drew artists to work in community contexts. Many artists evidently made an empathetic connection through creative practice and developing relationships with the (usually disadvantaged) people with whom they worked. This empathy was at the heart of the work, informing their responsiveness.

The ability to 'recognise' the other is a concept defined as *additional* to a process of empathy (Benjamin 2018). In this model 'empathy' can be used to express how we can seek to understand the other without needing to be understood, whereas 'recognition' emphasises the distinction between self and other, which then brings mutual affirmation. Recognition, in this interpretation, acknowledges an inter-subjective process where each is able to celebrate and value the other. In semantic terms these terms could be reversed, but the paradigm here suggests a model that can be useful here.

I propose that there is a specific quality in inter-relating (summed up by 'recognition' as opposed to 'empathy') useful to analyse how we relate, particularly within a digital context. Empathy remains important to the human connection as an emotionally informed perspective supports the ability to imagine the life of another. But the *recognition* in this interpretation more usefully expresses an approach that enables relational exchange from differing subject positions. The connection can deepen, share understanding and enhance positive outcomes for all parties. Whilst also applicable to in-person transactions, recognition is of particular relevance in the events discussed here. I

suggest that practitioners at Curious Monkey extend recognition to community participants during the lockdown, just as valuably as they do in person. And recognition of the student experience informed my approach to online teaching, which I believe contributes to more careful and effective management of their learning about applied theatre.

The structure of the article starts with an initial exploration of digital applied theatre practice and the body. We then consider Curious Monkey's adaptation to digital practice during the pandemic. Using Golding's own dilemmas about how to respond to the needs of participants in 2020, boundaries between social theatre and 'charity' work are discussed through the metaphor of bread and roses. I then go on to explore how learning about applied theatre expertise was adapted to substitute student work experience and mentoring through the project Curious About Theatre. I discuss details of challenges, barriers and opportunities in the virtual classroom and remote teaching. For both contexts of participant/artist and student/lecturer, I conclude that the notion of recognition reflects how digital online connections were able to sustain relationships of value.

I start with a confession of prejudice.

Virtual replaces the in-person connection

My view as a non-native digital user is that communication through a device is second best. It mediates and potentially diminishes what we know as a participatory, creative activity. Digital online links via Zoom or TEL prevent touch, the presence of bodies and being alive with each other. We can communicate on-screen but are 'isolated' in our 'rooms' (even language has been mediatised). The work of a community theatre company and a university theatre department value and facilitate in-person, living exchange that nurtures strong group communication. Ironically for the current times, a key aim of applied theatre is to reduce 'social distancing'. But in the presence of COVID-19 risks, we must avoid the bodies, touch and breath of others. How can online contact substitute the embodied work that happens in participatory and active pedagogic contexts?

Reflecting on Curious Monkey's work in 2020, Golding highlighted the paradox of digital connection when we are not in a bodily relationship. She described the use of Zoom to meet with participants 'so that we could still connect with everybody when we couldn't'. Within virtual, online, digital relationships, a connection is possible, but the *connection* in bodily form is also not possible. The irony of being together – but not – is a tantalising idea of a frustrating reality for theatre practices that are embedded within communities.

Anton Franks writes about the 'multimodal affordances of the human form' when calling for greater consideration of the body and 'bodyliness' (his preferred term for theorisation). He noted how, in drama education, 'the physical presence of diverse, energetic, creatively expressive and sometimes recalcitrant students has been one of the most impressive aspects of my experience' (2015, 312). He champions a holistic embrace of mind, body, thoughts, feelings and co-presence, going on to state,

> The idea of the teacher as involved in teaching and learning as a process of complex mediation is not to regard it as an abstracted process, therefore, but rather to see the implication of the cultural world as mediated in the making of signs and meanings. (2015, 313)

Working from home for nearly a year, I find myself thinking about the absence of bodyliness in teaching and missing its energising sustenance. I note how holistic relationships and communication are further 'mediated' when co-presence is reduced to a digitised voice, head and shoulders on a computer screen.

