

***Re atumela phetogo*¹: Africanisation in Embodied Actor-training Performance Platforms Incorporating Multimodal Learning**

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Abstract

This article reports on the implementation of multimodal creative training employed for embodied performance courses that include physical theatre and voice studies for actors. Awareness of embodiment is imperative for training actors, which in turn underpins the inherent nature of a visceral African performer and conceptual performance. However, attention to embodiment as a site of learning has been sporadic and paradoxically under-documented within the area of adult performing arts education. This article focuses on the potential of multimodality to challenge and re-imagine actor-training through implementation of performance platforms incorporating embodied-learning/performance/ space(s) (embodied-LPS). The performance platform training was initially designed for the physical theatre training of Tshwane University of Technology (TUT) students in 2000, and this article reflects on how this multimodal training approach may be validated when reflecting on its application to the voice course since 2011. Using a reflective research design, association of practice was identified through lecturer's observation and reflection on the teaching and assessment strategies employed to cluster sample groups of acting-training Bachelor of Technology (BTech) students. Strategies embrace multimodal, self-directed and cooperative learning, that integrate reflexive practice-based principles. The performance platforms are primarily practical applications of theoretical underpinnings that are explored, reflected

¹ English translation of the Setswana: 'we welcome the change'.

upon and interpreted. Within the South African higher-education environment, the documentation and reflection in this article serve to validate that such multimodal (re)conceptual performance creativity facilitates transformation for the creative student through ownership learning and co-creation of new knowledge.

Keywords: embodied learning; embodied performance; experiential; adult performing arts education; Africanisation; multimodal learning

Introduction

To concede, theatre is essentially an unavoidable hybrid of inherited, borrowed, stolen, and invented practices and ideas (Murray & Keefe 2007; Sánchez-Colberg 2007). Therefore, a framework in which to define any one practice as ‘embodied’ more than another is nearly impracticable.

This article describes the embodied-learning/performance/space(s) multimodal learning performance platform, named embodied-LPS, implemented at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). Embodied-LPS in this context is primarily employed for embodied actor-training. The performance platform training draws on experiential learning² and applies multimodal teaching³ and creative practice. It serves to concretise the effective utilisation

² Experiential learning is also referred to as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration. Experiential Learning emphasises the central role that experience plays in the learning process, an emphasis that distinguishes it from other learning theories. The term ‘experiential’ is used to differentiate Experiential Learning from cognitive learning theories, which tend to emphasise cognition over affect, and behavioural learning theories that deny any role for subjective experience in the learning process (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis 2001). Experiential learning theory defines learning as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience’ (Kolb 2015:49).

³ Multimodal learning and teaching environments allow instructional elements to be presented in more than one sensory mode (visual, aural, written), therefore, through several different sensory modalities, simultaneously or in tandem.

of performance platforms from our perspective as actor-training lecturers within a diverse multicultural and multilingual South African higher education context. To achieve this, our lived experiences and observations are juxtaposed and related to relevant literature to frame the training which centres on embodiment. Specifically, the performance platform employs a three-pronged approach to embodiment: embodied-learning/performance/space(s)⁴ (embodied-LPS). The coalescing of these three distinct embodiment contexts will be delineated in this article towards promoting a comprehensive decolonised and Africanised actor-training through multimodal performance platforms. Further, the validation of such a performance platform as a means of andragogy actor-training, how they have evolved, and how they integrate the three embodied-LPS practices has been articulated.

The embodied-LPS training facilitates transformation of the creative student through ownership of the learning. The implementation through a multimodal training performance platform was designed in 2000 for the TUT Drama students specialising in physical theatre. This article reflects on how the performance platform may be validated as an embodied-LPS training approach when applied to the voice course since 2011. Using reflective research design, our assessment stems from observation and reflection on a cluster sample of a 120 BTech⁵ drama students from TUT over six consecutive years (2011 - 2016). On average, 20 BTech students complete this process as a study elective per academic year. Data gathering included observation, reflective, and reflexive approaches. Thereby further enabling a qualitative argument for the actor's body-and-voice development in a diverse setting.

⁴ *Embodied learning* is interpreted as a somatic approach to learning that considers both the individual's entire experienced history and current experience. *Embodied performance* is applied as an interplay between efficiency, productivity, acting, and entertainment, thus incorporating acting within the broader scope of performance. *Embodiment* in relation to the utilisation of *space* is considered both as a psychological place of being, as well as the physical thoughts on space as a site for literal activation and participation.

⁵ A BTech (Bachelareous Technologiae) refers to a four-year degree proffered within a University of Technology in South Africa that places emphasis on pragmatic and vocational training.

Context

This article frames the use of embodied-LPS and primarily outlines these practices/metaphysical approaches within African perspectives due to the context that the performance platform unfolded and developed.

Embodied performance in Africa may be as ingrained in culture as is theatre, where 'African theatre can be seen as a habit that is as old as organized human communities' (Motsa 2001: 35). Further, Kamlongera (2005: 134) endorses the indigenisation of theatre by shifting away from the Western tradition of literary drama where the African theatre practitioner is urged to undo the 'shackles that bind him to the colonial heritage'. Storytelling and text are enhanced through physicality, which is in turn informed by performance traditions (Lewis 2013). Akin to its pre-colonial indigenous dramatic forms, African theatre⁶ continues to be a visual and performing art dependent on forms of communication other than verbal language (Amankular & Akafor 1988).

