

## [Slide 1 up] Wild Frontiers: Learning in Higher Education Institutions

I am a man in my mid-30's with very short hair, merging into baldness with stubble, wearing a green short sleeve shirt

Learning scenography in Higher Education Institutions presents iterative cycles of conflict, where heterogeneous personal perspectives are negotiated and mediated with the use of material tools and technology. These orientating scenographic frictions enable novice practitioners to recognise other perspectives and ways of working, adopting, adapting or discarding methods across professional material encounters. In Higher Education Institutions, scenography practices are scaffolded by tutors to enable novice scenographers to stage material worlds with others, to resolve conflict and progress practice.

### [slide 2]

In this interdisciplinary paper, I recognise Higher Education as a material culture, drawing on Hann's scenographics (2019) as a way of considering the socio-material components of learning scenography practice. I draw on Guiles (2012) notion of recontextualisation to consider the ways in which HEI learning might be drawn upon in the world of work and offer the following provocations:

- HEI's are wild frontiers where learners explore material, learning scenographic assemblages
- Within HEI's as wild frontier, practitioners build practitioner identities by encountering messy assemblages which can initially be destabilising
- Scenographic irritations force ruptures which provide space to evaluate personal ways of working, enabling practitioners to respond by staging new possibilities.
- This process of staging provides a meta-cognitive framework which can be recontextualised in professional practice – a stabilising process of re(wilding)

[slide] My name is Dr David Hockham and I am co-director of an internationally touring theatre company Dead Rabbits Theatre, which has just arrived back Edinburgh Fringe with Tiger Lady, the story of the first female Tiger Tamer. Here we won the award 'best immersive show' from Theatre Weekly

[slide] What the term immersive here appears to be alluding to, is to recognise the ways the different social and material methods of making theatre, the scenography, come together to build worlds with audiences, with judges citing lights, sound, set, costume and puppetry as the reason for the award. Dead Rabbits Theatre uses multiple scenography methods to form worlds on stage with its audience. In this paper, and in my PhD research I think about the ways in which learning worlds are created by students through the intersection of social and material components of education. A phenomena I call learning scenographics.

[slide] I am also senior lecturer of Theatre and Scenography at the University of Greenwich's Bathway Theatre, aligned to this role after my recent completion of a PhD awarded from UCL's Institute of Education which looked at how we learn and create worlds

in technical theatre education in Higher Education Institutions, having worked and taught in both conservatoires and universities for the past 13 years.

Using the language of scenography and the concept of the scenographic, my PhD combined theories of learning & practice with those from performance studies and today I'm going to bring together some of that theoretical thinking and re-cognise these in the context of 're-wilding,' the call for this conference and my offer of the frontier. In doing so I begin to learn how to articulate my PhD in different ways.

[slide] So what do I mean by frontier. Well, perhaps inspired by my recent trip to Calgary Canada where I got to dress up in my version of wild west realness, or perhaps invoking my inner 'trekky' frontiers are untapped and unexplored horizons. Wild Spaces which might be explored, dangerous spaces where cowboys might point a gun at you of Klingons hold you to account with a Batlith. K'Pla.

[slide] As a metaphor for the potential of learning in Higher Education, the notion of Wild Frontiers is quite alluring, a socio-spatial plane where knowledge might be constructed with others. Indeed as educators in the arts, we pride ourselves in developing student skills in critical thinking, problem solving and allowing people to find their own ways of doing. Within our disciplines, the practices of theatre and performance continue to evolve, and so to the scenography methods employed – as we adopt wider practice or allow performance forms to be porous with film, new media, science, and technology.

For the pedagogue, or so I conclude in my thesis, ensuring students are able to explore and find their personal way of doing is critical to developing the individual as a practitioner in scenography methods. Scenographers. Here I use scenographers as an umbrella term to describe the broad set of technical theatre roles in which our students might take up beyond the HEI, in lighting, sound, stage management. Practices where people bring together material components in socio-spatial ways.