And yet, in some ways, we remain very present for each other. The sudden adaptation to online teaching platforms as the alternative drama studio/classroom potentially resituates one as the designer of the online learning experience. We work with very different 'tools' to craft the online learning experience. New media and transmedia storytelling has created a role of 'imagineer' (an artist/designer/engineer), described as those who 'apply theatrical and performative elements to their work towards strengthening the experience and emotional reactions of the participants/audiences' Demetriou (2018, 172). The use of theatrical metaphor here is interesting. 'Immersion' in this context is said to promote an embodied experience within a virtual place. As university lecturers are now required to switch to a form of digital performance, just how far will the expedient adaptations of 2020/2021 take them? The past year has forced my use of the digital with both challenges and opportunities revealed. Whilst we may resist the engineered aspects of the role of imagineer, existing online could build creative use of the technology for inter-personal learning, even for an IT Luddite like myself.

Work experience and live briefs are a key part of applied theatre learning. This year, I have been forced to explore substitutes for the embodied knowledge that a socially-engaged project can offer a university student. How can students' facilitation skills be exercised when the all-important aspects of learning-by-doing are not possible? Can they develop personal and political awareness gained from meeting a new group who is often outside their normal social contact? James Thompson wrote recently about the importance of physical contact, noting 'how the art of being with others and creating mutually supportive relationships, does require a set of well-developed proximal skills' (2020, 481). It is a challenge for us to substitute the development of proximal skills (i.e. near to the centre of the body) when we are not able to be in the same room. Thompson goes on to say, 'the awareness of our need for physical connection and the way we learn from each other through different forms of sensory engagement has never been more acute' (2020). These issues have played out in my work over the past months.

In a bizarre start to the academic year Autumn 2020/2021, I found myself in a room with a number of students for their applied theatre module induction session, masked and socially distanced. They were eagerly anticipating the opportunity to work beyond the walls of the university studios and run workshops with 'real' community participants. They had not been 'together' for the final three months of the previous academic year. Not all the groups were present as some had COVID symptoms or were isolated as they lived with those who tested positive. Our usual 'get to know each other' activities were curtailed. We could not move around the room, shaking hands, breathing closely while laughingly interacting. We could not relax and were required to sit individually far apart. Rather than the typical 'what I did in the summer' topic, the buzz of conversation focussed on the 'unprecedented' circumstances still marking the world.

The chance to practise activities that developed their 'proximal skills' (to refer back to Thompson, above) was gone. In this new form of learning, opportunities were no longer there that would allow them to facilitate their planned workshop activities on each other as guinea pigs. They could not try out instruction and guidance, develop vocabulary,

tone, or hone their physical, interactive, embodied communication that is all important in learning about workshop engagement activities. The chance for valuable peer and tutor observation and reflection was changed, taking away much possibility to use each other as a resource to help build facilitation skills. At the start of their potential journey to being effectively applied practitioners, we were falling at the first hurdle.

Paradoxically, I felt close to students during online teaching. Operating within TEL, I thought much more about the moment-by-moment interactions in the learning journey. I carefully prepared online learning activities and considered the different modes of communication in more detail. Gallagher et al. explored the recent challenges for drama educators and 'how to establish a sense of intimacy in their now exclusively-online pedagogical work' (2020, 641). I was re-inventing a connection and closeness with students – possibly more intimate – within online delivery. As I playfully have observed since, we were, after all, present in each other's homes – even bedrooms.

Our classes in lockdown gave shape to the otherwise formless weeks where we were unable to go out or have visitors to form the usual pattern of our days. Bonding through adversity emerged. I felt sorry for this cohort and their loss of university life. Whilst this empathy was a form of care and mutual consolation for a normal life, I also recognised their particular loss where so much of their formative years had been taken away. Progression from school and into adult life had not been marked by the typical experience of exams, proms and student freshers' activities. Student feedback at the end of the academic year suggests that they noted more conscious care around learning in TEL. I return to the discussion of the design of online digital learning projects in applied theatre and the Curious About Theatre collaboration after the following section.

Curious Monkey's Theatre work

Here we consider how an applied theatre company adapted its work during the pandemic. Amy Golding is the Artistic Director of Curious Monkey Theatre Company (CM). She reflects that 'human connection is the bit that is really important to our work and it's been about finding ways during lockdown during the pandemic to be able to continue that in a meaningful way'. As introduced at the start of the article, CM was about to premiere their new play 'Here' in March 2020. Theatre production forms just one strand of the company's work. They operate in close collaboration and co-creation with community groups, making 'human connectiosn' which are formed through long-term creative processes.