Schechner (2013) substantiates that performance is a cultural process and an unfolding performance rather than a refined structure. In the contemporary world, cultures are constantly interacting, and subsequently, performance displays intercultural influences. Within this evolving practice the body of the performer in space is fundamental. Thus, it may be posed that embodiment is a central component in any performance.

Particularly in a South African performance context, Fleishman (1997) suggests that for most people making theatre in South Africa, the written word alone is insufficient to portray or explain the full complexity of the reality they face. Rather, these demands should be met or understood through the physical engagement of an embodied actor through performance (Lewis 2010). The need for embodied-actor training is therefore imperative within the South African context, as it shifts focus to 'organic congruencies' which Munro (2018: 5) describes as the similarities all humans share on anatomical, physiological, and psychological levels. Therefore, through embodiment in performance and organic congruencies, a collective culture or communication may be forged.

Similarly, Msila (2007) states that classrooms cannot be divorced from the societies they reflect and that is certainly true of the diverse contexts present within the learning performance platform discussed. The necessity of

⁶ In African theatre the performative traditions of dance, acting, and music are not separate, they all form a coalesced performance mode.

multimodality in learning expressed through creative practice is also paramount to ‘complex and diverse transitional educational contexts’ (Archer & Newfield 2014: xvi). While these wide-ranging multimodal creative practices are present in arts, specific pedagogical offerings are possible (Andrew 2014).

Although the act of acting could be deemed as an embodied activity, certain methodologies may be deemed more effective in the training of a well-round African actor, where applied acting methods have long since included emphasis on both the physical and the mind. While embodied acting is understood as the systemic interplay between non-verbal communication, thought, voice and gesture, self and character, as well as empathy, imagination, and emotion; embodied performance incorporates acting within the broader scope of performance.

Findings in cognitive science pertaining to acting suggest that the inner and outer cannot be separated due to the reflexive integrated relationship between physicality, thought, emotion, and expression (Kemp 2012). This inner-outer inseparability suggests that, in acting, it may not be viable to refer to psychological approaches or physical approaches independently if body and mind work holistically. Therefore, the inner-outer inseparability implies all acting is embodied.

If all acting is indeed to be considered as embodied, one could also argue that this is of specific relevance in a multicultural and multilingual context as the actor’s lived experience will be central to the development of embodied acting. This serves as a point of departure for the multimodal learning and application that is discussed within this article as it is concerned with the conceptual, physical, and vocal development of the actor-in-training within diverse cultural contexts. Archer and Newfield (2014: xvi) recognise the role of the trainer in the actor’s context, ‘The pedagogic potential of multimodality to challenge, re-think, and re-make educational practices in a complex and diverse transitional education context, such as South Africa, in which both teachers and students are understood as designers of meaning’.

Towards embodied-actor training, both performative applications in physical theatre, as well as the performing voice, offer a participatory embodied learning approach to performance that deals more with the direct translation of a process or concept into theatre. Lerman (in Schenck 2013: webpage) describes, ‘(W)hen you embody a process, you start to realise what you don’t understand, and you begin to ask questions because you want to get the movements right’.

This suggests that an embodied approach in the actor's physical and vocal development may be deemed crucial for holistic training. In embodied learning, the holistic bodily processes are the medium through which we internalise knowledge. Applied in conjunction with theatre-making the holistic bodily process is where the conceptual practice is externalised in/through performance. Performative principles of body, space, and time apply.

A holistic approach to learning and knowing is inherent within many non-Western perspectives (Merriam & Bierema 2014). In these contexts, knowledge acquisition is not sought merely for individual development, but rather to benefit the whole community. The holistic view towards learning is found in African *ubuntu* – basic respect and compassion for others in society through spirituality, consensus-building, and dialogue (Nafukho 2006; Higgs 2003). However, 'to accomplish more holistic learning raises the stakes for educators to build accessible and motivating learning environments for a range of learners' (Merriam & Bierema 2014: 245).

To this end, learning and diversity will be briefly explored within Africanisation to further construct the intent towards a diversified-learning within the discussions of the training platform.

Africanisation

Various authors writing on Africanisation offer varied viewpoints on what they understand Africanisation to mean or entail (Letsekha 2013). Notable voices in the discourse include: Makgoba (1997) who emphasises culture and identity, noting that Africanisation is a process of inclusion that stresses the importance of affirming African cultures and identities in a world community; and Ramose (1998: ii-xii) who frames Africanisation as Afrocentrism that embraces the understanding that 'the African experience' is the 'foundation' of, and 'source' for, the construction of the knowledge at hand. Altogether, the term Africa has been retained by post-colonial Africans and strategically adopted and extended as a political move towards self-definition, self-identity, and self-assertion (Lebakeng, Phalane & Dalindjebo 2006). Seeking to reaffirm this aspiration of Africanness within andragogy⁷ as applicable towards this training performance platform, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of such a paradigm.

