Capturing the Ephemeral: The Benefits and Challenges of Using Digital Mediums/Methods to Archive and Reflect Upon Teaching and Theatre-Making Within Drama.

Brief Summary

This case study is comprised of a set of 14 interviews, with a specific focus on teachers and researchers who work in practitioner settings – including Applied Drama, ethnographic field work, site-specific work, rehearsal footage, and in classrooms. The outcome included departmental presentation, dialogue and an edited video collection of the various interviewees.

The interviewees included six members of research staff and eight postgraduate researchers.

Context and Background

The drama department is a lively and often collaborative research environment with a strong emphasis on the link between theory and practice.

With about 60 currently-listed postgraduate researchers, the research interests span a diverse and international range. These include practice-based PhDs focusing on actor-training, psychophysical approaches, music theatre, and directing. Many research students choose to complete a more traditional PhD, but with elements of practice embedded – such as applied drama, contemporary performance, theatre history, and site-specific community work.

For undergraduate study, the drama department is one of the largest in the UK. Supported by recent investment (£3.7 million) the facilities are considered to be industry-standard, with the 2006 completion of the Alexander Building. Drama was ranked 1st in the UK for overall student satisfaction in the 2010 National Student Survey.

The department has 24 full time research staff, with a thriving rotation of supplemental teaching fellows who often have professional theatre careers. The drama website cites staff research interests as including: ‘theories of actor-training, non-western performance, twentieth-century theatre practitioners, dramaturgy and playwriting, new media, live art, site-specific performance, gender and
performance in the seventeenth century, music theatre, voice training, arts management, theatre and religion, and the politics of culture."

Additionally, the department is supported by three full-time technicians (J.P. Primrose, Chris Mearing and Andy Yarwood), who handle the myriad of student productions, visiting performances, staff research needs, and various formal digital capturing needs of the department. The department also houses the Exeter Digital Archives, a vast collection of digital footage of international importance.

The Challenge or Motive

The drama department is a busy and interactive space, with a regular seasonal cycle of productions and contact hours between teaching staff and students. Many of the research staff and PGRs are artists in their own right, often maintaining a career as a professional actor/director/playwright/facilitator/teacher/administrator in addition to their academic responsibilities. Because of the dual nature of these two roles, and perhaps due to the intensive pace of the academic calendar, spaces to speak frankly with each other about our own reflective or archival methods are rare... in particular spaces where the positive potentials and challenges can be articulated together. What has emerged from the case study is the necessity of creating spaces for these kinds of dialogues – carving out the requisite time for such conversations to take place.

The department has an exemplary and internationally-lauded archive, curated by Peter Hulton. This collection, the Exeter Digital Archives, houses a vast back-catalogue of digital footage from rehearsal spaces, productions, symposiums, conferences, site-specific work, dance studios, and even the department's own productions. Because of this history, an interview with Peter Hulton was imperative to the study, and his range of expertise provided a helpful background to the currently blossoming and accessible use of digital mediums to capture artistic work. The efficiency and accessibility of present technology, however, means that such archival practices are increasingly done by artists/teachers/researchers themselves, in an attempt to reflect upon their own work, to market their practice, to share their methodologies, and to keep a record. These practices, in my own experience, can emerge within an artist's work without adequate time to consider the implications and responsibilities. Creating space for mutual conversations about such topics was the aim of this case study.

The case study attempted to audit the variety of ways in which staff and research students were already archiving and reflecting on their practice/teaching. It also aimed to probe slightly the ethical and practical challenges of digital archiving, as well as the potential extended outcomes for the students or participants involved in the work. The core questions included:

1. How are we already archiving/capturing our artistic process?
2. How are we already archiving/capturing our teaching process?
3. Why do it? What is the intended usage?
4. In what ways do we then reflect upon our own work as artists and as teachers?
5. In what ways are students/participants benefiting or learning from these mediums?
6. What are the ethical challenges of such methods? What responsibilities exist?