Golding cites three strategies for how they work with participants; first building on cultural experiences, then using creative participation to enact an outcome of influencing change. Their 'Leaving' project has worked with care leavers for many years, including an ong-oing group 'Troupe' for looked-after young people. CM has used some digital technology within the creative practice for many years, such as '360' films that use virtual reality to immerse the audience in dramatised experiences of a young person in care, aimed to lobby for changes to care systems. Their 'Care about Care' multi-agency conference with creative workshops, run in-person in 2019, adapted to online in 2020. Presentations by academics form part of the online learning research resources located within CM's website, a further digital outcome to the collaborative Curious About Theatre project.

CM is a Theatre of Sanctuary and its 'Happiness Project' is part of a Co-Creating Change initiative. Funding allows participants with CM's Arriving project to design and run their own projects that bring happiness and promote well-being. Plans for salsa, massage and a cabaret event for older people were put on hold because of COVID, but an in-person, socially distanced yoga retreat in summer 2020 was led by a yoga teacher in the group who can't work because of her status.

Golding describes CM's participatory practices and how strong connections through creative collaboration inform their professional touring theatre productions,

> There's people involved really deeply in that process all the way through … [… indicates an edit] It is about longevity, working with people for a really long time and building trust. The way we did that in 'Arriving' was, we spent maybe 8 months with people before we even were thinking about what play would be or be about or how we were developing it. That was a lot of hanging out in in places and spaces where people were. We work with associate artists who have lived experience from refugee backgrounds so we would hang out with West End Refugee Service or in the Comfrey Project which is a gardening project for people who are seeking sanctuary and get to know people.
>
> And then we would invite people to come and have cultural experiences with us and creative experiences with us. So, the first point of call, we always take people to the theatre because to ask somebody to come and be involved in making theatre with you when they may not have the context, they may not have been into the theatre ever, or they may not be into the theatre in this country or experienced UK theatre. That's a kind of social thing, it's a getting to know people thing, it's a building trust thing, but it's also, 'this is what theatre can be, and these are many different genres'. We take people see all sorts of things, from dance to physical theatre, to serious plays, and much more contemporary stuff. It is really important to do that before inviting people in to take part in workshops, because they need to know who we are. They need to know that they are going to have a good time. They feel comfortable in a theatre building before we bring them into a workshop space or rehearsal room to have a creative process.
>
> One of the really important things for us in working with that particular group is that we're making a show that's not about telling those people's stories. I've made verbatim work in the past, this play was not verbatim. When you are an asylum seeker, you are asked for your story many times, that might not be believed. Or you might be asked to give evidence for that. We were very careful around the conversations we were having with people … we were looking at something from a distance and using the safety of the characters and other stories to distance our conversations.
>
> We worked with adult groups and with Byker Primary School with a group of children who are from backgrounds from all over the world, including Newcastle. We're still working with the adults now – we meet them every week. Some of them are developing to be artists in their own right. And some of them just want to come to see bits of theatre still or have a social with us.

Curious Monkey's response when theatres closed in 2020

The performance of the new play 'Here' by Lyndsay Rodden was in the final stages of production in March 2020 when the implications of COVID 19 broke into the rehearsal room. The company was forced to review plans. The coach trip was cancelled for the residents from Byker, an inner-city estate in Newcastle where the play is set. The educational event with students was abandoned. A book made by the writer with co-creators was to be

given out to audience members the company hoped to meet along the tour, booked to theatre venues including Sheffield, Derby, Leeds (Figures 3 and 4).

