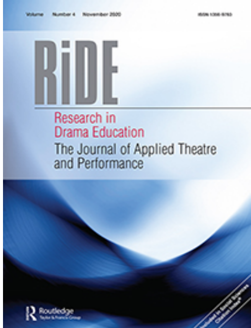

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Response to COVID-19
Zooming in on online process drama

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During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown both authors were experimenting with facilitating longer complex process dramas on online platforms. We offered participants the opportunity to reflect on the situation we were facing as individuals, as a society and as humanity. We worked with different levels of university students in two different languages and in two different countries. In this article, we briefly present what we did, then we analyse our work and generalise conclusions, focusing on the following special aspects of doing process drama online: planning, facilitation, ways of telling a story, framing, distancing, protection, conventions and Teacher-in-Role.

KEYWORDS
Process drama; drama in education; online drama; COVID-19; Teacher-in-role

Our motivation

Most drama educators faced grave challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our field requires live action, and participants need to co-create socially in a shared space. From one day to another, we found ourselves in a situation where we had to create theatre and drama from an isolated room, where we were sitting on our own and seeing others only through a screen. Space was not shared any more, and all activities were reduced to two-dimensional images on our laptops. Many thought that doing drama in such circumstances was impossible.

The authors of this piece are university lecturers in Norway and Hungary, and both have a special interest in process drama. When investigating how other drama practitioners coped with the situation internationally (e.g. by following the internal IDEA mailings coordinated by John O'Toole, prospero.digital by C&T,[1] Kandenze,[2] Te Rito Toi,[3] CREATE webinar by the University of Sydney[4] and others), and nationally (especially when following Facebook groups where practitioners shared tips and tricks with each other), we found many different great examples of drama games, role plays, improvisation games and other similar activities. However, we found just a few attempts at conducting longer process dramas online, some of which were published a decade ago (e.g. Davis, 2009).

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Our motivation was to set up such processes in the online space that reflect on the situation we as individuals, as a society and as humanity were facing. We both developed an online process drama and tested it out with groups of university students. We framed these sessions as action research, joint explorations, where we asked participants to give feedback on what 'worked' and what did not.

Since neither of us had access to a team of technologists or designers and we had to respond to the new circumstances relatively quickly (like most drama teachers around the world), our research focus was to identify work forms that do not require too much technical preparation. In other words, we sought easily accessible ways of working together that would trigger the *imagination* of our participants. Here, we offer our experience for analysis, briefly presenting what we did, then analysing the work and drawing general conclusions about the special aspects of doing process drama online.

'Is this art?' – an online process drama tested in Norway

This drama lesson was tested out by Cziboly with second-year BA drama students (18 participants, of whom 4 were exchange students from China and 1 from Belgium) and the first-year MA drama students (4 students & 1 teacher colleague) at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.

The drama took participants to a fictional small North-Italian town during the days of lockdown. A Statue of Liberty[5] stands on the town's main square; we discuss why this could be an important symbol for all members of the community. In the role of the City Council, in addition to online crisis management, we need to deal with a disturbing incident: the previous night someone broke lockdown regulations and vandalised the symbolic statue. Out of our role, we discuss in detail how the statue was vandalised.

The perpetrator, a student from the city, is caught, and back in our roles again, we decide what to do with her/him. The mayor's office sends her/him a letter, but a week later, the letter is returned with a few words scribbled on it in red: 'Idiots. This is art.' We discuss what we think about this.

A few days later in fictitious time, we attend an online press conference where the participants take on the role of journalists from different types of media and ask the perpetrator (Teacher-in-Role, then a participant) anything they want. Following the press conference, the participants as journalists write headlines, then one-sentence Facebook comments as responses to these headlines. Finally, the headlines and the comments are transformed into a contemporary poem.

'Lockdown helpline' – an online process drama tested in Hungary

Bethlenfalvy tested out a drama lesson that allowed the participants to reflect directly on the lockdown situation within a fictional frame. Participants of the research were 16 teachers completing a post-graduate drama education diploma and 12 MA English teacher-trainee students from the Károli University, while a group of 11 BA theatre education students from the University of Theatre and Film Arts also took part in the research.