⁷ Andragogy is the method and practice of teaching adult learners; adult-focused education. Within the context of higher education where this training

Within an African learning context, a Yoruba proverb states, ‘Anyone who fails to learn ... is regarded as *oku eniyan* (the living dead)’. Within African andragogy the paradigm expectation includes that active citizens are continually sharing their knowledge with each other to benefit the community (Merriam & Bierema 2014). Further, as recommended by Merriam and Bierema (2014), there appears to be more benefit in merging the cultural practices than in maintaining a dichotomous approach when trying to achieve highly effective, varied learning for diverse students. This supports a multimodal learning environment, and it is the intention to provide varied learning that reinforces the Africanisation of the training performance platform. The embodied-LPS platform can start to be Africanised by acknowledging that Africanisation ‘should not be constructed as an absolute rejection of European thinking on African scholarship, but rather as a rejection of assumed European intellectual hegemony’ (Lebakeng, Phalane & Dalindjebo 2006). Garuba (2015: webpage) advocates that:

Transforming the curriculum involves contrapuntal thinking at every level; it [requires] a contrapuntal pedagogy that brings the knowledge of the marginalised to bear on our teaching. A transformed curriculum is one that encourages contrapuntal thinking and pedagogy.

The contrapuntal notion is borrowed from music where it implies that two or more relatively independent melodies have been used in or in counterpoint within a composition. Within Africanised andragogy this would imply ‘tak[ing] into account the perspectives of both the colonised and the coloniser, their interwoven histories, their discursive entanglements – without necessarily harmonising them or attending to one while erasing the other’ (Garuba 2015: webpage). From a visual arts perspective, this may be akin to juxtaposition – where two things with contrasting effect that are seen or placed close together will contribute to the formation of a third unified interpretation. Kamwendo (2016) agrees that scholarship of African and non-African origins must feed into each other and strengthen each other, he warns that working in isolation within the globalised world cannot be fruitful.

The focus on physical actions in South African theatre and training can

strategy is found, the reference to andragogy as opposed to pedagogy is favoured.

be traced back to the rich and ancient performative elements in the oral traditions of indigenous knowledge systems (Coplan 1986). Significant in the performance narratives is that textual elements (oral tradition) have a high physical and non-verbal component. The communicative nature of physical actions in performance, and the meaning transfer, is a dominating factor to understanding conceptual narratives in a South African context. The physical action is therefore relevant to a professional performance ethic developed through physicality in theatre that transcends textual language (Lewis 2012).

The embodied-LPS training performance platform has conformed to these Africanised contrapuntal and physical theatre actions, notions and paradigms. Conformity was achieved by structuring the embodied learning coursework towards a metacognitive approach, where reflection is key to facilitating lasting learning experiences and developing lifelong learning. The threefold embodied approach proposed in this article, embodied-LPS, is central towards underpinning the development of multimodal performance platforms. To this end, the term *embodied* will be briefly explored in the three contexts learning/performance/space(s) as a fundamental synergetic aspect for the actor-training.

Embodied Learning

Embodied implies involving more than the mind (brain) and includes the involvement of bodily structures and processes (Rowlands 2010). Rowlands describes that embodiment belongs within the cluster of related philosophical theories regarding mental processes that are attributed to enactivism. According to Thompson (2007), enactivism proposes an alternative to dualism as a philosophy of mind, in that it emphasises the interactions between mind, body, and the environment, seeing them all as inseparably intertwined in mental processes.

The term *enactivism* is close in meaning to *enaction*, defined as ‘the manner in which a subject of perception creatively matches its actions to the requirements of its situation’ (Protevi 2006: 169-170). As Rocha (2011: 4) describes:

Enaction is the idea that organisms create their own experience through their actions. Organisms are not passive receivers of input

from the environment but are actors in the environment such that what they experience is shaped by how they act.

Further, the connection between enaction and enactivism may be positioned in embodiment. Where enactivism is closely related to both the ideas of cognitive development and social constructivism (Amineh & Asl 2015; Kim 2010; Thompson 2007). Enaction introduced within education is supported by the phrase ‘learning by doing’ as part of discovery learning by psychologist Jerome Bruner (1996) and resultant product of the learning process that provides ‘pride, identity, and a sense of continuity to those who participate’ (Bruner 1996: 22; Takaya 2013: 42). Both enaction and enactivism point towards an embodied learning state. Wilson and Foglia (2016) describe this fundamental concept of ‘learning by doing’ as a premise of embodied learning, through embodied cognition.

In philosophy, embodied cognition holds that a person’s cognition is strongly influenced by aspects of a person’s body, beyond the brain itself (Wilson & Foglia 2016). Further, it is surmised by embodied cognition that the nature of the dependence of cognition on the body is quite unexpected and suggests new ways of conceptualising and exploring the mechanics of cognitive processing. Researchers in education have argued that learning is a much more holistic experience encompassing the senses as much as the brain (Jarvis 2006; Jarvis & Parker 2007; Kelan 2011).

