

AGREEING TO BE CHANGED: ITERATIVE THEATRE-MAKING AS DECENTRALIZED PEDAGOGY IN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT. Formatted as a conversation to reflect its collaborative nature, this article explores an iterative, symbiotic, and decentralized pedagogical paradigm developed at the University of British Columbia, preliminary data for which stemmed from a student-led, devised theatre project staged in July 2022. This article seeks to extrude and articulate the project's continuous incorporation of its own components — from student anecdotal experience, to the co-construction of language and design, to the accumulation of sheer time — so that similar processes might be reimagined in other pedagogical contexts.

L'ENTENTE DE LA CO-TRANSFORMATION : VERS UNE PÉDAGOGIE DU THÉÂTRE ITÉRATIVE ET DÉCENTRALISÉE

RÉSUMÉ. Présenté en conversation collaborative, cet article décrit un modèle de pédagogie itératif, symbiotique et décentralisé développé à l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique. Les données préliminaires proviennent d'un projet théâtral réalisé par des étudiants de premier cycle, mis en scène en juillet 2022. Cet article tente d'articuler et de rendre tangible l'incorporation continue du projet de ses propres composantes — de l'expérience anecdotique de l'étudiant, la coconstruction de vocabulaire, et l'accumulation du temps partagé — afin que ses processus puissent être réimaginés dans d'autres contextes pédagogiques.

In January 2022, Jack Mosher and EJ Kneifel, two undergraduate students at the University of British Columbia, proposed an independent study to Professor Patrick Rizzotti. After meeting in Rizzotti's scenic design course that fall, then collecting thoughts, references, and dreams on a

collaborative digital whiteboard called Miro, they wanted to know: What would happen if they used theatre-creation to research theatre-creation?¹ More specifically: Could they rid themselves of the roles and hierarchy of North American theatre-creation, and, if not, what discoveries lay within decentralized, iterative collaboration? Moreover, in a pedagogical context, what would happen when the classroom's roles and hierarchies were disrupted?

With author permission, EJ and Jack adapted Renee Gladman's 2010 novel, *Event Factory*, for the stage. They added poems and rearranged scenes, developed choreography to establish a shared sense of time and to implicate the presence of the audience, and discovered, through props and gesture, how certain characters might signal special understanding.

The real research began, however, when this first back-and-forth exploration expanded to incorporate others. Jack and EJ first hosted a workshop with their student stage manager, Lauren, as well as seven participants, to discuss what emotions the script conjured while taking care to guide the students in and out of those states. The work only grew from there: After auditions, a second stage manager joined, student collaborators developed costume, makeup, set, sound, and prop design, and a student composer developed an original violin performance. Each student was involved with each part of the process. Professor Rizzotti, Jack, and EJ had to be "willing to hand it off" to an increasingly amorphous collective of students, both within the creative process as well as the pedagogical structure (Shigematsu et al., 2022, p. 356).

Along Beck et al.'s (2011) spectrum of Research-based Theatre (RbT), this project integrated a "closed/conference" setting with a distinct "aesthetic" performance, grounded in "informal, first-hand research" (p. 690). Intimate stakeholder participation and continuous dialogue, as well as the importance of aesthetic elements such as choreography and abstract language, reinforced and enriched the ultimate research goal of deep student reflection.

The student researchers' informal dialogue about immigration, illness, and personal struggles – highlighted by a student sharing a story in Punjabi during the performance run – also drew from rich secondary sources, including Gladman's (2010) novel. Working from a novel meant that no participant had privileged access to the source material. This allowed the group to collectively construct and evolve meanings, fostering a dynamic scaffolding of emotional and intellectual engagement through RbT's "slow rhythms and pauses" (Shigematsu et al., 2022, p. 356).

What began in a traditional university class turned into a decentralized research-creation project in which each student, as well as the professor, was a participant and researcher. This pedagogical framework empowered students to design and craft a process that served as an immersive counter to the lasting effects of isolation following the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within the impersonal setting of a large university like the University of British Columbia (UBC).