[slide] The challenge, for those who train students in technical theatre methods however, is that the methods of technical theatre often have pre-defined sets of rules and ways of working. Indeed, conservatoires look to make students industry ready for the now, teaching them the ways of working of today so that they might enter into pre-defined teams in the west end or regional houses and work in specific ways. They offer students a set of languages to engage with those trained elsewhere so that they might already have a shared understanding of how they might do something. This is the profession. In this space we might imagine wild frontiers as having roads built on them, taking a student from places of periphery participation to Centres of Expertise.

[slide] A traditional Lave and Wenger model of learning moving someone from A-B, Novice-full participation where there is little time to explore the potentially dangerous fringes.

For the university, we embrace this wild frontier Arm students with phasers set to stun and beam individuals around the landscape, exploring sections of the wild before moving on and decentring what expertise might look like. This strategy re-orientates the landscape

[slide]

It creates people who will try different ways of working and bring together interesting combinations of socio-material, scenographic components. As such, heterogeneous possibilities of where what and how emerge for students. Yet in this exploration, the destination of where we might end up is often unclear and the road of the methods of the profession less trod. In this mode we might indeed be discovering the new ways of making and doing but perhaps are less versed in understanding how we might bring them together in professional ways.

[slide]

I argue there is a need for a middle ground between these two positions. Indeed, the starship Enterprise set course in particular directions to accomplish specific objectives but allowed time to diverge and encounter new discoveries. It's five year mission extended to one which was continuing, allowing the franchise to milk the brand and perhaps more importantly, recognise that the frontier is vast. Everything cannot be learnt in five years. With our students travelling through three years of HE, we must equip them for their continuing mission, to explore the new possibilities beyond the academy, and to continue to learn in wider practice contexts.

[slide]

The trekkies in the audience will know that by engaging in these strange new worlds, the crew of the enterprise learnt about new civilisations. Through these engagements, the crew adapted their working practices to each new encounter. They then moved on, armed with the knowledge co-created in situated contexts. These complex and unexplored environments were approached at times with learnt methodologies and pre-taught behaviours. At other times situations were unique and new methods and ways of working had to be created. Further, sometimes where situated activity arised, whilst they could have used. Pre-learnt methods, they chose a way of working which suited the situation best. Even the prime directive was bent a little if the team needed it to... each captain, commander, lieutenant and ensign had the autonomy to deploy their skills in personal ways, creating their own style of working which was championed.

Exploring the wild frontier came at a cost. Some people were injured and even died.  
Learning is dangerous in Wild Frontiers

[slide]

I argue that successful Higher education must:

- Allow students to develop personal ways of doing
- Support individuals to create unique and heterogeneous scenographer identities.
- Create environments where complex and processional scenographic assemblages are allowed to cause destabilising ruptures so that students can create new world possibilities in scaffolded landscapes
- Where students learn how to create these landscapes for themselves, recontextualising HEI experiences in the profession

This process already occurs within HEIs, but perhaps goes unnoticed or un-named. In shedding light on learning scenographics, I task pedagogues to revel in the creation of complex socio-material assemblages and allow students to both dwell in them for a while,

and support students to construct personal ways of working, forming emerging Professional identities

To demonstrate this process of learning I offer you an extract of an interview with Annabelle which formed part of my interview data within my PhD.

Annabelle is a costume student in their final year studying on an intense but broad technical theatre degree programme. They have chosen to specialise in costume. The following extract forms a short story which demonstrates the scaffolded process in which student learners build new, personal ways of working, out of learning scenographic irritations.

Whilst I use an example from a university programme, similar examples of learning scenographic stories were encountered in interviews in drama schools as well. Importantly I am not advocating for either model of institution, but rather for the type of learning which might happen within them.

