

# The Trainee Speaks:

## The potential role of the blog in training discourse

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Since its first post in November 2015, the *Theatre Dance and Performance Training (TDPT) Blog* (<http://theatredanceperformancetraining.org/>), an online platform associated with this journal, has attracted an extensive body of work concerning issues critical to theatre, dance and performance training. Among the authors contributing to the site are researchers, practitioners, and students engaging first-hand with training. Through Artist Awards, it has commissioned a series of substantial posts from, among others, [The Wardrobe Ensemble](#) about their training process for *Education, Education, Education*, [Asha Jennings-Grant](#) on her Movement Training for Motion Capture Performance, and [Marie Hallager Anderson](#) for a series of posts addressing Motherhood In/As Training. It has a close working relationship with the Performer Training Working Group of the Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) which has dedicated conference sessions to its posts. Readership and engagement have grown over the lifetime of the blog, developing an international and diverse community of artists, academics, practitioners and researchers who are engaged in the vital issues it discusses.

I joined the Blog Team as a co-editor in 2017 in order to help to curate discussions about performance training while also expanding my own networks as an Early Career Researcher. Over my time on the blog I have seen it work symbiotically with the journal. While articles in the journal are subject to the highest standards of peer review and editorial control, ensuring that scholarly values are upheld, the blog allows for a quicker (non-peer-reviewed) gestation from conceptualisation to publication in a way that directly transmits the voices of practitioners and researchers straight from the field. Between the two media, *TDPT* is able to represent training from a multitude of perspectives, allowing a fuller picture to emerge.

The *TDPT* Blog has sought to make itself a useful tool for teachers and trainers to deploy in their work. To establish how the Blog might be utilised in this way, I have used it with my students in the Third Year Drama module, 'Other' Stages at the University of Greenwich, UK. This module explores performance practices from a range of cultures as well as theories around postcolonialism, and asks the students to navigate the ethics of intercultural theatre-making in their final assessment by pitching an intercultural theatre project of their own devising. A programme of sustained psychophysical training runs throughout the module, guiding the students towards the embodiment of non-western performance physicalities. It is within this aspect of the module that I have utilised the Blog as a teaching tool over the past two years.

In the first year of running this course I asked the students to read a post by Maria Kapsali, from her 'Two Trainers Prepare' project. In this series of posts, Maria and Marie Hallager Anderson take turns to assign each other performance tasks and reflect on their experiences of performing them. What followed was a year-long dialogue between two practitioners from different disciplines, physically separated by distance (Maria in the United Kingdom and Marie in Denmark), but connected through the digital platform of the Blog.

These posts were immediately deployable because the performance instructions could be relayed directly to my students. The post that I selected was the first of the series, from Maria, and included the instructions:

*Find a place where you can stand in front of a tree in a distance that allows you to hold the entire tree in your visual field. (A window on the first or second floor of a building would work well).*

*You can stand either with the feet hip width apart or feet together...*

*Allow the space where the base of the neck meets the base of the skull to open. Allow the neck to flow down and imagine the skull is floating up.*

*Allow the shoulders to melt away from the neck and imagine the neck free and the head going forwards and up. ...*

*Do all of the above keeping the tree in your visual field. Once you go through them, keep these actions/sensations going and bring your attention to the tree, how it is rooted down and how it shoots up.*

[\(Kapsali, 2017\)](#)

Following this exercise, the students reported a sense of connection with nature, a greater sensitivity to their own body, and a loosening of tension in their spines. However, the proportion of the class that chose to engage with the task and to offer a written reflection was limited. The consensus from the rest was that they did not have the capacity to take on non-assessed work. In this instance, the task allowed a few students to extend themselves, but did not have a substantial effect on the majority.

In the second phase of my incorporation of the Blog into my teaching, I aimed to harness its digital nature. Upon reflection, my first experiment did not relate to the technology itself – it might just as easily have been conducted with the analogue technology of a paper worksheet. The novel feature of this technology is its potential for interaction, to be a site for exchange and expression as well as a source of information. The concept of ‘Web 2.0’ (DiNucci, 1999), itself now 20 years old, describes the qualitatively new phase in the development of the World Wide Web that is characterized by user-generated content and information exchange rather than a unidirectional flow of information from the publisher to the user.

The second phase in my use of the Blog in my teaching therefore asked the students to read and watch the post by Campbell Edinborough entitled ‘What are we Warming Up?’ ([Edinborough, 2016](#)). I selected this because ‘warming up’ is an activity with which the students were familiar and for which they had developed their own routines. This was therefore an element of the discourse around performer training in which the students were equipped to participate. My intention was to have the students post their own responses to Campbell Edinborough, but once again the pressures of their workload (added to by the financial necessity of most students having to work alongside their studies) meant that they were unable to do so. In this instance I am therefore curating their video responses as a reply to the original post. I see this as a limited success in that it did allow the student voice to be heard in the discourses of performer training even if it did not empower them to directly make this intervention themselves. The power of interactive web-based platforms such as the Blog lies in their ability to give voice to groups invested in performance training that have not often been heard in the wider academic discourse.

As I move this project into its third iteration, I have taken on the feedback from my first two experiences. In the context of my students’ lives, engaging with the Blog will have to be embedded

into the module's assessment structure. In my redesign of the course I will change one assessment item from a traditional essay to a Blog post that responds to a post they are stimulated by. This is designed to accomplish three things. Firstly, it will require the students to research current discourse around performer training as they search for a blog post to which they wish to respond. Secondly, it will ask them to formulate a response to their chosen post, something that requires them to absorb the material, reflect and research, and then write or record their own contribution. Thirdly, and most significantly, it will emphasize in a concrete way the importance of their own reflective practice as trainees. This realizes the democratizing potential inherent in the Web 2.0 age of the internet and steps away from the conception of training as a unidirectional transmission of knowledge from an authority to the empty vessel of the trainee. It instead emphasizes the process inherent in all training – a negotiation between a particular training and the reflective incorporation of that training by the actual and particular body of the trainee. It affirms that the process of training is not a simple replication of technique, but the embodied assimilation of practices that will find their home in each trainee in a unique way. By allowing the feedback of this process to be heard in the discourse around the discipline, the technology of the Blog allows us to capture the evolving dynamic of performer training. Such feedback might influence the ways that training is conducted and therefore facilitate a more organic and vital conversation between trainers and trainees.

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## References

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