

Teaching Dramatic Texts Virtually: Exploring Challenges And Solutions

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Citation: Dr. Khairunnisa Nakathorige et al. (2023), Teaching Dramatic Texts Virtually: Exploring Challenges And Solutions, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(3), 664-668
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v29i3.6844

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT This research paper investigates the complexities and opportunities associated with the online teaching of dramatic texts, a genre that fundamentally relies on live performance and interpersonal engagement. As the educational landscape underwent a significant shift towards virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 pandemic, educators confronted the formidable challenge of teaching drama remotely. This paper examines the multifaceted difficulties of adapting to an online teaching environment and proposes innovative strategies to enhance the teaching of dramatic texts. Drawing on the author's experience in teaching drama to postgraduate students, this research explores the pandemic's impact on pedagogical practices and offers insights into the author's approaches within the virtual classroom. This study underscores the necessity of reconsidering traditional teaching methodologies and embraces the possibilities presented by technology to make online drama instruction engaging and effective.

Introduction

Teaching drama is a unique challenge in literature classrooms. Drama, with its vibrant characters and powerful emotions, is designed for live performance, where its essence is fully expressed. However, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a shift to virtual classrooms, presenting a formidable challenge: how to convey the depth of dramatic texts through digital mediums. This abrupt transition to online teaching and learning posed significant challenges for educators, particularly those responsible for teaching disciplines that rely heavily on in-person interactions and embodied experiences, such as drama (Mishra et al., 2020). This paper explores the complexities of teaching dramatic texts online, drawing on the author's experiences and insights from the literature, to propose innovative strategies that can enhance the online learning experience for students.

Drama relies on live enactments and embodiment of characters' passions, which introduces complexity when adapting it to an online setting. This paper explores the inherent challenges of teaching dramatic texts virtually and proposes innovative strategies to overcome them.

The core argument is that by using technology and creative teaching methods, educators can transform the online drama classroom into an engaging space. While it may not fully replicate the experience of traditional classroom, this approach aims to preserve the essence of dramatic texts and make them accessible for educators and students.

The Distinctive Nature of Teaching Drama

Teaching dramatic texts in literature classrooms requires a unique pedagogical approach, given the centrality of live performance to drama. This challenge becomes even more pronounced when drama is taught online, where traditional in-person methods may be difficult to replicate effectively. This paper offers preliminary insights into teaching drama online, primarily focused on post-graduate students, drawing on the author's experience. While the strategies discussed have proven successful in one classroom, the evolving nature of this field necessitates further research.

Drama is a distinct literary genre that requires specific instructional techniques different from teaching prose or poetry. Drama is "process oriented" and its focus is on the active participation of the students, who must use the same instruments as actors: mind, body, and heart (Water, 2021). Drama engages students in a more inclusive expression of the performing arts, as they learn to apply theory to practice (Hernández, 2016). This shift from theoretical analysis to embodied performance is a crucial aspect of teaching drama effectively.

As drama requires live action and co-creation in a shared space, the transition to virtual classrooms presented significant challenges. The sudden shift to online learning meant that space was not shared anymore, and all activities were reduced to two-dimensional images on our laptops. This abrupt change compelled drama educators to re-evaluate their teaching methods and find innovative ways to engage students in the online medium.

Divergent Approaches: Drama in Literature vs. Drama in Theatre

Drama taught in theatre or performing arts departments focuses on the performance and enactment of dramatic texts, while drama taught in literature departments emphasizes the socio-political, historical, and aesthetic analysis of texts. However, it is important to recognize that a comprehensive understanding of a play requires considering both its performative aspects and the deeper layers of meaning embedded in the text. In literature classrooms, even though the focus may not be solely on performance, it remains an integral part of understanding the essence of the dramatic text. As highlighted by Riddell et al. (2020) in their article, "From Sherbrooke to Stratford and back again: Team teaching and experiential learning through 'Shakesperience'," teaching drama in an English Literature course presents unique challenges:

[a]ttempting to teach theatre in an English Literature course is a daunting prospect. A far cry from the highly individual experience of reading a novel or poem, theatre is both a visual and communal kind of engagement. It is a challenge to capture this medium in a traditional lecture-based classroom and harder still to convey its three-dimensionality... (Riddell et al., 2020).

The challenge of conveying the three-dimensional nature of dramatic texts is even greater in an online classroom, where the communal engagement typical of theatre is limited. Consequently, teaching drama online becomes more daunting. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of online teaching, making it a defining feature of contemporary education. This transition was abrupt, without adequate training or infrastructure for many teachers, students, and institutions. However, it also presented a unique opportunity to experiment with new teaching methods and technologies. This paper, therefore, examines the challenges encountered while teaching drama online during the pandemic and explores techniques that helped navigate this virtual terrain.