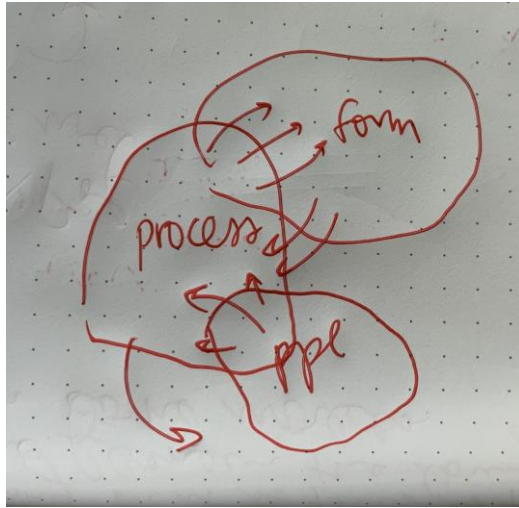


FIGURE 0. *Form, process, people*

By positioning our work at the intersection of closed / conference and aesthetic performance stemming from more informal, first-hand research, we hope to stake out a non-linear RbT progression, wherein the process feeds the form, and the form feeds the process (see Figure 0).

The following section, a conversation conducted before the 5-day performance run, traces this project's accumulation: how the scaffolding of research coincided with the buildup of trust, which coincided with students' ability to make their own impacts upon the work. This, in turn, delineates the shape of a *crucially iterative* collaborative creative process, a process of research and classroom structure which can be changed, and which continues to change its participants.

CONVERSATION

For ease of reading, the authors' names are abbreviated to their first letters. The professor's name is marked with a "P." The students' names are "J" and "E."

The following figures, drawn over the course of the conversation, made it possible to imagine this project's cumulative process as a more general series of movements, applicable to further research contexts.

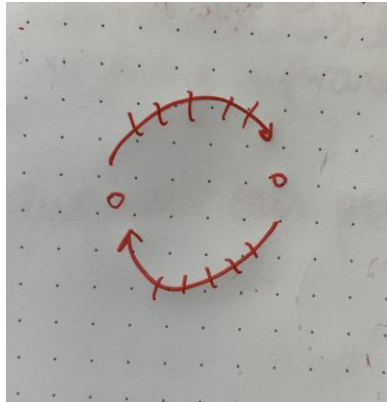


FIGURE 1. *The first strength*

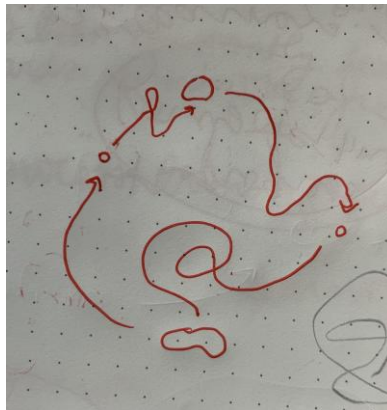


FIGURE 2. *Incorporation*

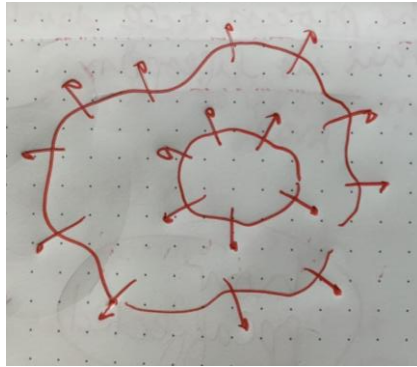


FIGURE 3. *Sedimentary behemoth*

Note. We are using the term *sedimentary behemoth* to describe a layered accumulation of processes, relationships, and inherited structures, revealing how meaning, memory, and collaboration build on top of each other over time.

E: We met in Patrick's design class, and —

J: We pushed away from the same things.

E: We were like,

J: "There's something else here."

E: "Something else is possible." So we looked at the same line. We learned how to talk to each other. Eventually the amount of things we needed to say to each other became too hefty to wait a week to say it.

P: You began to process asynchronously on a Miro board: "This movie feels like this," "I had this dream." You allowed time.

E: And we didn't always have to talk to each other. We could just write, "I'm thinking this" for the other to read.

J: I went on a lot of tangents, impulsive things I would have forgotten to say.

P: From there, it bloomed: two students to three to more –

J: Which confirmed to me that work is built on top of work. The Miro informed our syllabus, which informed our readings, which informed the script. That momentum was there throughout the process.

E: And how life is built on top of life. We met, we looked, and because *this* [see Figure 1] was so strong, and ongoing – we are still looking at each other – other things could be incorporated [see Figure 2]. We could hold more. We talk about Renee Gladman, the author of the source novel, as a collaborator, too.

