

18 Fuifulupe Niumeitolu, speaking at “Rematriation and Indigenous Feminisms,” Sogorea Te’ Land Trust, 8 March 2021, https://he-il.facebook.com/179297255754356/videos/522545495397022/?__so__=watchlist&__rv__=video_home_www_playlist_video_list, accessed live.

Clara Margaret Wilch is a doctoral candidate in UCLA’s Department of Theater and Performance Studies. She researches icescapes and cultural negotiations of climate change based in and upon the Arctic.

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Let’s Build Theatre Communities . . . or Not: Virtual Teaching and Scholarship in an Exclusionary World

Linda Lau and Rae Mansfield

Santa Rosa Junior College, Santa Rosa, CA, USA and University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA, USA

Email: raeandlinda@gmail.com

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As collaborators who have been working together virtually since 2017, we have written plays and articles, conducted artist interviews, and are in the process of writing a book about teaching older adults theatre. When the pandemic came, everything else in our lives moved online, and we encountered new challenges with both our teaching and our scholarship. We were tasked with transitioning our theatre students to a virtual environment while conducting research for our book. We knew what was successful for us, as working online had helped our own practice, but would it be effective for students? And was it possible to write a scholarly book without access to academic libraries and archives? Our experiences over the past year reminded us that it shouldn’t require a pandemic to rethink best practices in teaching and research. While the lessons we learned were because of a restructured academic environment, the issues we addressed existed previously and were often ignored. These are some of the things we will take with us postpandemic as educators and scholars.

Learning from Everywhere

TECHNOLOGY CAN BOTH BE EXCLUSIVE AND INCLUSIVE. When my [LL] theatre improvisation course moved online, many older adult students dropped out because they didn’t have access to a computer, weren’t comfortable taking a class virtually, or were uninterested in spending time online. However, the virtual course encouraged new students to sign up. Students enrolled from all over Sonoma County and beyond, including several from San Francisco and one in Las Vegas.

For my [RM] play development course, aside from issues with access to Wi-Fi, younger students were comfortable with technology. Moving the course to a virtual setting was relatively easy. Virtual classrooms made it possible to learn from everywhere—I've had students perform in staged readings from their cars, from storage closets in COVID wards at hospitals, and from break rooms at work.

In both the theatre improvisation and play development courses, students who previously would have been excluded from taking courses due to lack of time, inability to travel, or health issues were able to create theatre during the pandemic.

BASIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE HELPFUL. Zoom's lag in sound forced everyone to become better listeners. When multiple people spoke at one time it was difficult to hear. Everyone eventually adjusted to being more patient and gave fellow students the opportunity to finish their thoughts instead of interjecting. This was excellent practice for performers.

RELATIONSHIPS CAN BE BUILT VIRTUALLY. Many students taking theatre improvisation enrolled because they wanted to try something new and meet different people. Some students lived alone, some had family to care for, and some were homebound and didn't have access to a vehicle. Theatre improvisation was an avenue for students to explore their creativity, do something fun, develop new skills, make new friends, and be a part of an intergenerational community that included people in their 20s to 80s. It was an opportunity to expand their social network with a diverse group of people.

THEATRE CAN HAVE POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS. In spring 2020, my [RM] students canceled their spring productions. That fall, two of our students died by suicide, centering the importance of connection, community, and sharing perspectives. Theatre became a means of saying, "We were here." Several students working in the service industry were diagnosed with COVID-19 and put in isolation but joined us to take part in virtual productions. Collaborating on plays provided a creative outlet with a positive impact on mental health.

THEATRE IS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ART FORM THAT INTEGRATES WELL WITH VIRTUAL FORMATS. We started the play development course by playing writing games and improvising scenes. Then the students adapted works to be performed as radio dramas, Zoom theatre, escape rooms, and other virtual formats. My [RM] students' plays have run the gamut from comedies on grief and loss to supermarket bakery battles and physics class time loops. They turned *Trifles* into thirty-second TikTok videos, created immersive theatre projects merging Edgar Allan Poe and the pain of ZoomU, and developed musicals addressing the pandemic and systemic racism. Sometimes we would just scream together.

ALMOST ANYTHING CAN BE A THEATRICAL EXERCISE. After the first few theatre improvisation classes, I [LL] figured out what types of activity worked best virtually, but still felt that there needed to be more activities. To keep things fun, I incorporated non-traditional exercises that I would not have done in an in-person course by using videos. We did sing-alongs of pop songs and musical numbers and did physical

warmups with the help of Richard Simmons and Jane Fonda, all available from videos posted on YouTube.

TECH IS JUST TECH! Just like with live shows, tech issues will happen and the show will go on. Sound doesn't synch? Write that into the script as a character quirk. Delays? Write dialogue that conveys different meanings depending on when it is overlapped. Connectivity issues? Provide everyone with an understudy. Can't access a shared document? Collaborate via text. Audience can't hear or see anything? Restart the meeting and performance. Sometimes a tech idea will need to be scrapped. For example, during one of our own Zoom productions the audiences were supposed to be able to unmute and react to the action. After Zoom updated, anyone who laughed grabbed the spotlight and, in the words of one audience member, "Cookie Monster kept jumping all up in everyone's business."