Like many theatre producers, CM made plans to film their play. The company was due to perform at a refugee arts festival that moved online. Scripts in translation, designed as a synopsis takeaway for audience members, were published on the CM website. A live reading option was abandoned because of fears about bandwidth, so a version was adapted for Zoom recording. Actors were able to perform from their locked down homes in Norwich, London, Newcastle and Whitley Bay when there was no way of getting together. The substitute version blended actors filmed in isolation, interwoven with animation and AV material that had been made for on-stage projection, using an original score and soundscape. Golding discusses the writer's adaptation,

> Lindsay did a really good job of how she edited the script to some of the things that we couldn't see physically had to be talked about. There was a lot of direct address, storytelling to the audience anyway, so it allowed us to do more of that – describing some of those moments rather than seeing them. We cut it down a lot as well, because you just can't watch something online for as long as you can sit in the theatre for and live in that moment. There was lots of stuff that were real discoveries for us as director and writer in that process … being economical with what we saw.

The resulting performance had a sense of intimacy and directness that perhaps would not have been experienced in the live performance. The Zoom performance was made available within the Curious About Theatre learning project. The company is able to produce the play for a limited tour in 2022.

Figure 3. The 'dancing' moment in performances of 'Here' by Lindsay Rodden. The first is a rehearsal photo for the Curious Monkey show, cancelled due to the pandemic in March 2020. The Zoom performance for the online festival summer 2020 gives additional resonance to a moment when the characters share an embodied experience of dancing. The two images here show how each appeared, the moment becoming internalised by the actors within Zoom. Connections between individual actors in their digital space are co-witnessed by each solitary viewer.

Figure 4. The 'dancing' moment in performances of 'Here' by Lindsay Rodden. The first is a rehearsal photo for the Curious Monkey show cancelled due to the pandemic in March 2020. The Zoom performance for the online festival summer 2020 gives additional resonance to a moment when the characters share an embodied experience of dancing. The two images here show how each appeared, the moment becoming internalised by the actors within Zoom. Connections between individual actors in their digital space are co-witnessed by each solitary viewer.

Enduring the pandemic in theatres

The pandemic forced changes in the theatre industry, most commonly illustrated by empty auditoria, unemployed actors and technicians. But issues are different for community embedded companies like CM which are closely engaged with its 'audience' rather than in a (red velvet-seated) mass. There are no overhead costs for an unused venue, front-of-house staff, nor loss of income based on bar and ice cream sales. Building-based theatres were struggling to keep contact with their audiences (significantly the main income source) with online offers of recorded performance. In January 2021, Lyn Gardner wrote 'now is the time to invest in the future by making work for the present. And work that can be made safely, rather than clinging to the increasingly doubtful notion that the only way forward is to open up theatres as soon as possible' (The Stage 2021). Even for larger organisations, engagement practices in theatres continued throughout the closure of public buildings. And small companies are more swiftly adaptive. Longer-term plans for CM outlined by Golding point to working within the hyper-local, the possibility of 'safer' pop-up theatre venues, using digital applications for the collaboratively made creative product,

> really investing in the building of that and seeing this piece of work that's made there and made with the people there. I think we will still have relationships with theatres, but we also thinking much more outside of the theatre building. The pandemic had challenged their ways of working for theatre production, and also in relation to participation.

Socially engaged, participatory theatre is likely to be responding to increased disadvantage for their 'audience' as the pandemic hit disproportionately to those already in need. Some organisations shifted even further into a community support role; for example, Leeds company Slung Low used their building and human resources to build a food bank for their area. In Newcastle, Open Clasp joined West End Women and Girls

Centre to make and deliver soup. Clean Break Theatre Company in London raised funds to provide laptops and data to allow some of the women they worked with to continue to engage with artists. Organisations recognised how they were part of essential services that support vulnerable individuals.

Curious Monkey used Zoom throughout 2020 to meet with groups, including sharing meals,

> we did lots of deliveries of recipes and food and creative activities and various things so that we could still connect with everybody when we couldn't. Food is a really important thing to our work. Whenever we go to the theatre whenever we have a workshop, we always eat together and we always talk over food … being in a room creating with a group of people and creating the right atmosphere and eating together and going to watch things together is really huge, so finding ways to adapt to that has been interesting.

Support for artists has become an area of even greater need than pre-pandemic but initiatives have used the capacity for digital networking to set up training and exchange of online strategies. The excellent work of Collective Encounters (based in Liverpool) reflects a generous collaborative approach inherent in the values of community arts practices, evidenced through their offer of training and shared guides about digital practices (Figure 5).