[slide]

Annabelle I found the role of costume designer quite difficult. I mean, not the role itself but working with a professional director you know. I mean, they have been doing it for a long time and I'm only a student and so I thought well what do I know? We have to present our ideas at production meetings and it's quite a public forum. Everyone is there. Those on the course and the director and I never knew if the director would like my idea or not... Sometimes they said yes straight away and other times they were like no. I found the whole thing made me quite anxious. To make it worse... I am not very good at drawing so if I sketch out my ideas they can be quite messy and I am embarrassed to show them. They are not to a professional standard.

Interviewer How did you overcome your anxiety to get the work done?

Annabelle Oh, I asked my tutor. That really helped. They were like, well you don't have to draw what you are thinking you can show it, especially in this type of production where the work is devised... theirs a level of exploration you know, it's not about being right or wrong... different people play with ideas to see how they might come together. Anyway, they said that the way I was thinking about the design was really exciting and that I should take some of the stuff I have pulled and made and take it to the rehearsal.

At this point in the interview, Annabelle describes how much she respected her tutors and went on a tangent about how much she respected the tutors' professional work. Bringing the student back to the conversation I asked

[slide]

Interviewer You said you were told to take the items to the rehearsal room, what happened next?

Annabelle Oh, my tutor came with me that afternoon. They then grabbed stuff out of my suitcase and during the rehearsal, at points that did not interrupt the flow of a

scene, they grabbed stuff out of the suitcase and said to the actor and try this on and they just did it. And I was like, oh no, wait, that doesn't fit so I grabbed another jacket or offered up pairs of shoes you know and the director sort of ignored us and then the actor would somehow move differently because the costume was heavy or whatever, or an unusual cut or different shoes and then the actor had a really open chat about how the costume made them feel and the director was like that's really great and that made you work differently and they suggested a handkerchief and a pair of braces and so I found something and well the costume kind of just happened

Interviewer It just happened?

Annabelle Yes, I mean, it was my ideas and they were kind of agreed just like that and so... sorry what was the question?

[slide]

Interviewer How did that change what you did next?

Annabelle Oh yeah, well, at the next production meeting I started to bring clothes and stuff to them and it allowed me to talk to the director about tangible things rather than abstract ideas you know and then I thought well, now I'm starting a new project and I'm doing things completely differently

Interviewer In what way

Annabelle Well like, for a start I was like, well I could take photos and gather pictures and show stuff instead of drawing right? I mean it's not what I did last time at all or anything but I was like, there are no actors when we start conversations so I mean that's a way of showing my thinking. And I'd forgotten I could use Photoshop which I used to just play around with and so I have sort of created a style of collage that just looks good and shows off my ideas. I suppose it was about finding another way to overcome drawing before rehearsals start and away from the costume store. And I have already had a conversation with the next director to say, the way that I work is to bring items into the rehearsal room for your actors to try on and they were like great.

In this extract Scenographic irritations force destabilising ruptures which provide space to evaluate personal ways of working, enabling both student and tutor practitioners to respond by staging new possibilities. [slide]

- Annabelle, recognised that she could not use drawing as a tool.
- This created friction as in her world, drawing was the professional way in which to share design ideas.
- This at first destabilised her ability to undertake the task in hand
- It became a moment of orientation as both tutor and students were orientated towards the socio-material irritations, the route of the problem within Annabelle's scenography activity.

- Supported by the tutor Annabelle created a method of co-constructing costumes with the wider team, director and actors
- This formed a new method of sharing ideas and designs
- Recognising that they were uneasy with particular traditional methods, Annabelle formed hybrid ways of working, drawing on knowledge from wider contexts and re-contextualising these into the specific situated contexts of the next costume design process.
- This created a personal way of working, which they can then iteratively recontextualise into wider professional paradigms.

[slide]

Within this paper, to re-wild is a process in which

- The wild frontier of scenographic possibilities are explored by learners in HEI contexts.
- new situated ways of working are learnt forming plural professional ways of working
- Graduates bring with them new ways of working into industry, recontextualising the knowledge learnt in HEI's
- Our graduates become the professionals of the future.