Challenges of Teaching Drama Online

The landscape of online teaching is fraught with a myriad of challenges that transcend disciplinary boundaries, affecting educators across various fields. However, when teaching drama is transplanted into the digital realm within literature classrooms, a distinct and unique set of hurdles emerges. These distinctive challenges, specific to the task of teaching dramatic texts online, encompass a range of complexities that require innovative solutions and careful consideration.

1. Accessibility

A stark and glaring reality confronted educators during the pandemic—the stark socio-economic disparities that exist among students, and this was particularly pronounced in India. As Ferri et al. (2020) astutely observed, various countries sought inventive solutions to address the glaring issue of unequal access to digital resources during the crisis. They note that,

[D]uring the current crisis, some countries have used different modalities for online learning to avoid the problem of the digital divide. New Zealand, for example, has adopted a combined approach, using two television channels to deliver educational content, integrated with an Internet delivery and a hard-copy curriculum resource. In Queensland (Australia), due to poor Internet connectivity television has been used to engage parents as well so that they can assist their children in learning. In Portugal, hard-copy teaching resources have been promptly delivered to children's homes thanks to a partnership between schools and post office services (Ferri et al., 2020).

In the Indian context, accessing the internet became an intricate maze, easier for some but a distant dream for others. The absence of smartphones posed a formidable barrier, rendering participation in online classes a formidable challenge for many. Furthermore, the financial strain of mobile internet data packs weighed heavily on some students. In some cases, the increasing financial constraints in the family pushed them to make distressing choices such as selling their mobile phones to meet pressing family needs. For students hailing from rural areas and regions like Jammu & Kashmir, uninterrupted internet access remained a distant aspiration.

2. Reduced Enthusiasm and Engagement

The virtual classroom environment presented another unique challenge, as students frequently turned off their cameras, leading to a profound sense of disconnection and waning enthusiasm over time. Unlike the physical classroom setting, where the boundaries of the space helped maintain focus, the online environment became a battleground for educators striving to keep students engaged and free from distractions. With students' cameras disabled, educators lost the invaluable visual cues that allowed them to gauge student engagement and adjust their teaching accordingly. The lack of face-to-face interaction made it increasingly difficult for

educators to foster a sense of community and maintain students' motivation, as the virtual setting lacked the natural ebb and flow of a physical classroom. This disconnect posed a significant hurdle, compelling educators to explore innovative strategies to reengage their students and recreate the dynamic atmosphere of an in-person learning environment.

3. Lack of Adequate Study/Work Space in Households The transition to online learning unearthed a stark reality—the scarcity of private and dedicated spaces within many households, particularly in India and other developing nations. Ferri et al. observed that “children from disadvantaged households often lack a quiet space to study, and frequently have to share devices with other family members.” For many students, the home environment lacked the luxury of a dedicated study or work space, leaving them grappling with distractions and compromised concentration. The challenges escalated for students who once actively participated in physical classrooms but now hesitated to engage in online sessions. Whether due to the presence of family members or the cacophony of household disturbances, students' reluctance to speak up or activate their cameras added an additional layer of complexity. For educators, the inability to read students' facial expressions—the invaluable instant feedback mechanism of a traditional classroom—further exacerbated the teaching experience.

4. Social and Cognitive Implications

The abrupt transition to online learning also had profound social and cognitive implications for both students and educators. The shift to virtual instruction has highlighted the crucial interplay of social and cognitive processes in education, revealing potential drawbacks of online learning environments. While education transcends the mere transfer of information, online interactions can be more tiring and isolating due to the lack of non-verbal cues that typically enrich our understanding of social contexts (McLeod & Gupta, 2023). This absence forces the brain to compensate for missing information, increasing cognitive load and leading to a more taxing learning experience (McLeod & Gupta, 2023). In traditional classrooms, students feed off the energy of shared physical space, engaging in dynamic exchanges with peers that spark captivating discussions and yield valuable insights. Online classrooms, however, often struggle to replicate this dynamic, as physical separation can side-line these vital interactions and cast a shadow over collaborative learning.

5. Difficulty in Teamwork

In traditional in-person drama classes, students collaborate to perform excerpts or scenes from a play. These experiences allow them to develop social skills and engage actively with the text. However, the shift to online platforms presents significant challenges. The physical separation and lack of in-person interaction make it difficult to coordinate group performances and role-playing exercises, leaving these essential drama-based learning experiences in limbo. Educators must now explore innovative strategies to foster collaborative engagement and recreate the dynamic, hands-on nature of traditional drama classes within the virtual environment.

6. Household Responsibilities During the Pandemic

The pandemic uprooted students from campus life, thrusting them into domestic responsibilities that clashed with their academic commitments. Female students often juggled household caretaking and schoolwork, leading to missed classes and unfinished assignments. Conversely, male students from disadvantaged backgrounds had to supplement family incomes, adding to their workload and hampering academic progress. This took a heavy mental and emotional toll, leaving students isolated from their peers and the academic path they once shared. The upheaval of established routines and the burden of new household duties eroded students' productivity, motivation, and focus, with cascading effects on their academic performance.

