Dr. Andrew Goldberg

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**REPORT ON ARTIFACT: A PROPOSED STAFF DEVELOPMENT “EDI FOR ACTOR TRAINING” READING GROUP AND RESOURCES**

**Introduction**

After working for almost thirty years as a professional theatre director and teaching artist in New York City, I moved to the UK a year and half ago to begin teaching at UAL Wimbledon. As a queer, Jewish, theatre-loving adolescent growing up in a socially conservative, Christian town, I have been attentive to experiences of difference from an early age as well as to the importance of the arts as an avenue for self-expression. I am equally aware of the privileges and opportunities that my whiteness and my upper middleclass background have afforded me throughout my life. As both an artist and an educator, I have committed my life to advancing the principles of social justice through the belief that an aesthetic education should be an essential component of all students’ education and that the theatre arts can be an important site for individual and social transformation. I have developed my teaching practices in relation to the philosophies of Paulo Freire (2018), John Dewey (2009), and bell hooks (2014), and I have seen first-hand the power of art to empower self-learning, imagination, confidence, and empathy through experiential learning.

While a social justice pedagogy has been part of my practice for many years, the urgency to address the abuses caused by systemic patriarchal, heteronormative, and white supremacist ideologies embedded within universities, and more specifically, actor training programs, has taken on a new urgency in the wake of the #MeToo movement and the global Black Lives Matter movement following the death of George Floyd. Racist, sexist, and abusive practices both within the theatre industry and within our training programs which have been tacitly accepted for years, are being named and are no longer being tolerated. (See for example, “We See You White American Theatre,” <https://www.weseeyouwat.com>). These systems were not built overnight, and they are not quickly or easily dismantled.

My report explores one strategy for embedding social justice pedagogy as an ongoing commitment and self-reflective practice through a voluntary, ongoing, staff development reading group. This proposal directly addresses one of the conclusions listed in the “Embedding equality and diversity in the curriculum: an art and design practitioner’s guide”: to “create opportunities for students and staff to meet and discuss equality issues within all the practices and processes of the institution” (Finnegan, T., and A. Richards, 2015, p. 13)

**Teaching Context**

I am the Second Year Lead for the relatively new BA Acting and Performance course at Wimbledon. Our program has just graduated its second ever cohort, and our four years in existence have been marked by major disruptions, most notably COVID, but also high staff turnover, and student dissatisfaction. As such, we have had precious little time to discuss pedagogical theories, methods, or best practices in relation to questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion as a staff. Individually, we are all committed to inclusivity and work towards this goal on a daily basis, but we would greatly benefit by holding a regular group forum in which to discuss and reflect on our shared values and to identify activist interventions instead of merely being reactive to situations, our default position born out of difficult circumstances.

**Inclusive Learning Theory and Actor Training**

The design of the acting and performance course from the outset was founded on a theory of social justice pedagogy and theories of decolonizing the curriculum. It was also designed as a response to address a number of issues commonly encountered in traditional, hierarchical actor training programs. By “social justice pedagogy” I mean a theory of teaching that not “explicitly recognizes the disparities in societal opportunities, resources, and long-term outcomes among marginalized groups” (Shankman as quoted in Hahn Tapper, 2013, p. 412). As a consequence, this pedagogy takes an activist stance towards redressing those disparities through the work in the classroom to work towards building a more equitable society. This is theoretically embedded in some aspects of the curriculum through the structure and content of our units which seek to empower the actor as a total creative artist with more agency over the kinds of roles and performances they get to make compared to traditional acting schools. It also includes units such as “Performing Histories” which encourages students to create solo performances which ask them to think about their own positionality in relation to aspect of personal, familial, national, or global historical events.

Nevertheless, the acting studio is a particularly complex pedagogical site. Because acting and actor training is realized through the body, issues of identity take on a particularly complex set of considerations. In his study on ethical practices in actor training in Australia, Mark Seton (2010, p. 13) recognizes that “the notion of vulnerability emerged as the quality most valued and required as a gestural symbol of commitment to the discipline of acting.” What happens then when, as teachers we ask our most *socially* vulnerable students to become *emotionally* vulnerable as a requirement of the course?

Despite our best efforts, as teachers we are also full of ideological blind spots, created by what Pierre Bordieu calls *habitus*: enculturated patterns of behavior. For instance, I was forced to acknowledge my own habits in Arseli Dokumaci’s (2023, p. 20) description of ableist tendencies when she writes: By the term "the habitus of ableism, I refer to an unknowingly incorporated set of bodily dispositions and skills and, necessarily, their affordances that have become established as the way of moving, sensing, and behaving in the world, negating all other alternatives.” As teachers, it is imperative that we embed a never-ending, ongoing self-critical practice to challenge the hegemonic forces that determine our habitus but are so prevalent as to go unseen.