Several thematic topics arose out of these questions, including (but not limited to) the following general areas of interest and response.
1. The impossibility of capturing a visceral and live performance medium within any format. What are the potentials of a digital archive in keeping alive something that is temporary and ephemeral? What are the negative outcomes of this?

2. Cameras as a second eye or different gaze in the studio space – the challenges of this both in terms of facilitation and in terms of participant response.

3. The necessary technical skills to digitally capture at a high aesthetic level. The difference between theatre skills and film skills. A lack of time to take on the requisite training. The potentials of working in an interdisciplinary capacity to team-up skill sets.

4. The grey area for many PhD students and early career researchers about placing their work on a public arena. (Blogging emerged as a regular means of archiving theatrical material, but many had concerns about the public nature of such an archive.)

5. The challenges of finding best practice models as a researcher or a practitioner... how do we share our work and learn from each other? What is the value of best practice? What are the extended problems with capturing it?

6. To what end an archive actually prompts reflection and praxis. The lack of time to adequately look back and engage reflexively with our own work. This can be broadly summarised as a need to 'slow down' and reflect upon what we do and why we do it.

7. Who are the intended audiences for such archives? Whose voice is represented? What intention drives the work? Working with vulnerable populations, extended privacy concerns, and the lack of a roadmap with digital mediums all emerged as key tensions. How do you balance the imperative of participant privacy/ownership against the need for evidence in a market-driven world?

The Digital Literacy Agenda

Intended outcome(s) of the case study:

- An audit of the variety of methods/ mediums already being used within drama to capture performative methods, teaching practices, and off-site work.
- A general analysis of the ethical/practical concerns involved in such digital archiving.
- A set of recommendations about how such practices could be enriched or developed to better inform researcher methods, reflexive teaching practice, praxis, and student learning.
- Prompting a set of departmental dialogues regarding digital literacies, archiving and capture.

The Project in Practice

Because this case study took the form of an audit, it never intended to enact a specific change in practice. It was an attempt to create spaces to talk to each other about archiving practice, and to stimulate and provoke the subject – render the invisible practices visible. What is of note, however, was the clear evidence that many of the interviewees were eager for an opportunity to discuss these topics... and consensus that such opportunities for frank conversations were rare. Many of the interviewees mentioned both the insular nature of their work and the lack of reflection time to sit with their own practice and examine it retrospectively. This seemed equally true for both teaching practice and their own research work as artists.

Throughout the 14 interviews, which included two joint session conversations, several topics of importance to the teaching practices in the department were raised. These were further discussed at
the department's annual Research Round-Up sessions in June, as part of a visioning toward better digital collaboration amongst GTAs and staff.

The case study findings were also presented informally at the Humanities Showcase event, to a voluntary college-wide audience interested in gaining skills around digital literacy.

Additionally, a documentary film of the interviews was screened at the Drama Research Round-Up Conference, followed by a discussion prompted by the points raised in the film by many of the interview participants and an external audience.

In essence, therefore, the case study prompted a series of dialogues which would not have been possible otherwise, and proved to elicit several potential shifts in teaching methodology and artist collaboration.

**Issues and Problems**

As a partial audit of departmental practice, the case study achieved its intended goals. The participant response was enthusiastic, and the resulting conversations were captured in digital video interviews ranging from 45 to 90 minutes. However, the case study did not include an intended impact on the research community, beyond the prompting of a necessary dialogue about such topics. Perhaps this could be seen as a missing piece to the study, but was not possible given the financial and time constraints of the work within the academic calendar.

**Benefits and Impacts**

It seems clear from the findings of this case study that the outcome most needed is space to reflect and dialogue about these mediums and their infiltration into artistic practice. Even for those who kept a wholly non-digital archive, reflection space is rare.

There will be two specific longer-term outcomes from the case study itself within drama.