This process became its own class, with you, the facilitator, pinwheeling at the centre. Now there is also an outer layer, where we ourselves are facilitating for other students. I wonder how that is? You're relinquishing so much control.

P: Because there's so much trust. The two of you built that trust. I thought, great, now go give it to others.

E: They're the ones who gave, I think. I think the last thing Jack and I wanted was to arrive at the end of this and be like, "All we did was drag these people behind the plow of our ego vision." So we were always asking, "How is this going for you?" At one important moment in particular –

J: The lead actor and I were early to rehearsal. I asked how things were going, and she detailed a disconnect she was feeling between the "how" and the "why."

E: For the next three rehearsals, we just sat with the actors and talked.

J: Instead of answering questions, we were going to work through them together.

P: And you felt there was time and space for that?

E: There was only time for that.

J: It *was* the process.

E: We've been talking about the sedimentary behemoth [see Figure 3] of our relationship and the world of the show, but we also came up against the sedimentary behemoth of actor training, the fossils at the centre of that. We didn't know! We couldn't just say, "Nothing exists anymore! We're breaking it all!" There's still a thing above your head blinking, "Director!" It still exists. The structures are there.

P: It's muscle memory, right? We all do it. Going through a process, good or bad, 100 times or 150 times: Ruts are created in one's body and one's brain. I get on my bike every morning and I push down with my right foot first.

As soon as we put a label on ourselves, assumptions come with that. Director. Actor. Designer. Those are safe in some ways: I can define that role. In a process that is the one you describe, all of the safety around defined roles evaporates. You've got to build trust.

E: Do you want to talk about the dance that the actors choreographed?

J: In a rehearsal with the two lead romantic interests, they were like, "I feel like something's missing." They started moving together; I would occasionally give them a little prompt. That culminated in this dance. We were like, "Why don't we just add this to the show?"

E: It's *this* [see Figure 2], right? To get to the point where someone can say, "Something's missing, *and* I'm going to say that, *and* I'm going to add something, *and* we're actually going to put it in." There are so many levels of trust that have to reach a tipping point for that to be possible.

P: This is a mirror of you two early on in your writing process. As soon as you started to hear the words aloud, the world presented things to you. The same way it sounds like it presented things to the actors, who then spoke that back to you.

J: Yes, this show has basically built itself. When we put the script up on a wall and moved things, the show unraveled into itself. Talking through the visual helped us understand each character's relationship to the world. That just kept going each time we added a layer.

E: One of our actors said the whole room changed when [Figure 4] appeared. I think a big block to explanation and understanding was just the "work on top of work" / "life on top of life" thing: How do you even begin to ask someone about their knowledge of an entire world? But this was proof that we weren't just making things up. Like, there's a map!

J: There's some evidence behind this.

P: Did you find yourselves going back to [Figure 4], or was doing it enough to move forwards / sideways / backwards from it?

J: It's a bit of both. When we came up with [Figure 4], it was locked in our brains and we built on it. But we also referred back to it when new questions arose. The figures are wonderful tools for showing people the world.

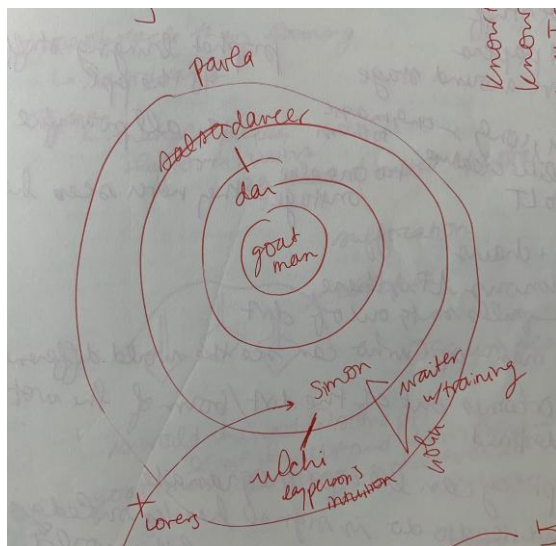


FIGURE 4. Artifact of effect

Note. This is one map of the characters in the show, and how their knowledge of their world relates them to one another.