Possibilities in Online Teaching

While replicating the energy and engagement of a traditional classroom in the digital space may seem daunting, the pandemic has motivated educators to adapt and innovate. Teaching drama online, with its distinctive challenges, also reveals a wealth of exciting opportunities.

1. Flexibility

Online learning environments offer flexibility for both educators and students. A key aspect of this flexibility is the ability for educators to accommodate students who face irregular attendance due to various reasons. By recording and sharing lectures, educators can ensure that no student is left behind, even those dealing with unstable internet connections. Moreover, educators can seamlessly address missed classes by capturing their knowledge in recorded lectures. However, the critical element is not just the dissemination of information, but also the dialogues that follow. Students should have the opportunity to raise questions, seek clarification, and actively engage in discussions, either during subsequent live online sessions or through asynchronous online discussion forums such as Google Classroom. This allows for a more interactive and personalized learning experience, where students can review content at their own pace, participate in meaningful exchanges, and receive timely feedback from the instructor and their peers.

2. Leveraging Technology The online environment offers a wealth of opportunities to leverage technology and enrich the learning experience. Platforms like Zoom and Google Meet can facilitate engaging activities and foster collaborative learning, while the broader digital landscape provides a treasure trove of additional resources. Playwrights, for instance, have created digital sanctuaries brimming with materials related to their works, offering valuable insights into production and performance. Furthermore, platforms like YouTube, hosting recordings of productions by renowned theatre companies, provide a valuable resource for students who might otherwise face geographical and logistical barriers to experiencing live theatre. Assigning students the task of comparing distinct interpretations of a single dramatic work not only sparks insightful observations but also fosters stimulating discussions, reinforcing the concept of performance as a unique artistic interpretation.

3. Facilitating Engaging Group Discussions

Engaging discussions are crucial for effective literature education. A blend of discussion-based techniques and traditional lectures is essential to transform students from passive recipients of knowledge into enthusiastic participants in the deep exploration of literary worlds. Manzollilo, insightfully highlights the advantages of electronic communication for fostering discussions:

Integrating discussion-based techniques with the predominant lecture mode is necessary because we need to modify students' merely receptive attitude, and help them develop the fundamental skills of reading, interpreting, and criticizing literary texts. Compared to live discussions, electronic communication has the advantage of providing a more relaxed atmosphere where social conventions are less important, and this encourages positive interaction among students (Manzollilo, 2016).

Online discussion platforms, such as Google Classroom or Google Groups, provide students with a peaceful environment conducive to open and honest dialogue. These platforms empower students who may have been hesitant to voice their thoughts in a traditional classroom setting, allowing them to freely express their perspectives and convictions. Furthermore, these online discussions serve as a lifeline for students who have missed a class, ensuring that no one is left behind in the educational journey.

4. Dramatized Reading

Recognizing the limitations of online platforms for live performances and group activities, educators can explore the use of dramatized reading. In this approach, students select and perform their favourite passages, dialogues, or key scenes, bringing the text to life. This hands-on performance allows students to assume the roles of both actors and interpreters, shedding light on the complexity of literary analysis.

The benefits of this method are numerous. Engaging in dramatized reading helps students understand literary devices, as they must consider the nuances of language, rhythm, and subtext to deliver a compelling performance. Furthermore, the process of selecting and preparing a passage for dramatized reading encourages students to critically examine the text, fostering deeper engagement with the literary work.

Additionally, the increased use of recorded content opens opportunities for students to gain insights directly from authors. Students can access videos of authors discussing their creative processes, reading excerpts from their works, and offering behind-the-scenes perspectives. This first-hand exposure to the author's voice and intentions can significantly enhance students' understanding and appreciation of the literary work.

Conclusion

In the face of the unprecedented challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to online teaching has been a complex and multifaceted endeavour. This rapid and unexpected shift to remote learning presented unique challenges for teaching dramatic texts, a subject matter inherently reliant on live performance, interactive engagement, and embodied experiences. Adapting effective in-person teaching strategies to the virtual realm requires creativity, resourcefulness, and a willingness to experiment.

While the loss of physical interaction and the burdens of technological constraints have undoubtedly posed difficulties, this period has also presented opportunities for innovation and the exploration of new pedagogical approaches. By embracing the flexibility, technological advancements, and opportunities for engaging discussions and dramatic interpretations, educators can cultivate a dynamic and enriching online learning experience that fosters deep exploration of literary texts and their performative dimensions.

While online education cannot fully replicate the vibrant dynamism of traditional classroom settings, it offers a wealth of unique pedagogical possibilities. This article underscores the resilience and adaptability of both educators and students in response to these new circumstances. By embracing technology and innovative teaching approaches, we can transform the online drama classroom into a truly vibrant space where the essence of dramatic texts is not only preserved but also enriched. Though different in modality, online drama education can be equally engaging and effective, bridging the physical gap and ensuring continued access to this dynamic and transformative field of study.

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