The facilitator steps into the role of director of the Lockdown Helpline group and addresses the participants as colleagues. He asks for their advice: he has received a link to a strange video[6] and cannot decide if the person is having any serious issues, or if

the link was sent accidentally. Out of role, he asks the participants to reflect on the situation, then asks them to work in smaller groups on messages that the Lockdown Helpline has received from people of different ages. The groups write the texts of either video or voice messages, sent by a six-year-old, a twelve-year-old, someone in their forties and a pensioner. These messages are shared and discussed while the facilitator draws a problem tree.[7] The group reflects on the similarities and differences between the possible problems of the different age groups as well as the individual and universal aspects of each message.

The group chooses which problem to continue with and who they would like to talk to. There is a quick thought shower session about what questions they can ask and what suggestions they can make. The facilitator takes on the chosen person's role, and one of the participants in the role of a Helpline worker conducts an improvised online discussion with him. The drama lesson ends with the participants sending a message in response to any of the four messages that they devised during the lesson.

What works in an online space and what does not?

In the following section, we will pay special attention to the differences in and challenges of doing a process drama online, as compared with working in a traditional 'offline' way. The following considerations and observations are purposely generalised, they are not exhaustive and are based solely on our own experience.

Both of us welcome the spontaneity of O'Neill's (1995) process drama, which relies on live interaction and on monitoring the responses of participants, but our experience was that working in such a way was greatly constrained online. Since we could not use a shared space and what we mostly saw were faces (or, when in action, just a segment of the speaker's body and room), we had to build on the participants' imagination (Davis, 2014) to an even greater extent than usual. Both dramas offered just a structure, the 'skeleton' of the story, but the participants had to invent almost every detail: the problems they faced (how the statue was vandalised; what messages they got), how they interpreted these and how they dealt with these.

When *facilitating*, one of the greatest challenges we faced was that, since we were not sitting in a circle, it was impossible to make and keep eye contact with the participants. Addressing someone was especially difficult when the group was working in role: when we said the real name of a person, we interrupted the fiction; when we used a fictive name, many times the participants were unsure whom we are talking to (even if we agreed in fictive names in advance). We felt that a far greater level of energy than usual was necessary: the participants were just watching a screen in their homes, and at any moment, they could decide to switch to their email or social media without anyone noticing. Therefore, the process needed to be interesting and engaging at literally every moment. We found it to be a curious phenomenon: we were sitting alone in an empty room and conveying a lot of energy and activity towards a screen.

Small group work or pair work was possible in breakout rooms, but it was difficult because we did not have an overview of 'what is going on in the four corners of the room'. We could follow only one group or pair at a time, and we needed to trust that the others would adhere to the task and that, when working in fiction, they would stay in role.

However, the online space also offered a few work forms that are not accessible offline. Responding to a question, writing messages and blog entries or conducting a quick poll were all possible in the chat feature of these platforms; this allowed everyone, even the more usually silent participants the opportunity to contribute simultaneously. We also found some online platforms that offered interesting possibilities for working collaboratively.[8] Digital images proved to be highly useful to move the story forward: Bethlenfalvy used a pre-recorded video, Cziboly used photos.

According to Heathcote (2015), giving participants an overarching task that moves them 'into a position of influence' (76.) in relation to the problem offered in the drama lesson, *frames* their engagement in a productive way. O'Neill often uses Teacher-in-Role to set up a frame and create the fictional world as a starting point in her process dramas (Bethlenfalvy 2008). Our experience showed that this approach also worked really well online. We did not set up specific roles, rather introduced frames that defined the attitude and task through which the participants engaged with the problem (City Council members, Helpline workers).

Eriksson (2011) points out that '*distancing* in the process drama literature is dominantly associated with *protection*' (69); Davis (2014) uses the phrase 'protection into role' (96); Bethlenfalvy (2020) argues that the more aware the participants are of the fictional nature of the drama and their role in 'making' the fiction, the more they feel protected and eager to engage even with bigger problems. When doing drama in online platforms *distantly*, the fictional nature of the process felt much more evident, so instead of working against this alienated setting, we decided to use it. Bethlenfalvy shared a video portraying himself, while he also discussed and analysed the video together with the group in a different role, hence reinforcing the fictional nature of both roles and adding some playfulness to the drama. Cziboly asked the participants to reflect on the story they created in two steps: first, in the form of such digital contents that overly dominated our lockdown everyday lives (headlines and Facebook comments), then he asked the participants to read these sentences together *as if* it was written by a poet in locked down New York. Thus, the sentences written by Norwegian students in the role of Italian journalists were transformed into a fictive American poem, and as a result, something surprisingly 'universal' emerged from some reproduced commonplaces.