Bresler (2004: 9) refers to ‘a mode of knowing’, suggesting enquiry is constantly conducted by the body through sensory experience. Gärdenfors (2007) poses that through action and reaction to sensory stimulus, human beings create patterns employed to reason and ensure connected meaningful experience with the world. Such patterns order actions and perceptions and these patterns manifest as meaningful structures for bodily movements in space and perceptual interactions.

Johnson (2008) advocates that meaning is grounded in the body and that reason is an embodied process, thus suggesting that mind and body cannot be separated in the individual’s unique experiences. This implies that what is often categorised as body (doing), mind (thinking), and emotion (feeling), interact as a dynamic integrated system. It could thus be posed that one’s experiential embodiment is essentially the source of all that is known to the individual (Csordas 2003), as embodiment is the perspective from which the world is experienced (Campbell *et al.* 2009).

Further, according to Dourish (2004) embodiment implies that humans process and act through the physical manifestation of the world. This embodiment includes the physical embodiment of the body as an object. Thus embodiment encompasses bodily skills and situational responses humans develop; as well as cultural skills and understandings that sprout from the cultural context in which one is rooted (Dourish 2004). Such a notion contrasts with the separation of body and mind rooted in Western philosophical and religious traditions (Kemp 2012). That separation advocates a dualism in which the body is viewed as a machine controlled by the mind and subject to the laws of physics (Northoff 2014).

Embodied Performance

The construct of embodiment in performance could be summarised as ‘the mind is of the body and the body is of the mind’ (Lutterbie 2011: 30), as established through embodied learning. Within this construct the body and mind cannot be separated. The body houses the mind and the body is the means of interpreting and expressing what is deemed as the ‘mind’. Therefore, it could be posed that the act of thinking does not occur separately from being (Dourish 2004).

An integrated body and mind is akin to indigenous African cultural performance modes and practices, where embodiment implies a sense of self connected by reflection of self. The connection marks the coming together of mind and body that results in reflection in lived experiences and results in the reflection becoming the experience (Varela, Rosch & Thompson 2016). According to Meyer-Kalkus (2007), it is the kinaesthetic dimension that merges what is heard and what is seen into a bodily reality. Humans apply kinaesthetic learning and perceptual experiences to navigate metaphorical abstract concepts, therefore embodiment could thus be described as a process rather than a state (Carroll 2011). This process occurs in both space and context and determines the body’s orientation and movement in space and time, as well as the personal cultural identity and sociocultural context the individual body engages.

Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Ladkin (2012) further maintain that we conceptualise through our bodies. Others have suggested that it is with the body itself in space and time that can be a source of learning and insight, where the

somatic knowing is integrated in the learning (Beaudoin 1999; Mathews 1998). This in turn validates the African embodied performance-making initiative. It may be noted that it is arguably the body's movement in space and time that generates the actors' understanding and portrayal of space and time, placing embodiment central to the navigation of human existence.

Subsequently, power relations regarding sound, inferred in language and accent, affect the individual's experience, as the individual senses 'own sound' connected to 'linguistic expression'; thereby voice training implies the individual actor's subjective experience (Mills 2009: 84). Human experiences are dependent on contexts, and as a result the body and the embodiment experience are always concrete and individual (Bowman 2004). This implies that the system or process of embodiment reaches beyond personal cultural identity and self-awareness and extends into sociocultural contexts. Thus, the body and its lived experience is always social and cultural (Bowman 2004). Further, if performance considers how the body performs its social identity in terms of speaking, acting, and dressing (Schechner 2013), the performance implies that perception of voice and speech is heavily influenced by socio-cultural and environmental factors (McAllister-Viel 2007).

Bendelow and Williams (1998) state that natural expression is coded by the body, determined by culture and controlled by social demands, indicating that embodiment is subject to cultural and social context. It could therefore be argued that the context in which the body lives will affect embodied experiences and how the individual perceives and reflects upon the lived experience. Consequently, how the actor interprets and portrays lived experiences within fictional circumstances.

If the body is deemed a dynamic system and the actor is indeed a body in space, then the actor is a dynamic system of body and mind. Findings in cognitive science pertaining to acting suggest that the inner and outer cannot be separated due to the reflexive integrated relationship between physicality, thought, emotion, and expression (Kemp 2012). This suggests that it may not be viable to refer to psychological approaches or physical approaches in acting if body and mind work holistically. The cognitive science findings imply all performance and acting is embodied.

Bryon (2014) provides some insight into the discussion surrounding embodied holistic understanding of self in performance by pointing out that through integrative interdisciplinary performance the actor may break out of the constraints of dualistic thinking and being, with regards to self:

(T)o think is one emergent property of self, not the one defining factor of self. This shift does two things: it takes us out of the mechanical dualism of mind/body and also out of the idea that self is born of linear and reductive models. It might also affect what performers value as correct, proper, and good discipline, in the act of training, learning, and performing (Bryon 2014: 17).

Lugering (2015: 28-29) contributes that:

This perfect organisation of thinking, feeling, moving, breathing, sounding, and speaking is human expression at its best ... Ideally, the actor should not focus on what is wrong with the body or the voice, but on how the body and voice are designed to work right.