The Gulbenkian Foundation was already investigating a civic role for the arts in 2020 when the pandemic hit, noting how many organisations were engaging positively with what they define as a 'shift from participation to co-creation' (cited in their website). The report (Macfarland, Agace, and Hayes 2020) draws up principles for what they observed as a characteristic of 'purposeful' arts organisations and response to the impact of the pandemic, many of which concur with the values of applied theatre and aims of CM. They recommend reviewing how and with whom organisations work to, 'deeply embed co-creation methods into future work', highlighting Black Lives Matter and a

Figure 5. Curious Monkey and Happiness Project group participants shared a meal as part of their creative activities on Zoom when they were unable to be together in person because of lockdown.

> chance to not only be more representative of our communities, but share power more equitability. The crisis has demonstrated that there is a practical and strategic, as well as a moral, case to be made for these new models of dispersed leadership and shared ownership.

They note on their web pages,

> This role goes far beyond digital and remote provision of creative experiences; while online engagement has been a factor in many organisations' responses to the crisis, but [*sic*] it is just one aspect of a much bigger picture. Our research has shone a light on the stories of creative solidarity, civic responsibility and public cultural value that arts organisations provide, contributing to vital social infrastructure and community resilience. These stories highlight both how arts organisations need active and engaged communities to thrive; and how individuals need creativity and cultural experiences to lead connected and fulfilling lives. They demonstrate that what matters in the arts are not objects, events, or activities in isolation, but the web of relationships between people that make culture happen.
>
> Gulbenkian Foundation (n.d.)

This emphasis on relationships is echoed by Golding's view that 'being in a room creating with a group of people and creating the right atmosphere and eating together and going to watch things together is really huge'. Here description of the connections that make up their relationships are multi-facetted, including an affective notion of 'the right atmosphere'. Helen Nicholson writes how 'Affect is relational, contagious and goes viral, moving between people and their material environment, as an atmosphere, mood or structure of feeling, and often in ways that are not understood or even recognised cognitively but experienced, embodied or sensed' (2017, 108). Her description is nuanced now in 2021, with the unintended resonance of the 'viral' quality of effect. This article explores some of the ways complex affective relations occur between artists and theatre participants or lecturers and students in a digital arena.

Bread and/or Roses? Social work in applied theatre

The work of CM employees in 2020 illustrates their emphasis on social engagement. As with other examples above, CM continued to find ways to connect with participants, taking food and activity parcels to the doors of group members, loaning laptops to allow the continuation of group activity online. At this point, the focus of their community theatre activities emphasised social support rather than a development of engagement with arts practices, posing questions of emphasis.

The phrase 'bread and roses' is associated with the trade union movement, calling for entitlement for the least advantaged in society. It has origins in emancipation and trade union activism,

> What the woman who labors [*sic*] wants is the right to live, not simply exist – the right to life as the rich woman has the right to life, and the sun and music and art. You have nothing that the humblest worker has not a right to have also. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too. Help, you women of privilege, give her the ballot to fight with.
>
> Schneiderman (1912, 288)

The call for justice and essential life needs include 'sun and music and art', resonating with the wide-ranging activities of eating together, creative exploration, yoga, etc., surrounding CM's participatory work for the 'Arriving' project. During the pandemic, many theatre

companies found themselves responding to the more fundamental need for 'bread', in some cases literally.

Golding describes the dilemma of balancing what she calls the 'charity' aspects of the CM's work, noting choices about how to prioritise resources. The company funded a digital wifi connection to allow group participants to attend online sessions,

> We are relying on data when they've got limited money. They're living on £36 a week, some people, if you're seeking asylum. And how do we make all of that [online activity] accessible to everybody? We've managed to do that, but that's involved refocusing funds in lots of different ways. And people getting food to people. There was a moment where we were asking, 'actually, what do people really need right now? Do they really need an online salsa class or do they need to be connected and eat culturally appropriate food, which isn't available in their nearest food bank?'