Although Neelands and Goode (2015) ' … have recognised the all-pervasive impact of the digital world in our cultural connections for each convention' (p.1.), and have even included digital world-inspired cultural connections in the descriptions of all *conventions*, five years ago they were not facing the necessity of exploring the possibilities of online adaptations. However, several conventions suggested by them that are not bound to the use of physical space can be adapted, as Cameron (2009) has already proved. Our observations mostly support his analysis.

We tried only a few 'Games' (e.g. the 'Secret leader'[9] worked well in Zoom). Rather, we experimented especially with working in roles, e.g. we tested 'Meetings', 'Interviews/interrogations', 'Hot-seating' and 'Forum-theatre'. During a workshop, Cziboly showed the 'Objects of a character' to the camera to trigger discussion. A few conventions offered even more possibilities in the online space: 'Collective drawing' could become literally collective using Zoom's 'annotations' feature; while headlines, Facebook comments and other types of 'Diaries, letters, journals, messages' could be shared simultaneously by all participants in the chat.

Dorothy Heathcote's claim that the facilitator stepping into role is the quickest way of moving a group into the 'as if' of drama (Heathcote 2015, p. 74.) proved to be as true working online as offline. We found that Teacher-in-Role functioned as a powerful template; it helped participants to dare start (en)acting in front of their cameras – whether alone or in a room shared with roommates. When we showed a scene in role, we had to learn that since they could only view these scenes 'through a window', anything and everything that was visible gained meaning: the background, costumes and props, objects, even the smallest movements and gestures. Changing the virtual background around the speaker in Zoom was also tested by Cziboly, but it did not work: objects in the hands of the speaker 'became invisible', as the programme mistakenly identified these objects as part of the background. We found it extremely challenging to go slowly to allow participants to follow the action, and *at the same time* to keep the participants engaged and curious.

Closing remarks

One of Cziboly's MA students claimed that the process drama 'triggered [her] imagination and [her] reflection about how a system can work, exploring how decisions are made, thoughts about government, art, humanity, crisis, press and so on.' Since the statue's central figure was a fragile woman surrounded by two male soldiers, this group invented a story in which feminism and revolution blended with folktale-like elements. Here, the perpetrator was a young female activist who clearly had a political message against white-male-dominant governance which distributes even life-saving necessities (masks) unevenly. Recent events in which statues (of Columbus, Churchill, Gandhi and many others) have been vandalised around the world creates an entirely new context for this story.

Research participants in Hungary were asked to create an online stimulus, an 'event' that could be at the centre of a fictional frame of an online drama. 8 of the 18 videos explored the problem of isolation, 4 dealt with how reality gets deformed through news, 3 videos looked at cyberbullying and 3 on the distortions of online communication. These examples also show that online channels allow a variety of urgent problems to be explored through drama. One reflected on how this experience helped her explore further with her own students: 'Stepping into role in my Zoom class brought back some of the fun and openness I aim at in normal classes.' This ties in with the experience of the researchers that drama not only allows us to explore urgent issues, but also creates a healthier learning environment in online teaching.

Few would argue that this will not be the last time in the twenty-first century when we have to work under extreme conditions, and based on our knowledge of the impact of drama (Cziboly and DICE Consortium 2010), drama is needed in such periods to reconnect with our communities and to understand the complexity of the crisis we are facing from multiple perspectives. For us, the lockdown was a serious learning process, a period when we had to learn to adapt our routines to demanding and challenging situations and, for us, to reconsider our function, operations, effectiveness and even our role as drama educators.

Notes

1. https://prospero.digital/
2. https://www.kadenze.com/
3. https://www.teritotoi.org/
4. https://sesw-events.sydney.edu.au/calendar/create-webinar-for-educators-applied-creativity-the-arts-and-transforming-schools/
5. A photo of the South African War Memorial from Toronto (Canada) was used – see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_War_Memorial_(Toronto)
6. https://youtu.be/mndWGneMHNg (The person in the video is Bethlenfalvy himself.)
7. Problems are noted and connections are marked with lines and different signs.
8. E.g. Bethlenfalvy used Mentimeter (www.mentimeter.com), an anonymous brainstorming space.
9. https://www.dramatoolkit.co.uk/drama-games/item/concentration/secret-leader

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Adam Bethlenfalvy is a senior lecturer at the Károli Gáspár University, Budapest. He has also worked in Theatre in Education companies as actor-teacher, director and facilitator in Hungary and Great Britain since 1998. He is a co-founder of InSite Drama, a project-based company working internationally with DIE and TIE.

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