Lugering adds that the most proficient acting is acting which gives the illusion that no training or technical skill is required. Simultaneously, voice plays a central role in cultural performance traditions where meaning is created through collective voicing. Thus, the vocal development of the actor in training in a multicultural and multilingual context demands a balanced interplay between the self and the cultural/linguistic collective. A performance training space in which the physically embodied exploration of the ‘vocal self’ can be freely and creatively asserted as individual and representative of a vocal collective could tangibly facilitate this balance.

The emphasis on the body working holistically (body and voice) along with the mind (focus) is imperative in acting and consequently in actor training. This is epitomised by a body and mind approach to acting that is mostly discussed and popularised through scholars and contemporary practitioners as ‘psychophysical actor training’ (Zarrilli 2009; Kim 1993; Rojo 2000). Later, acting and actor training coined the term *bodymind* alongside psychophysical.

Zarrilli (2009: 4) refers to *bodymind* connectivity in acting as a ‘deeply-felt resonant inhabitation of the subtle psychological dimensions of the body and mind at work together in one moment’. Such an awareness is so open that the actor is totally focused on the action in the moment. This implies cultivating an awareness of the subtle synergy between body and mind in the act of performance. Enabling attention to these inner messages of the bodily experience could enhance how messages are translated into external expression, which is further associated with the concept of being embodied. In

the scope of this article *bodymind* is considered within the context of the actor-in-training's movement and voice preparation – as embodied performance.

Embodied Space/s

The above discussions of embodiment in relation to learning and performance relate the utilisation of space as a psychological place of being, as well as the metaphysical thoughts of space as a site for being/learning/knowing/activation. Therefore, space has been included in the discussions on embodiment towards using the constructs of space and referencing both the physical and psychological for learning and performance opportunities.

Towards a physical use of space, the embodied-LPS performance platforms discussed in this article requires the literal use of space/s for performance. Brook (1996: 9) says:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst somebody else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

All activation of spaces (literal and figurative), is a vital element to the growth and evolution of this training platform.

Space also speaks to this training's perspective of diversity: that people in any community have access to and draw from multiple resources and means to make sense of the/their world. Hybridity theory looks at how being 'in-between' (Bhabha 2004) various spaces of knowledge and discourses can be both fruitful and limiting for identity development, literate, social, and cultural practices. This alludes to and introduces third-space theory that acknowledges the difficulty of examining people's different 'spaces and literacies' (Bhabha 2004: 42).

The third-space concept represents the in-between, or hybrid spaces (Bhabha 2004), where the seemingly oppositional first and second spaces work together to generate new third-space knowledges, discourses, and literacy forms (Bhabha 2009; Pane 2007). Pane (2007) clearly articulates that this generated third-space concept is optimal for learning.

Although people have varied spaces and literacies, being performance literate offers the opportunity to be active, critical, and creative, using print,

spoken, and visual language. As a holistic sensorial literacy, performance uses the body in space and time. Therefore, performance may be an embodied third-space activation for the actor/performer who then simultaneously engages with the performative elements of: concept/ text/ stage/ action/ spectator. As an inherently human experience, performance offers this possible third-space encounter with performative elements towards constructing meaning-making and (re)conceptual interpretations. This meaning-making is as applicable to the actor and the spectator, through being literate of the performance elements. Moreover, according to Bauman (2000: 2), '(T)he best performances tend to affect their audience viscerally and proceed from instinctive rather than intellectual motivation'. Therefore, the third-space concept is additionally active as a transferal learning experience for the spectator.

Performance Platforms

Body and voice are the actor's primary tools for expressing emotion (Krasner 2012). Therefore, the development of the physicality-in-performance, as well as the body-voice as creative and expressive tools is a fundamental component in the actor's training. At the crux of the performance for vocational actor-training employed in the TUT drama programme is the use of multimodal performance platforms. The platforms allow the student to conceptualise and present embodied work as the practical application of the praxis learning environment. The performance platform was first created for use within the TUT physical theatre⁸ course and the benefits and effectiveness can be validated through the application of this mode within the TUT voice training.⁹

⁸ The training of the actor within the constructs of physical theatre includes understanding the elements of movement, somatic principles, non-verbal communicative tools, and conceptual application within performance. These elements combine to form a holistic view of such training. As proposed by Murray and Keefe in that physical theatre must also be contextualised within the historical and ongoing practices named 'physical in theatres' which are founded in all performance modes centred on the (moving-speaking) body (Murray & Keefe 2007: 6). The 'physical in theatres' are akin to the characteristic visceral African performance modes.

⁹ Voicing and speaking are an unconscious and conscious activity that all humans conduct. In performance, however, it becomes a crucial and often

Verve Physical Theatre Performance Platform

The Verve Performance Platform project was started in 2000 for TUT BTech drama students specialising in physical theatre to have a public performance opportunity of their conceptual works. Shortened to the informal title of *Verve*¹⁰, this platform has become an anticipated ongoing annual event where drama students¹¹ present the practical application of their studies. *Verve* is pragmatic in its approach to using embodied performance-making as a multimodal learning and peer-education tool.