She notes how making a choice between making an offer of either 'bread or roses' is clear in times of need,

> There was lots of charitable stuff. We're a charity and a theatre company and I think that the charity part of the theatre company really took precedent at that moment. And actually, we would think much more about that than making anything theatrical … For some people we are something the one consistent thing that they come to every week, because of the chaotic nature of the systems that they're living within. There was a much more of a need in that moment. That was literally week one [of lockdown]. We were driving around devices and trying to get laptops donated by tech companies to give to those that didn't have them. We were ramping up our activity rather than doing less. I think we realized by about October 2020 that we had to slow down, that we couldn't keep going at that pace. When I look back on March to October, we did a hell of a lot of activity. We didn't think it was going to go on as long as it did, so we've had to kind of just slow down a little bit. But at that moment it just felt very right and what was needed. There's only five of us in the organization so it is easy come on a Zoom call together and make decisions and then get out in our cars and make it happen.

Golding notes that choices for CM may be different long-term,

> It's an interesting dilemma that we're always facing and we have so many conversations in our team questioning what is our role as a theatre company. More and more when there's a lack of other support or cuts or austerity. We ask whether there is anyone else to provide that support, so we do a lot of signposting whenever we can outside of the creative stuff and the art stuff, but there's people that slip through gaps. You know, there's care leavers who we work with, who aren't involved in the children's services teams anymore, who we end up helping them – to get a van to move house for example, to access mental health services and going with them because anybody. And organizing childcare for somebody because they are single mother and it's the only way that they can get involved in the activity that we're doing. There's a lot of pastoral.

Consideration for participant well-being and support has long been a feature of the company. With the Troupe project, CM has a permanent youth worker employed. The staff had all had training about mental health support.

> We're not mental health workers, but those things come up and I think when you when you work really closely with people, build trust and create an environment where people feel safe, things come up. You know that people share things with you, or people ask you for help because they've got a good relationship with you because they feel safe and they feel trust. And then what do we do with that? … I'm definitely doing things that I never

> thought I'd do as a theatre director such as going around to somebody's house. They can't connect with the world and we're in a pandemic, so of course I'm just going to leave my desk and go and do that on that day, because it needs doing …
>
> The charity part of our organization is becoming much more in the forefront. That's responding to the world, to the need. If we're investing in those people or care leavers who aren't getting that support from somewhere else, there's also the opportunity for them to become leaders, to become artists. There is an opportunity for them to be doing something brilliant that we can all benefit from … It is great if they can be leaders within their communities and that we can support that in whatever way we can. And that's not always through the arts.

Sustaining the welfare for all during participation is a factor that also applies to university students, as I go on to explore in the next section on the digital adaptations and approaches to teaching during the pandemic.

Teaching applied theatre in lockdown

This section focuses on how the Curious About Theatre project enabled applied theatre students to continue practice-based learning in conjunction with practitioners. The necessity for online learning structures in 2020/2021 was disappointing for students' expectations, whilst presenting challenges to lecturers seeking to replace the benefits of experiential learning. As with other practices, skills development in applied theatre benefits richly from real-world activity to supplement theoretical study. I have written elsewhere about the broader 'expertise' demanded of an applied theatre practitioner (Hepplewhite 2020). This is a complex practice that demands multiple learning approaches for the novice to build and develop. Embodied, interactive skills are developed in collaboration with community groups and artists. There, the students learn about how to *comport* themselves in diverse social contexts relating to health, care, education, criminal justice (for example) that may be outside their experience. They gain professional, employability skills such as protocols, ethics and specialist vocabularies. Working artists mentor and demonstrate current practice in activism, cultural and social organisations. Students learn how to talk to older people, children, and professionals. They witness the realities of social discrimination and disadvantage that underpin and motivate so much of applied theatre practice. Their prejudice and unconscious bias can be challenged by meeting 'audiences' and communities underserved by the arts. Skills are gained by instruction, research, observation of role models, embedded through a guided process of reflection, de-brief, analysis and theorisation to support the lived experience of practice.

The 'Curious About Theatre' learning project was designed in anticipation of lockdown for university undergraduate students studying a module on applied theatre practice. It included opportunities to view the Zoom version of Curious Monkey's play 'Here', online conference participation, artist 'visits', staff and student collaboration to design a learning area about the company. Co-authorship of 'blended' teaching in synchronous and non-synchronous activity was based on the university's TEL platform and the company's website. What started as a substitute for being in rooms together learning about established professional practices was augmented so students could learn how methods for community-related activities were adapted in the pandemic. The developments provided the potential for a richer and more complex learning collaboration.