The first is the implementation of a weekly teaching support group which will be convened (and departmentally funded) by senior teaching fellow Fiona Macbeth, beginning in October 2012. This group will meet to disperse best practice teaching methods, to share experiences, and to reflect upon the ongoing GTA responsibilities within the department. As a part of this group, the department's practical marking criteria are undergoing an evaluation and revision. These outcomes were in part stimulated by the digital literacies case study providing a holding container for 'necessary frank conversations.' There has been a department-wide acknowledgement that we need to slow down and find more time to talk to each other about what we're doing.

The second outcome is less tangible, but perhaps that is appropriate. For many of the interviewees, digital literacies have represented something to be fearful about or tentative with. At our June Research Round-Up, seven PhD researchers presented their work, and two of these presentations the digital was embedded in a far more holistic manner than we had seen before. One presenter interacted with a video of his ethnographic interview participants... speaking back and forth in a performed dialogue with the digital voices. Another presenter created a podcast version of his paper, broadcasting it as a voice-over whilst he enacted an embodied physical piece in front of the speakers. To my mind,
these two papers represent a 'freeing' within the department that has occurred vis-a-vis the frank conversations about the digital.

Conclusions

The specific thematic findings listed above are more closely explored here. They are grouped under issues of 'common concern', meaning that they emerged in three or more interviews as a regularly occurring topic. Links at the top of each theme connect to a brief video compilation of interview excerpts related to that theme.

**Common Concern 1: The impossibility of capturing a live event in digital form.**

There is an inherent tension in discussing the use of digital mediums within performance studies, where there is a strong emphasis on the live/present event. Despite a wealth of literature of mediated forms of performance, many artists and teachers who work in theatre spaces have reservations about the value of 'capturing' what they do. This was representatively captured within the 14 interviews. Many of the interviewees expressed an internal tension between a curiosity about the potentials of digital mediums capturing their work and a strong set of reservations about the limitations of those same mediums.

Peter Hulton (Exeter Digital Archives) speaks in the video clips about viewing the use of digital capture or video as a 'harmonic' of the live experience – not an attempt to copy or duplicate the live experience, but an art form in its own right with a separate existence.

However, despite this viewpoint, this was still a common area of concern for many of the interviewees in the case study. What if, in attempting to 'capture' our work, it is framed as something other or lesser? It is impossible to adequately capture the visceral and sensory live event, with its 'perceptual experience'. However, increasingly we are asked to provide evidence of what we do, to discuss it in our research, to apply for grants, to provide visual examples. Many of the interviewees struggled with this.

Similarly, there was a sense of potential/possibility about new ways of capturing and archiving performance. Body-cameras, still photos, audio and voice over, all provide alternative means to create an enduring record of something ephemeral and temporary.

**Common Concern 2** Cameras as a second eye or different gaze in the studio space – the challenges of this both in terms of facilitation and in terms of participant response.

Both in the teaching classroom and in the theatre-making-space, the camera seemed to provide a shift in tone for the participants. Many of the interviewees avoided using digital capture for this reason, pointing out that the learning/rehearsal space needs to be safe and risk-free for those trying out new ideas. A few interviewees mentioned that they found it difficult moving back and forth from the facilitator/artist head space into a tech-focused mode of thinking... (did I put the spare battery in? Is the camera angle still right? Has the memory card run out?) distracting from being fully present with the group.

Others expressed concern not over the use of the camera in the space (which they saw as necessary for funder evaluation, efficacy evidence, and marking purposes) but they were hesitant to show the footage to the participants. This reticence was usually driven by a fear that the footage would not fully capture the true tone of the work, or that the participants' confidence would be adversely affected, or that
watching the same work back on film layers a different set of aesthetic criteria – a professional 'movie' gloss – which workshop footage couldn't/shouldn't achieve.

All interviewees expressed concern about the digital means of capture becoming obtrusive or alienating the safe space of the classroom/studio. Several mentioned that in their experience, the comfort and relaxedness of participants disappears when a camera is introduced, and this has a lasting impact on the quality of the work created.

