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Introduction: The Stuff of Teaching

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The Syllabus is the Thing: Materialities of the Performance Studies Classroom

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Introduction: The Stuff of Teaching

Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz

What does a performance studies syllabus instantiate or call into being? As an interdiscipline, performance studies has been incorporated as an academic field while still remaining sensationally unsettled in its interventions, methods, and objects of analysis. Performance studies syllabi may function as performance scores, performative texts, archives of pedagogical practice, and finally, as the material trace of our performance as teachers. Indeed, the classroom, for many of us, is our most prolific and durational performance site. These iterative classroom performances rely on scripts as well as improvisational practices, with new forms and constellations emerging from the tried and true. The classroom is then a black box: a space for the staging of collective process, of dialogical exchange, and of inquiry itself as a performance form. It is also a black box in another sense: the classroom walls obscure its inner workings, rendering the performance of pedagogy strikingly difficult to represent. How do we document these pedagogical performances and make them accessible in some way to those who were not there?

Our call for proposals for this special issue asked scholars and practitioners to critically reframe the performance studies syllabus. If the syllabus (from its Greek origins, meaning “title,” “slip” or “label”) is a protocol for an experiment, how do we design syllabi to serve radical spaces of knowledge-making and modes of coming to know? How do syllabi create new structures within which to learn, reformulating the dynamics and relationships between the positions of teacher, student, and institution, as well as our engagements with the world beyond the classroom? As professors and teachers, we often informally share syllabi and assignments with one another, but all too rarely do we publicly share our classroom materials. It was clear to us that performance studies as a collective enterprise could benefit greatly from a commons of pedagogical materials. And so, our call invited contributions to an assemblage of the “stuff” of teaching, with the syllabus as a central object.

This special issue was conceived of in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, and amid powerful waves of protest against white nationalism, police brutality, war and insidious forms of state violence. All too familiarly, the classroom transformed into a “situation room” in the face of direct political assaults on minoritarian experience. These ranged from Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” legislation prohibiting discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools to nationwide efforts in the United States to ban the teaching of critical race theory (or at least Fox News’s caricature of it), as well as the ongoing marginalization of Black, Brown, and Indigenous voices in the academy. During this time, our feminist theory courses moved from questioning the symbolic force of #hashtag activism to the chilling material effects of the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe*

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v. Wade. While classrooms may sometimes serve as sanctuaries and places of refuge, we are continually aware that realities in the world “outside” are also present in the seminar room, and conversely, the waves we create in these rooms can ripple outward and resonate widely.

In response to our call for papers, we received annotated syllabi and assignment prompts, teaching manifestos, classroom contracts, and documentation of collaborative works with students (amid a glorious rubble of thank you notes, love letters, hate mail, desk graffiti, and gossip). The special issue that we curated from these submissions addresses a number of critical themes organized by affinities of form: Pedagogical Duets; From Pro Forma to Performative; Between Students and Teachers; and Classroom Experiments.

Pedagogical Duets

Pedagogical Duets meditates on the pleasures and labours of co-teaching. In “Performance, Race, and Media: A Syllabus” by Miriam Petty and Joshua Chambers-Letson, the authors explore the aesthetic strategies deployed by artists of colour to “reorganize the orders of (white) power to which minoritarian life is subject.” Chambers-Letson and Petty reflect on the way this class came into being, transforming from a series of “playful but deadly serious” conversations between the authors into a co-taught doctoral level seminar that brought the spirit of this ongoing relational and intellectual exchange into the classroom. Using the syllabus as a score for collective improvisation, the class became a vital forum for thinking together under the “storm of racial animus” that orders public life, while considering how minoritarian performance and media might bring new worlds into view on the horizon.