E: They're tools, but they're also artifacts — in the way that maps are tools and artifacts. You can find a map that's outdated; we have outdated maps, and we remember why they looked the way they did. [Figure 4] is actually a more recent map where Goat Man, whom the lead character meets at a crucial turning point in the show, is at the centre. This mapping happened during an early design meeting. When we asked what the Goat Man might be carrying, we thought, "Oh my God, a set piece! He's the creator of this whole world!"

E: In callbacks, the actor himself changed the shape of the world a second time. He was in a scene as another character, the Salsa Dancer, and he started to sing. I wrote to Jack: "He is both. The Goat Man and the Salsa Dancer." That totally changed how we understood things: that the Salsa Dancer, who is otherwise just a brief romantic interest, is actually this visitation, which we couldn't possibly have known before.

J: There's a layer of discoveries built from adding more people.

E: There's something so special about the fact that, in both this world and this process, the more people you add, the more like life the layers become.

J: There's life in each one of these sections. There's something to be learned and added to everything.

P: How do we share this with others? How do we actually use this now?

E: I'm thinking about the layers required to get to that point of choreography. You have to address the structure, that there will be a gap, and then you need to affirm the student at each step. Then they'll start to see the pattern, and slowly create the sedimentary behemoth of the knowledge of their own sensibilities.

J: Knowing what you know has been a huge aspect of this process. The choreography isn't based on forcing actors to move in a certain way; it's working with them to build comfort in their own bodies and joints. So we tried replicating that in a design and teaching sense.

P: Does this feel student-led?

J: Absolutely. Even when you are present, you are a collaborator in that space. You are contributing in the same way that we all are, in this wonderful flattening of hierarchy.

E: A question that I have is if we're trying to draw one of these [see Figure 2], what would ideal teaching look like?

P: There's a start: me and the student. We establish a beginning. And *here* is where we think the end is. And that's it. That's all we know. Who knows what the inside looks like, but it definitely goes backwards. It definitely goes backwards, and then we land somewhere.

E: What happens when you start with 15 people? Is it that 15 times?

P: I think it's that 15 times, which is why it's hard for a class to be 25 students. But there's this concept of "the trainer training the trainer, training the trainer." In our time together, I handed it over. You were the guides for the (eventually 38) others.

E: An important feature here is consent. I was talking to the actors recently about how time moves in our show's world. It's very specific, but, like any measure of time, it's based on an agreement. We've all agreed how long a second is; in our world, time passes the way that it does because of this tacit agreement.

Jack and I had to agree first: We're doing this, we're building this. When other people come in, they have to agree. Again, not pulling them behind the ego plow; they have to want to be a part of the construction of time. So with teaching too, there has to be an agreement.

P: You need a community agreement, even if it's nonverbal. It's many times harder with more people. The nice thing is, if I layer 10 of my maps on top of each other, they're individual. If somebody chooses a simpler journey, that's theirs to choose; if somebody chooses a deeper journey, that's theirs to choose. If you're all doing it together, you're right. You have to agree to walk at the same pace.

E: Well, we're talking about life too, right? So much life has happened during this process, in the same way that life happens during school. Maybe a student can't go deeper right now, because something else is really pushing. So there are also ways, maybe, of creating a structure where that student's still supported to go to the depth that they are able to right now. We cancel rehearsal if people are not feeling well. We change what the rehearsal looks like if people are tired.

J: Or once, we were going to do two runs, but it was really emotionally taxing for people. It was a lot to do it once. We decided we'd just talk.

P: There's this ethos, right? "The show must go on."

J: One of the actors semi-seriously said once, "Anything for the vision." I was like, "No!"

E: Nothing for the vision. That way of thinking is cruel. To agree to be changed by something is not submitting to a vision; crucially, we're talking about the fact that you have to *trust* the people you're working with. You have to know that they *care* about you and your well-being.

P: Do you think all of this was a door your collaborators were trying to step through, or do you think it was awakened?

J: I think it was both. Some people were searching for it, but it was awakened in others.

E: It just starts with the agreement, right? We've agreed to be changed by this. At the beginning of the drawing, you're agreeing, but you have no idea about the boundlessness of the whole page.

J: The spirals might start smaller; you have flares over here. It gets bigger. It keeps going.

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NOTES

1. This question holds resonance with Shigematsu et al. (2022)'s question, "What if we used the methodology to explain the methodology?" (p. 352).

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