However, several participants strongly advocated for a protracted and regular usage of digital film in both the classroom and theatre-making settings. Timing seemed to be key. Two interviewees mentioned that if the camera was present from the first day of a process, participants soon grew used to it and ignored it, whilst a later addition of digital film could be quite disconcerting for those who were used to working without it.

**Common Concern 3:** The necessary technical skills to digitally capture at a high aesthetic level. The difference between theatre skills and film skills. A lack of time to take on the requisite training. The potentials of working in an interdisciplinary capacity to team-up skill sets.

When asked what kept them from using further digital methods, all interviewees cited a lack of technical skill as one of the primary reasons. This was followed in several cases by a discussion of the difference between theatre/performance studies and film studies, and some interviewees advocated working with a fellow expert from a media background to achieve stronger aesthetic outcomes.

There seemed to be either a sense of futility - ('I don't have the time or the energy' or 'That's not my field of expertise, I'm not good with technology!') or a sense of resistance for many people.

For those who expressed interest in gaining further digital capture skills, the limitations of time were still a factor. Unless the increase in skill set could directly impact their ability to deliver quality work, to gain funding, or to improve their practice, such trainings were seen as secondary to the immediate presence in the studio.

Aesthetic criteria also regularly arose as a point of contention. Several interviewees expressed indignation or frustration over the 'youtube' promotions which are run for various performance projects. Some saw these promotional videos (often de-voiced montage sequences with music playing over short clips) as distorting theatre work so that it could be translated into a 'byte' as one interviewee put it. However, when faced with the knowledge that such promotions can be required or necessary parts of funded project outcomes, a divide seems to occur amongst the interviewees regarding this kind of marketing tool. Other interviewees saw this kind of promotional use of digital capture as a necessary means of widening awareness about performance work in an increasingly visual commodity culture.

**Common Concern 4:** There is a grey area for many PhD students and early career researchers about placing their artistic-process-based work in a public arena.

(Blogging emerged as a regular means of archiving theatrical material, but a potentially problematic public one.) When asked about the method with which they captured their process, only a few respondents regularly used video/stills. All 14 kept some kind of written record, but many were hesitant about making this record visible to others, even in a heavily-edited form.

A three-tiered continuum seemed to emerge, ranging from handwritten records, through a personal computer in word processing form, and into the world of the internet via blogs or websites. Some interviewees stated that their recording of their practice took place only in occasionally scribbled notes
in the margins of their lesson plan, or on bits of scrap paper during the studio session. Others kept typed lesson plans or rehearsal schedules and adapted them according to how the group responded. One interviewee pointed out that he would return to the Word file for his lesson immediately after a session, type a few changes and then not look at it again until he taught that session again the following term. Finally, there were those who kept an online record of their artistic process — either through a blog or website. Several of these interviewees stated that the blog was ‘just for me’ as an archive, and that any additional public audience was fine, but not the intention.

Regardless of where people fell on this continuum of comfort, all 14 interviewees brought up the challenge of finding the time to return to an archive for reflection. Some interviewees pointed out that they rarely led the same workshop or taught the same module twice, and so returning to an archive had limited value to them as they needed to move toward creating a totally new way of working. Others pointed out that the reflective process happened in an intuitive and internal way, and that it didn’t require external note-taking or a return to watch back footage. Many said they would have loved to spend time reflecting upon their captured data, but the time involved in editing and watching back was too demanding for them to build such reflection into their research/teaching schedules.

One resulting recommendation from this is the integration of a reflective teacher approach within the LTHE model, or as an alternative approach to the University’s teacher training. Many best-practice models exist which can help to instil a set of reflective practice skills for teachers, and it would be a helpful supplement to the current LTHE curriculum.

One positive outcome that emerged from the practice of placing an archive within a blog was the way that it served as a practice ground for ‘real’ academic outcomes – published papers, conference keynotes, etc. There was a division regarding the legitimacy of the public sphere as a useful space to explore ideas/practice in their more raw form.