In “The Unwieldy Otherwise: Rethinking the Roots of Performance Studies in, and through, the Black Arts Movement and Black Freedom Struggle,” authors Leon J. Hilton and Mariahdessa Ekere Tallie present us with a process-oriented view of this syllabus as it evolved from a reading list in preparation for Tallie’s PhD qualifying exams. Through screen shots of their email exchanges, we see the syllabus come to life in an epistolary form that also gives us a rare portrait of the faculty-advisee relationship that lies at the heart of doctoral study. Together, Hilton and Tallie excavate a previously unexamined root in the formation of the field of performance studies. They trace a genealogy of the Free Southern Theatre’s emergence against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement. Started by three artists (John O’Neal, Doris Derby, and Gilbert Moses) who met as members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), this theatre was also an important early home for Richard Schechner, a founder of the field of performance studies. Through their collaboration and the resulting syllabus tracing out the influence of the Black Arts Movement on the origins of performance studies, the authors ask, “How might these largely hidden histories of resistance and dramaturgies of evasion reorient the way performance studies syllabi of the future tell the story of who and what matters, and in so doing materialize particular pedagogies of field formation that get frozen in place?”

“Performance, Protest, and Feminism in Latin America” by Cara Snyder and Sabrina González offers up a statement of the authors’ co-teaching philosophy alongside their syllabus for the three-week course “Online and in the Streets: Feminist Protest and Performance in Latin America.” Originally conceived of as an off-campus studies program to be conducted in Buenos Aires, Snyder and González translated the course into an online format when travel became impossible in 2020. The authors’ work together took the form of a *pareja pedagógica*, or co-teaching partnership,

mobilizing a philosophy of collective teaching commonly used in nonformal education such as schools for working-class adults, typically from marginalized populations. In this *pareja pedagógica*, Snyder and Gonzáles worked in constant collaboration and dialogue as educators using innovative approaches such as “experience sets” to foreground embodied approaches that unite activism, performance practice, and feminist inquiry to transcend both national boundaries and the limits of online learning.

In “The Studio in the Seminar: Performing Theory in an MFA Classroom,” the editors’ contribution to this collection, we (Karin Shankar and Julia Steinmetz) describe an “Introduction to Performance Theory” course that the authors co-teach to MFA students at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York. The article offers our syllabus and ten practice-based assignments to illustrate how we encourage the artists in our class to engage with critical theory and performance studies scholarship in an embodied way, bringing the studio into the seminar. In modules such as “Rethinking Ritual,” “Play,” “Decoloniality and Performance Studies,” and “Quotidian Choreographies,” students stage performance experiments that animate emerging and foundational performance studies scholarship. The syllabus is accompanied by a reflection on co-teaching performance studies, enactments of difference, and the politics of friendship.

From Pro Forma to Performative

The articles in *From Pro Forma to Performative* radically transform those sections of the syllabus that may conventionally be filled with hollow institutional speak: the accommodation statement; land acknowledgments; and DEI commitments. In “Awe of What a Body Can Be: Disability Justice, the Syllabus, and Academic Labor” coauthored by Jess Dorrance, Julia Havard, Caleb Luna, and Olivia Young, the authors foreground how both performance studies and disability studies as fields explore the ways in which power structures and bodies interact. They then mobilize this generative overlap to posit the performance studies syllabus itself as an opportunity to articulate more accessible spaces for learning and art-making. Thinking with and beyond standard accommodations for university students, such as physically accessible classrooms and increased time for test-taking, the authors compile a set of prompts and questions to more radically interrogate concerns around access. These concerns include crippling syllabus design, resisting productivity cultures, and building networks around access advocacy. The authors offer a dossier of personal reflections, autoethnographic fragments, illustrations, and creative classroom strategies in response to these prompts, which may help move pedagogical communities toward what disability justice activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls “collective access,” and further, how this process may even be a profoundly joyful one.

The article “Performativity, Possibility, and Land Acknowledgments in Academia: Community-Engaged Work as Decolonial Praxis in the COVID-19 Context,” coauthored by Sammy Roth and Tria Blu Wakpa, reformulates the land acknowledgment statement as praxis. Working at the intersection of dance, performance, and Indigenous studies, Roth and Blu Wakpa show how the trifold of research, teaching, and service—often viewed as separate and competing demands on faculty—can in practice be holistically interlaced to build a movement toward decolonial redress in academia. The authors do so by reflecting on a series of ongoing and proposed community-engaged pedagogical initiatives at their academic institution in partnership with artists and cultural practitioners from the Tongva, Chumash, Costanoan Rumsen Carmel Tribe, and Winnemem Wintu nations.