This is both the challenge but also the opportunity for actor training theories to be on the forefront of social justice pedagogy. As Maurice Hamington recognizes, embodiment is heart of human commonality and therefore an ethics of embodied care can be the starting point for repairing social problems (2010, p. 81): “Framing care as performed bodily actions is an effort to capture a corporeal basis for morality that has the potential to help us negotiate powerful narratives of socially constructed otherness to confront identity-based injustice without silencing the voices and experiences of difference and dissent.” This perfectly encapsulates the urgency and potentiality of an ethics-based actor training pedagogy.

**Reflection on Process**

In conceiving of an artifact for this unit, I wanted to create something that would:

* allow me to translate the ideas this unit to the specifics of actor training
* allow me to explore the existing literature on the topic of current best practices
* allow me to support my fellow staff in our ongoing development
* to create an accountability group to maintain a space for ongoing pedagogical self-reflection despite the enormous daily work pressures we are all under

Initially I had imagined the project as an archive of articles that could be used as a resource for staff in the undergraduate classroom. But based on feedback from my tutor and my fellow PgCert cohort, I decided to reconceive the project as a reading group, for which I created the beginning of a living archive; however, we would not be limited to these resources. The intention is to make the facilitation of the reading group as easy as possible given everyone’s limited time constraints while also providing the space for individual staff members to bring their own passions and research interests to the group. Likewise, a format which includes a rotating chair, and a summary of reading being provided for those who wish to participate but have not had time to do the reading, is intended to lower the barrier to participation.

In researching and creating the selection of written materials, I wanted to find articles and books that were recent (within the last 5-10 year maximum) and that specifically addressed actor training in a higher education context. I wanted to find articles that spoke to the wide range of intersecting vectors we have been exploring in this Inclusive Practices Unit (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion), and some others that we have been less attentive too but that are particularly important in an acting context (class-background, size). Unsurprisingly, many of the articles I found were written from a US perspective, and moving forward, I would like to find more articles that specifically address the UK context, particularly in regards to issues of race and ethnicity.

**Conclusion**

So far, this project is only theoretical and so I cannot speak to its effectiveness. I have spoken to our current acting programme director and several staff members, all of whom were supportive of the way it will support our programme’s commitment to decolonization of the academy. I will chair the initial meeting, scheduled for the first week of November to allow people time to settle in to the academic year.

On a personal note, this unit has been important for me to re-examine all of these issues within the context of the UK, which shares many similarities with New York, but also has its distinct historical and social contexts as well as contemporary discourse. For example, I find that I am still learning the subtle cultural signifies between race, class, region, and accent. I believe a space like the proposed reading group will allow me to continue to learn and grow from my fellow staff members.

**Word Count for Report: 1564**

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**APPENDIX: Artifact for Inclusive Practices Unit**

**Proposed Artifact: A Monthly Reading Group for the purposes of Staff Development for the BA Acting and Performance Course supported by a living archive of resources**

Rationale:

The many issues and identities we are discussing in the Inclusive Practices Unit (race, gender, sexuality, faith, ability, neurodiversity), take on particularly complex figurations in an acting course. While all artists need to consider the cultural implications of representational art, in the theatre, the primary medium of representation in acting is the students’ own bodies and voices to represent fictional (and non-fictional) characters. Combined with the fact that theatre making is a creative process that typically involves deep and intense collaboration with a wide and diverse group of individuals, it is not surprising that theatre departments have often been on the front lines of confronting student demands to dismantle traditional, conservative training methods which are often implicitly patriarchal and colonial in their power dynamics. As a result, this has also meant that theatre and the performing arts have been on the forefront of innovative pedagogies and theories on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion.

The BA Acting and Performance course at Wimbledon is relatively new (we are only graduating our second cohort this year). We are still developing our unique offer of teaching acting in an “art school context,” an untested and still emerging concept. However, as a staff, we are interested in developing innovative pedagogies that seek to redress the problematic aspects of traditional conservatoire training programmes. However, due to the extremely demanding teaching schedules at UAL, we rarely have time as a staff to reflect together on the successes and challenges or more theoretical aspects of our pedagogy together.

Proposed activity:

For my artifact, I propose a voluntary, monthly staff reading group series centered on issues related to social and racial justice pedagogy and actor training. Each month a different staff member will volunteer to choose a reading for the staff and facilitate a lunch time discussion. Topics could include (but are not limited to): race, gender, sexuality, faith, class-origin, neurodiversity, and body size.

Each session will commence with a summary of the reading (to encourage participation even if someone has not completed the reading), followed by a discussion of the theoretical issues raised by the article. We could then think about those issues specifically in a UAL context and will conclude each session by committing to a specific action to incorporate into our teaching in the near future. In this sense, the group will commit to the integration of theory with practice. Future sessions will then begin with an accountability check to see if staff members did indeed amend their practice in some way and to share the results with the team.

The following bibliography is the start of a living, collaborative archive of articles on various topics. It is suggestive of the kinds of material available, but in no way comprehensive.

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