**Common Concern 5: The challenges of finding best practice as a researcher or a practitioner**

How do we share our work and learn from each other? Many interviewees spoke about the challenges of finding best practice models within their own field of research. This was true across the boards – from researchers working with historical materials to those studying contemporary theatre companies. Most of this was related to digital dispersal. In an increasingly digital world, companies with records that have not been digitised are more difficult to access/write about.

Additionally, several researchers spoke about the disparate policies of various artists or theatre-makers regarding copyright of their digital materials. Some theatre companies distribute their work for free upon request for academic scholarship. Others consider the material copyrighted and require payment, and others don’t digitally archive their work at all...requiring an academic to provide the digital capture themselves through personal study. One interviewee pointed out that British theatre companies are far less prolific about capturing/archiving than some European countries. This range of practices requires researchers to be responsive to the artists’ needs, but also prompts the question: do the companies who are better at digital capture/archiving ensure a stronger presence as a source of study? Are they potentially ‘easier’ to research and discuss because of the wider dispersal of their practice through digital media?

For those practitioners working with vulnerable populations, this is an infinitely loaded question. Many facilitators who specialise in Applied Drama don’t document their work at all for reasons of participant privacy. Others may document for grant-funders, but not for general dispersal. It is rare for an Applied practitioner to regularly capture and discuss the details of their work in any kind of public forum – academic or otherwise. Applied work is more often discussed through descriptive textual summary
using pseudonyms, and in a generalised conference setting, without images or video footage. These protective measures were universally supported by all the interviewees, but grey areas tend to emerge in two key areas: the use of ‘evidence-based’ digital capture for funding agencies, and the sharing of best practice methods (virtually) with other practitioners. Also, there seems to be a divide in opinion regarding the voluntary permissive usage of digital output which the participants wish to see dispersed... the use of digital mediums as an outcome the participants want to pursue.

**Common Concern 6:** Slowing Down. To what end does an archive actually prompt reflection and praxis? The lack of time to adequately look back and engage reflexively with our own work.

For the majority of the interviewees, there was an emphatic consensus that we need more time to talk together, to slow down and discuss what is happening in our work. It was clearly established that despite differences in working methods, participant groups, and mediums, that most of the GTAs and research staff in the department share concerns about the digital means of capture that demand frank dialogue.

What this case study provided was an excuse to talk together. Some of these conversations took place digitally and virtually – as we watched and witnessed some of the interview clips together and then had a dialogue about what we’d seen. Other conversations were spurred by ideas that had arisen in the case study interviews, that spilled onward and travelled into action.

Many interviewees noted that they often recorded things from their practice for ‘documentation’, but never had the time or space to return to that archive to reflect and think forward. The momentum and speed of both the research environment and the world of arts funding tends toward forward motion, rather than stillness. Ironically perhaps, the case study’s digital form actually created a brief moment of stasis together, where we were held still long enough to ask each other questions about archive and capture, about praxis, and about how we improve at what we do. This stillness, this stasis, was much needed. Perhaps this is an important way in which digital forms can enrich our busy lives... or maybe we need to find even more ways to slow down and ask each other questions.

**Common Concern 7:** Who are the intended audiences for such archives? What intention drives the work? Whose voice is represented in an archive? Working with vulnerable populations, what are the extended privacy concerns and ethical imperatives? Are there potential artistic outcomes of digital technologies within the arts – rather than a method of capture, a means for voice and agency as an aesthetic outcome driven by the participants?

Such concerns as those listed above all seem to trickle back to the same question. Capture to what end? Who benefits? Many interviewees expressed clarity that the captured/archive materials was simply to enrich and improve their own practice. Both as teachers and as artists/facilitators, simply having a record of your work can be helpful, as a memory-aid and a launching pad for future work.