Presented as a montage comprised of each student's individual work (10-minute offerings), an annual production of *Verve* can last up to two hours. The platform is structured so that each physical theatre student may include as many/few performers as desired for their offering. The only prescription is that the student performs in their own piece. This is due to the course being focused on the physical performer and not necessarily advocating or addressing the external vantage obligations or function of a choreographer. The entire scenographic design is also conceptualised and managed by the physical theatre student. An entrepreneurial quality is thereby fostered through the application of the embodied learning activity. Further, collaboration with the TUT Department of Entertainment Technology has afforded students the

deliberate tool. Munro (2018) states that performance-centred voice training could include body-voice-integration, voice-building, speech-building, connecting voice to emotion, character development, accent acquisition, and applying voice in various performance spaces. Within a Western text-based context such training tends to emphasise the actor's need to activate language within the text (Berry 2012). In a broader performance context, however, the performer's embodiment and interaction with the observer is central (Bala 2013). Thus, it may be posed that embodiment achieves prominence in non-scripted performance traditions. Brown, Rothman and Sapienza (2000) propose that focus should be placed on the physical act of voicing, with a focus on the expressive act rather than imitating or striving towards a proposed ideal acoustic model.

¹⁰ As a noun, the definition of 'verve' is 'great energy and enthusiasm'.

¹¹ The actor-training within Tshwane University of Technology is presented in the Department of Drama and Film. Thereby the reference to the students being 'drama students' – essentially part of the drama programme.

opportunity to participate in simulated workplace practice by operating and administrating a complex production presented in a festival approach.

Many students have elected to do solo pieces and others have included up to eight other performers. These supplementary performers are sourced from the undergraduate drama student body and a prerequisite is that the supplementary performers are students enrolled for movement studies. *Verve* includes peer mentoring by including the supplementary performers and this adds to the complexity of the layered learning. Ownership by the student as performer/creator/scholar/mentor in this holistic training process has had a profound effect on fostering self-regulation and self-efficacy. Students emerge stronger and more resilient because many choose to develop pieces that articulate their life experiences or make commentary on sociocultural norms. Because they explore sensitive topics and find individual uniqueness in their conceptual handling of the subject matter, the process has proven unmatched for co-creating new meaning and understanding.

Verve also provides alternative conceptual performance opportunities in the greater Tshwane¹² metropolitan area. Initially, the Rostrum Theatre¹³ was utilised as a venue, but the project has grown exponentially and found spaces/venues in and around the theatre and on the Arts campus.

As site-specific performances on location throughout the Arts campus, *Verve* saw the audience taken on a travelling theatre experience. Undergraduate students performing with masks and mime lead the crowds and demarcate the route to follow. The travelling theatre aspect gives undergraduate students engaging with performative modes an outlet for their designated performance applications.

The dynamics of such a walkabout theatrical experience is also audience development and has become an enticing drawcard – hardened theatre-goers, first-timers, as well as random spectators who join the crowds in passing, return year after year to view these alternate performances in interesting spaces. *Verve* has become a trend and has solicited a great following over the years. So much so that in 2014 the logistics were reformulated to offer

¹² Tshwane is a metropolitan region in the province of Gauteng, South Africa.

¹³ The Rostrum Theatre is a black box theatre that is an experimental space primarily used to showcase student coursework and directorial prowess. The Rostrum is located on the TUT Faculty of the Arts campus in Arcadia, Pretoria, South Africa.

double performances per night. The audience had grown in number upwards of 200 attending a single performance. This proved a safety hazard for the theatre that only seats 110 and spectators were jostling for space at the site-specific performances and running from piece to piece to ensure that they could secure a space. Since 2014, the platform includes two parallel programmes to accommodate the additional audience members. The audience is divided into two, with one half watching the first programme, whilst the other half concurrently watches the second programme. The performances then swop over so that by the end of the evening all spectators have watched both programmes.

The *Verve* performance platform offers the audience an engagement through performance as a co-performative witnessing (Conquergood 2016) that further affects the ways of knowing that are emergent from such performance-making. Conquergood's (2016: 9) shift from dialogical exchange between performer and receiver (initially framed as 'the researcher and the researched' in an ethnography) to co-performance in that 'the power dynamic of the research situation changes when the [spectator] moves from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of 'co-activity' or 'co-performance'.

Having to perform each piece twice, in relatively close succession, in one evening, has resulted in other considerations for the physical theatre student, such as costuming and staging/design elements. This too emulates in training, a possible taxing element of the embodied performance environment where the actor needs to simultaneously be able to maintain the *bodymind* emotional development in performance and be able to 'reboot' to begin again almost directly after concluding.

The use of various alternative spaces and only limiting each performer to one piece has helped in structuring the duplication of performances in one night. By limiting performers to one piece, performers do not have to rush frenetically between pieces, and more students are afforded an opportunity to participate – on average there are over fifty students involved in the platform annually. The dual-mode performance has proved a successful alternative, despite the complex logistical planning.