THINGS WE'LL REMEMBER.

- There are people interested in theatre beyond those stereotypically thought of as "theatre people."
- When teaching expands to different formats and incorporates new technology, it can provide access to a new group of people. This includes people who live alone, people who do not have reliable transportation, people who have jobs, and people who have caregiving obligations to others.
- Online education isn't the end of education. It is not the enemy. No education is the enemy. If we can provide education to others in multiple accessible formats, that is a good thing, not a bad thing. How we run a course is what matters, not the format.
- Relearning how to intuit in a virtual environment is challenging, but with practice, it's possible. Working with the same people over a period of time will create an ensemble, just like face-to-face theatre.
- The more we incorporate other disciplines, the richer theatre becomes. When we include other arts and culture into theatre courses, we offer students more opportunities to be creative and make connections in their everyday lives.

OUR BEST PRACTICES.

- To be more inclusive and give access to more students, offer online theatre courses even when we transition back to in-person learning.
- Listen and encourage others to listen.
- Find new ways to incorporate everyday life and the arts into theatre.
- Make time in the classroom to build relationships. Students learn better when they all get along.
- Have a beginner's mindset. Start each class with the intention of learning something new from your students as well helping them learn. If things don't go the way you intended it to (like tech issues), improvise and go with the flow.
- Encourage students to share laughter and be okay with mistakes in class.
- Create virtual spaces where students feel comfortable experimenting without judgment. This may be someone's only opportunity to connect with others.

- Challenge yourself regularly to learn something new. Experiment by incorporating new methods and ideas in your teaching.

We Need Access!

EVERY COLLEGE LIBRARY IS NOT CREATED EQUAL. Between the two of us, we had access to a community college library (as faculty), and two state university libraries (one as an alumna, and one as faculty). None of those institutions were research-heavy, and we were not able to get the books and articles that we needed. Even interlibrary loan didn't make a difference.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ARE DIFFICULT TO ACCESS. Although we didn't need to access any special collections, it would have been nice to have had the option to visit the Billy Rose Theatre Collection, the National Theatre Archive, and the Black Archives Historic Lyric Theater in-person. We recommended these resources in our book anyway.

VIRTUAL ACCESS CAN SHUT DOWN TOO. To save costs and close budget gaps during the pandemic, some universities stopped subscribing to theatre databases and journals. Though it was still possible to pay to access these resources as individuals, costs are prohibitive and most non-tenure track/untentured faculty do not receive reimbursement for research costs.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IS YOUR BEST FRIEND. There are plenty of materials available at public libraries. The audience for our book project was wide, and one of the objectives was to develop resource lists of no- and low-cost course materials from public libraries. Our final lists comprise films, plays, biographies, histories, instructional materials, and so on that people can access for free at libraries.

DAMN! THAT PART-TIME STAFF POSITION DOES MATTER! Prepandemic we had access to Harvard University Libraries via a part-time position at the American Repertory Theater. After COVID-19 shut down the theatres and the university terminated part-time staff, we lost access to these resources.

ACCESS GREATLY AFFECTS THE QUALITY OF RESEARCH. You can't respond to current scholarship or undertake a complete and thorough literature review when you are unable to access source material. University austerity measures mean a decrease in access to "nonessential" interlibrary loans. Resources for research by non-tenure track/tenured faculty is a low priority. If a person is not independently wealthy or affiliated with a research institution, it's *extremely* difficult to be a scholar and publish.

THINGS WE'LL REMEMBER.

- Our field cannot grow, expand, and become more diverse if we continue to exclude people who don't have access to research materials.

- Subscriptions to archives and databases can change at any time, and you may not be able to access the same materials from week to week. Moreover, different universities have different levels of access. We learned that the hard way.
- Alumni access isn't great. It's better than nothing, but it's not great.
- Public libraries are awesome!

OUR BEST PRACTICES.

- Help each other out. If there's a way you can share resources with fellow scholars and provide access to materials, do it!
- Whenever possible, publish work that is open access so that people can read and cite your work.
- Use and create resources through the Open Textbook Library, <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/>.
- Remember that you're not a failure as a scholar, it's the access. Take care of yourself. Academia isn't everything, and your mental health matters. You are a person and you matter.

Linda Lau teaches theatre improvisation for older adults at Santa Rosa Junior College, and **Rae Mansfield** teaches play development and advises undergraduate theatre at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Over the past year, they have been collaborating on the Theatre for Lifelong Learning project and developing solutions for keeping their students engaged and connected.

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Going “Live” Again: Reflections on Zoom, Copresence, & Liveness in a (Post)Pandemic World

Carla Neuss

Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA

Email: cneuss@ucla.edu

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In April 2020—only weeks after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic—the *New York Times* published an article titled “Why Zoom Is Terrible.” Quoting a gustatory simile from Sheryl Brahm of Missouri State University, the article declared, “In-person communication resembles video conferencing about as much as a real blueberry muffin resembles a packaged blueberry muffin that contains not a single blueberry but artificial flavors,