However, there were a few key areas of concern about potential audiences for archived artistry – which fell into the following categories: 1) The general public, 2) Funders, 3) External Markers/Assessors, 4) the participants 5) other artists/facilitators. Whilst few of the interviewed people were concerned about other artists viewing the footage, there were strong concerns about the general public being able to access and view their work. This concern, however, sits somewhat dissonantly alongside the necessity of making their work accessible, promoting their research profile, attending and presenting at conferences, and attracting funding. This contradiction seems to result in each individual setting their own boundaries/intentions for their work.
For those who don't archive regularly in any digital format, the privacy concerns, importance of the 'present moment' and sanctity of the rehearsal/classroom space are far more important than any perceived positive outcomes to be found in dispersing the archive. Others found ways of maintaining the 'present moment' and negotiating the challenges of privacy – through the use of permission forms, through an external camera-operator, through the use of still photos and textual summary to replace video. There were some interviewees who actively sought an external audience for their work, stating that sharing the stories and voices of the participants was part of the work itself, and that their continued and active role as named and voiced participants in this sharing was essential.

While not all of the interview subjects work with hard-to-reach populations, all were indeed concerned about the ethics of their archiving methods. Several interviewees spoke at length about the impossibility of using any video or still images within their work, due to the extremely vulnerable nature of their participant populations (domestic violence survivors, adults with developmental disabilities, etc.) Either due to institutional restrictions about image usage, or due to their own ethical guidelines as a facilitator/researcher, they would not consider using digital documentation within their studio or teaching work. However, the issue of providing evidence to funding agencies proved problematic in all these cases, and when encouraged to speak further, several interviewees mentioned that these restrictions (while necessary and important) prove to be hugely problematic when it comes to talking about their work in a research context.

Because of this, the subject of institutional change, or a paradigm shift arose at several points.

Other interviewees articulated a sense of obligation, or even responsibility to think about the potentials of digital mediums as an artistic output, rather than just a documentation of a live process. Digital storytelling, performative conference papers, named and credited ethnographic video clips, and participant blogs all arose as possible outcomes of various theatre projects... driven by the interests of the participants themselves. Again, a dual response seemed to arise – those who felt their responsibility was to protect the invisibility of participants by camouflaging their identity and those who felt the right approaches were open and transparent methods which credited sources and checked output with them regularly.

These differences of opinion were influenced by the diverse range of participant populations accessed by various researchers. Another topic which regularly emerged was the lack of a roadmap or clear set of universal principles which exist for disclosure. Many facilitators had to draw their own ethical line in the sand regarding particular methods and procedures. Again, it seems clear that space for dialogue and frank conversations is needed in order to share our concerns, hesitations, passions, advocacies, and tensions in this work.

Additional Information

Excerpt clips from the interviews have been edited into 7 short videos, compiled under the heading of 'Common Concerns'. This is an extremely selective set of clips, and if you are interested in seeing the full footage from any of the interviews, please contact ewalcon@gmail.com. The full footage will be stored in a safe hard drive and available until 2015. All interviewees have granted permission for the interviews to be used and viewed within academic/research contexts.

See also: Researcher briefing on using video in research

Interviewees:
Staff:

Dr. Anna Harpin (Lecturer)
Dr. Bryce Lease (Lecturer)
Fiona Macbeth (Senior teaching fellow)
Peter Hulton (Archivist, Exeter Digital Archives)
Dr. Richard Feltham (Teaching fellow)
Dr. Megan Alrutz (Visiting professor, University of Texas)

Research Students/GTAs:

Meghan Johnston (Applied, Domestic Violence)
Kris Darby (Site-specific/archival study of walking practice)
Solomon Lennox (Ethnographic approaches to boxing performance)
Ilaria Pinna (Contemporary Italian political theatre)
Sarah Evans (Facilitation and theatre education)
Erin Walcon (Dialogic theatre with young people)
Jens Peters (German and British rehearsal methodologies)
Rebecca Savory (Brazilian processional performance)