Verve has the potential to draw the Arts campus into a practical learning opportunity. Additional drama students from other courses such as Arts Administration are brought on board to facilitate this structured chaos, further widening the learning opportunities. The soft-skills learning is met

through engagement with discipline, focus, metacognition, and tenacity. The learning is in turn fuelled by the collaborative environment and encompasses the spirit of *ubuntu*¹⁴ (Higgs 2003).

**Figure 1. A collage derived from previous original
*Verve physical theatre performance platforms***



¹⁴ *Ubuntu* means ‘I am because you are, and you are because I am’, and here *ubuntu* is facilitated by the mutual learning experience

Lifeskills benefits are an outcome to both student and spectator. Within the performance platform, each student is afforded the opportunity to imagine, explore, and develop their own unique creative voice, justified through their research underpinning their concept. This aspect has always been respectfully and appreciatively received and each offering is graciously supported by the respective audiences. Presented as a mixed bag, there is always something inviting on offer for each spectator.

As a process of Africanisation of the curriculum, *Verve* is a multicultural and intercultural event. No ideas rooted in creative and performance practice are excluded. This inclusivity and freedom along with this site-specificity has opened the creative space/s and welcomed thoughts on holistic learning, creativity, and performance. This led some students to explore a hybrid mix of physicality for performance that the mix includes: performance and installation art; ritual practice; protest and body art; multimedia; and physical storytelling. Also, collaboration with local artists and invited guest performers over the years has fostered exchange and has developed the platform to include a variety of creative elements and offerings. Therefore, the official name of the event was adapted to include this development: *Verve Physical Theatre and Performance Art Platform*.

From the individual conceptualisations, an annual overarching linking theme is identified for the showcase and is used to frame the performances for that year. Themes have included: *id* (2010); *somatic self* (2011); *[trans]mogrify* (2012); *[non]duality* (2013); *(dis)possessed* (2014); *confluence* (2015); *Kinesis* (2016). Topics broached and addressed in the individual pieces include feminism and constructing an African female identity; patriarchy as embedded in African identity; abuses of power/sex/drugs/self; understanding and (re)conceptualising rituals and rites within a contemporary setting; and spirituality and acceptance of other/self.

Voice Performance Platform

Initiated in 2011, the *Voice Performance Platform* was intended to create an opportunity for BTech students who specialise in voice training to translate their written work into a performance. Prior to 2011, students conducted research into an aspect of voice production or vocal performance and submitted a written essay only. The performance was included in 2011 to enable

embodied interpretation and application of their engagement with literature. Additionally, performance was included to encourage students to engage creatively with the theory and techniques surrounding the performance voice. Mills (2009) poses that a vocal utterance can evoke an acoustic image and the performer's voice could deliberately be applied as an aesthetic and interpretative tool in the theatre-making process. The possibility of an acoustic image emphasises a representative 'vocal self' as the overarching objective of the *Voice Performance Platform*.

Each student researches an aspect of performance voice and creates a 10-minute performance with their own creative scope in terms of concept, design and staging. The pieces are then presented as a cohesive public performance. When this performance platform was applied in 2011 and 2012, most students elected to conduct solo performances in the Rostrum Theatre. The *Voice Performance Platform* has grown significantly and has organically adopted a structure that echoes the *Verve Physical Theatre Platform*, with larger casts performing in a variety of spaces. The voice version is not as established or large scale as the physical theatre platform, although it has also afforded many of the applied learning opportunities that the *Verve Physical Theatre Platform* has afforded students.

The themes that are examined in the performances are discussed in the production classes and the synergies that are uncovered are then translated into a title for the performance. In 2013, rhythm and the presence or absence of sound was a common thread and the students named the platform *Pause*. Africanisation of themes are often present. An example of which would be the title *Switch* that was used in 2014 as a play on the term 'code-switch' or the switching between various languages and embodied personal/social-cultural understanding of being, as most students examined their multilingualism and elements of linguistic prowess as a further extension of their identity. In 2015 the celebratory title *#TurnUp* was used as the performances celebrated vocal elements of culture and gender. *Lentswe*, the Setswana term for 'voice', was used as a title in 2016, as the performance interrogated several elements of vocal identity.

An increasing number of BTech students (fifty at the time of writing) are engaged annually in the *Voice Performance Platform* that facilitates peer-learning and ensemble work created and performed with junior students. Simultaneously, the *Voice Performance Platform* exposes a larger body of performance students to the creative potential of voice and allows them to

engage with their own vocal identity and technique, while enabling the BTech students to develop peer-to-peer coaching skills.

**Figure 2. A collage derived from previous original
*Voice performance platforms***



The deeply subjective nature of voice as an expresser has led to students examining theory around voice and topics that are deeply personal and

socio-culturally relevant. Recurring topics have included gender and gendered roles as expressive representation of the relationship between space and time/life and art within the African paradigm; language and identity; power; violence; acceptance of self and other; spirituality; and the reinterpretation and rediscovery vocal elements of traditional ritual and traditional vocal practices.

Although the *Voice Performance Platform* has only been established recently, it performs to full houses and has been an evolving training performance platform that develops technique, creativity, critical thinking, and conceptual skills in a non-prescriptive manner that celebrates the personal uniqueness and universality of the performance voice.