Digital connection and dis-connect for students

There are significant problems associated with digital learning engagement, despite advantages discussed here. In their late-teens and early 20s, many students are still negotiating their sense of self and place in the world and their political and civic engagement. Whilst as young people, their digital knowledge is substantial, here participation is of a very different nature. Young people are more susceptible to social pressures, particularly regarding self-image, impacting how they use the internet and social media. For online classes, they do not place their self-consciousness by the metaphorical classroom door. They can feel exposed by drawing the focus of attention when contributing on screen. Many do not want to turn on their cameras, sometimes claiming they do not work. Their voices can be shut down in self-editing.

From the teaching perspective, lecturers can find themselves 'delivering' to a dark, silent screen even when participation is requested. There is a notable exaggeration of the familiar 'same hands going up' patterns of classroom behaviours. Approaches, such as 'cold-calling' lure contributions from less forward students in the live classes, but these tactics for teaching can be less effective in online spaces. It can be easier to hide in the virtual classroom, and 2020, more students may feel inclined to withdraw.

Our well-being is dependent on connections with others. A lively social life is usually part of being a young person. Links to others in the 'real world' can help combat difficulties that students were experiencing during the pandemic. Some stayed with family, others in a shared house, and many were experiencing negative feelings due to lockdown in student accommodation or (because of infection) required to self-isolate because of positive COVID tests (theirs or one of many potential housemates). Students with jobs may be furloughed from their regular contact in part-time employment such as bars or restaurants, where others in retail or supermarkets are front-line workers throughout. Student support services gave testimony to many suffering anxiety and depression. Young people, in general, were accused of/actually flaunting guidelines through a sense of immunity, freely socially mixing throughout the pandemic.

Digital poverty is a significant barrier for many community theatre participants. Many of the students are also struggling with the shift to online teaching because of issues of digital discrimination, poverty or shame about the domestic setting. Without access to their laptop, some used a phone to connect to classes phone, limiting their ability to view full screen or access linked documents. Some may not have a connection away from adults or home-schooling siblings. One student would sit in a car to attend taught sessions. A girlfriend or sister often shared the bedroom that had become the student's classroom. Many found it hard to find a quiet, private space.

Given these roller-coaster conditions, regular teaching could provide a steadying effect for students. With the Curious About Theatre project, they were learning about creative activity and how others were living through the year. They heard about the potential to use Zoom to host workshops, which encouraged them to see their recent frustrations with having to transfer online in perspective. They heard from CM about community participants who needed to have laptops and data provision deposited at the door to enable their connection to be realised. This enabled students to feel connected to the wider world and realise the social circumstances of others.

Advantages offered by online engagement are common for student teaching and the work of CM. Accessibility through distanced and digital learning offers opportunity. The virtual classroom stops being a local, socially-distanced substitute and offers potentially global engagement. After an extended Christmas break that locked down students across the UK, I found students logging in to classes from the Czech Republic, UAE and Norway. The connections were still from domestic locations, but their distance and difference encouraged more attention to cultural diversity, use of language and cultural references in class activity.

Golding also reflected on how online activity had advantages relating to geographical challenges faced by migrants,

> People get Zoom fatigue and all of that, but there's also been some incredible things about it connecting with people from other countries who now have joined our weekly group. There's a there's a guy who lives in Gateshead now, but the rest of his family currently live in Sarajevo and his daughter has been able to come to the same workshop as him every week, so there's a really beautiful connection that would never have happened if we weren't running things currently online.

Two further learning projects had a similar impact. A 'digital' work experience for students allowed them to build skills in design and planning and facilitation of an online theatre course in the university-based project for mental health service users. A 'twinning' pen-pal exchange project with a primary school class co-designed anti-racist resources that use drama, sending video workshop packages for the teacher to use in class.