Conclusion

The three-pronged embodiment approach to the training strategy includes: **learning** (through enaction that encompasses bodily skills as well as cultural skills and understandings); **performing** (the dynamic system of body and mind that generates the actor's understanding and portrayal of space and time, manifesting as *bodymind* connectivity in the actor-in-training's movement and voice preparation being an embodied performance); and **space/s** (referencing both the physical and psychological for learning and performance opportunities through literal use of space/s for performance; and the hybrid spaces that generate new third-space knowledges, discourses, and literacy forms). Combined, embodied-LPS, as a means of andragogy actor-training, integrates Africanisation and collaboration, as well as multimodal learning opportunities. This approach was validated through the application of *Verve physical theatre platform* principles to the *Voice performance platform*. Offering insight into Africanisation in embodied actor-training performance platforms that incorporate multimodal learning prospects.

Training strategies that enable students to assert identity is crucial in a diverse context (Msila 2007). Therefore, training in a diverse context requires constant navigation of approaches and activities that honour individual identities. Based on our observations, informal feedback and the reflection of past participants,¹⁵ the training performance platform described in this article

¹⁵ Students were expected to reflect on their themes, experiences, and practical explorations in their applied assignments submitted as partial fulfilment of their course requirements.

has the potential to honour that individual within diversity as it focuses on the organic congruencies that all actors in training share, embodiment. This is articulated through framing the context of embodiment in learning, performance and space/s.

We concede that the qualitative description in this article merely scratches the surface of the potential impact of the multimodal performance platform and future research that analyses the experiences and performances of students could be conducted.

The performance platform, design, and application within embodied learning and training of actors has been refined over the years and has now manifested towards transformation. This transformation is an acknowledgement of the learning environment through metacognition and an acknowledgement of the epistemological access and co-creation of new knowledge. Engaged through embodied-actor training and rooted in Africanisation, this training performance platform embraces multiple perspectives and the praxis relationship. Evident in the cultural etiquette and exchange individually, collaboratively, and interdepartmentally, the contrasting (or even contradictory) ideologies are contrapuntal and are pragmatically juxtaposed within the montage-platform offerings. The Africanisation influence of the inclusive cultural differences and/or synergies, alongside power struggles, and marked in peer-activities, are what defines this relationship between theory and practice. The relationship also advocates for the student to approach the learning from their preferred vantage point – cognitive or pragmatic.

Chapman (2011) advocates for producing theory, not just taking theory. At the same time underpinning self-regulation in learning encourages trying new things and thinking differently. The embodied learning inspires action and inquiry towards reflecting both *in* action and *on* action.

The body of the performer is central to the exploration of theory and practice, and as such is a complex and unique learning site where culture integrates and influences the body/voice relationship and the expression of self. This embodied multimodal learning enables non-biased expression of the self and employs the inclusivity of collaborative peer education. The peer education element and collaborative aspects speak directly to the African holistic paradigms of learning and performance that extend beyond the Western bias towards interdependent creative practice. Generated through third-space opportunities, by shared embodied learning presented holistically,

ways of knowing are recognised and respected beyond the cognitive to include the physical, emotional, and spiritual. These ways of knowing result in a highly effective, varied, and multimodal learning for diverse students.

In the training performance platform acknowledges the Africanisation perspective by not focusing on the curriculum alone. Africanisation of the curriculum occurs by advocating for self-definition, self-identity, and self-assertion, as well as identifying and including an African essence within the research and practice. The focus is on the application of the teaching and learning by centring this training as a viable approach towards generating multimodal means of learning within higher education.

By situating the student at the centre of the learning objective, through embodied space/s, the performance platform immerses the student in the learning/research/practice. Where the embodied space is unavoidably affected and dependant on the student towards the development of innovative practice, vocational, and life-long learning. Granted, this approach has been successfully implemented at a senior-student level. However, the integration of students from various levels (first to fourth year) within the performance training endeavour, has strengthened the emphasis on socio-cultural learning aspects and rooted the seeds for self-actualised learning early. Doing so has borne fruit when the undergraduate students have progressed to a level where they are facilitating this process for themselves, and in turn passing the training forward to the next student generation.

The emphasis on the three-pronged embodiment approach in learning, performing, and space/s (embodied-LPS) also allows for a boost in the development of specialised skills and abilities in areas that students identify they are interested in or show a strong affinity/ability towards, over and above what is offered at the various levels in the curriculum. This results in confident students advancing quickly in their areas of strength towards more grounded practice that may later lead to more security in their knowledge, which in turn gives rise to ingenuity and manifests in innovation.

The embodied-LPS approach has ensured that this training is more effective as a means towards life-long learning. This training strategy has ensured that the students who have passed through both the physical theatre and voice courses (successfully and not) and have participated in the *Verve Physical Theatre Platform* and the *Voice Performance Platform*, are able to think laterally, theorise, synergise, and critique. Because the student actor-in-training can successfully create, as well as make themselves understood, they

are able to co-create new knowledge while fostering self-regulation and self-efficacy to own the/ their uniqueness and the independence of their work. These outcomes all echo the Setswana sentiment used in the title: *Re atumela phetogo* (we welcome the change).

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