In the school project, the letters exchange and photographs of children actually doing the workshop activities designed by the students enabled the feel of real-world engagement. Although video links were not possible that directly involved the children, students valued how the personalities of the children were revealed in the letters and pictures shared via the post. At the end of module presentations that analysed the school project, one student highlighted how a chance sighting in a video call from the classroom with the teacher offered useful insight. The background showed how children used emoticons stickers to show their moods which echoed the visual games we had devised in the university virtual classroom chat facility. Such details were a creative combination that combined media vocabularies with the knowledge that can only be gained from 'being there'.

Surveys with students used short questionnaires at the start and later stages of the Curious About Theatre project. Unanimously, the response indicated that their understanding of the role of digital work within a community-engaged theatre company improved. Students had been able to contribute to the development of the online learning zone web resource. They had the opportunity to meet with Golding, hearing directly about the company's work. Hearing about motivations first-hand can enable students to find their vocabularies and more complex rationale for what they basically articulate as 'helping people'. Student feedback suggests that an artist talk from a graduate who now works freelance with CM was a preferred way to understand real-world practices. In relation to their work-readiness and employability skills, students scored themselves more highly at the end of the project than at the start.

Conclusion: relationships and recognition in the digital

Here I return to Golding's assertion that 'human connection is the bit that's really important to our work'. This article outlines how contact between lecturer and student, student and professional, applied theatre practitioner and participants circulates around human connections. Human connection can be threatened by physical distance and absence, such as within digital online solutions utilised in the pandemic. We saw mitigations and surprises through the community projects and the learning strategies outlined here. To ascertain what is valuable, productive and enduring in these human connections during the digital intervention, I offer the model of 'recognition' (Benjamin 2018). The application of recognition here distinguishes a sense of distinctive *otherness* that can more productively, drawing from an empathetic attunement to build a mutual sensibility. This serves as a useful tool in the pedagogic exchanges between lecturer and applied theatre student. It can also express the professional connection with community participants demonstrated by applied theatre practitioners.

Golding responded to a question during the online event to explain 'why she did it?', highlighting empathy as a factor in the work,

> I guess we're doing it because we see inequality. In the world, it's a kind of our way of addressing that and theatre for me is a really powerful tool in in telling a story that that people might not hear if it wasn't told on that platform, it's a really powerful way of experiencing empathy. When we take pieces of theatre or 360 film to a conference, often the those are the things and that's the moment that makes them want to do something, that makes them want to make a change because people feel empathy with somebody's story in that moment. So, I think that's the skill that I have. And as an activist, I want to use the skill that have in theatre making, to use it in that way for social change.

Social activities described (above) by Golding, such as going to the theatre and eating together were seen as important forerunners to the creative exchange and co-creative activities that lead to participants having an input in creating theatre. The company has honed a 'method' that works through respectful social exchange to build relationships before inviting creative participation. Empathetic understanding forms part of an emotional response to oppression or discrimination that participants such as refugees experience in their lives. A notion of recognition goes further, enabling all joint activity to be built on a sensibility that support positive outcomes for all.

CM artists engaged with what Golding framed (above) as 'charitable' elements of community practice. The acts of kindness were necessary to enact for the theatre practitioners who (amongst many others in society) found themselves close to people in fundamental need during the pandemic. They had relationships with their groups and individuals, seeing primary needs at that moment, and they were empathetic to the difficult circumstances in the pandemic that disadvantage had forced. Understanding those primary concerns reflected an empathetic understanding but was not the usual foundation for the relationships with the group. Relationships established with groups through their usual, in-person work were built on *recognition* that moves beyond empathy. Perhaps it is for this reason that CM operated only temporarily as charitable doners, why they, as creative practitioners are more comfortable as creative collaborators who 'recognise' otherness as part of the relational transactions that go beyond the charitable. The mutual

understanding gained through recognition of otherness can nurture a more egalitarian relationship within creative practices.

Recognition has enabled my online teaching in the past eleven months. It helped me make choices in my teaching design that acknowledged the student with empathy and with respect for their agency. The openness to collaboration from Amy Golding and Curious Monkey has allowed me to progress with creativity just as my circumstances were more locked down and I was forced to engage with a new vocabulary of the digital. Their work has been generously shared with the students and benefitted future practitioners.

This has been part of my lockdown story. I hope you are able to get together – in person or digitally – to reflect on stories of managing human connections in applied theatre during the pandemic.

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