“Un/Commoning Pedagogies: Forging Collectivity through Difference in the Embodied Classroom and Beyond” by The Un/Commoning Pedagogies Collective comprising Dasha A. Chapman, J Dellecave, Adanna Kai Jones, Sharon Freda Kivenko, Mario LaMothe, Lailye Weidman, and Queen Meccasia Zabriskie, is a manifesto, transcript of exchanges, and ongoing pedagogical archive, about the possibilities and difficulties that an embodied approach to antiracist pedagogy presents. Such an approach invites teachers and students alike to “hone into bodily intelligence” by “toggling between discursive cognition of what [one is] reading and what is resonating within [one’s] body.” The authors focus on moments of “friction” when adopting such praxis in the classroom and pose vital questions about the urgency of body-based, intersectional, pedagogical work.

Between Students and Teachers

Between Students and Teachers brings together articles that propose models for how the classroom can be transformed into a meaningful space of intersubjective exchange. In “Four Handouts,” Ethan Philbrick theorizes the “handout” as a pedagogical and writerly praxis. Philbrick riffs on paring the two meanings of handout: on the one hand, it is a financial or material gift; on the other hand, it is a printed text or piece of information given out for free, a form with a reputation as a “dry, instrumentalized, and bureaucratized genre.” Philbrick asks how we might invigorate our teaching practices by sticking these two senses of the term “handout” together, embracing handouts as classroom materials “offered without indebtedness, gifts operating beyond logics of exchange.” Philbrick, in turn, offers readers a hand by sharing the text of four handouts authored in the course of his own pedagogical practice, encouraging us to be freer and more open with the writing we engage in as part of our teaching.

In “Pedagogies of Negation: Notes on the Politics of Refusal,” Michelle C. Velasquez-Potts reflects on the multiple ways in which a “politics of refusal” was creatively and critically enacted in an interdisciplinary course of the same name engaging Black studies, performance studies, psychoanalysis, trans studies, disability studies, prison studies, and science fiction. Offering fragments from classroom discussions, office hour meetings, and in-class collaborative note-taking, the author considers how the shape of the class ultimately transformed in line with its content. As students read works that simultaneously “refused the givenness of the present” while conjuring alternative life-affirming worlds, they also animated ecosystems of care within classroom sessions, thereby enacting a rejection of the “death-making” institutions that surround us.

In “Pandemic Pedagogy: Snapshots from a Year of COVID-Impacted Teaching in Three Artefacts,” Sharon Green looks back on the 2020-21 academic year and her process of navigating the pivot to remote and hybrid learning. Through “curricular remains”—classroom prompts, personal reflection, student assignments—Green shows how she attempted to keep Paulo Freire’s praxis of dialogic education and its respect for students as co-learners alive. Two questions animated her pedagogical thinking-doing that year: “What if students’ emotional experiences during the pandemic became the subject of their critical inquiry and intellectual labour?” And, “how could I create assignments and activities that would do this?” Green’s curricular remains and pedagogical reflections on care for her students and the labour of teaching under extenuating circumstances come together to shatter notions of the professor being anything other than co-learner with her students.

Classroom Experiments

The pieces in the Classroom Experiments section of this special issue give accounts of minor gestures and extraordinary undertakings that mobilize unexpected and underutilized spaces, both institutional and domestic, as laboratories for collective study and minoritarian aesthetic experimentation. In “Collective Curation across Difference: Performing Live with Race, Gender, & Sexuality,” Sandra Ruiz vividly describes a course she taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in which a collective of students, faculty, and staff transformed a disused copy/computer room housed in the Latina/Latino Studies Department into a self-sustaining gallery. Animated by questions of what impact it might have on disciplinary and ideological boundaries, La Estación Gallery centred the work of minoritarian performance artists, with an explicit emphasis on queer Latinx art. Students in Ruiz’s course collectively curated an exhibition of student work for the gallery, and in the process learned how to work “theoretically, creatively, practically, and collectively, always moving from a space of curious care and rigour into an intellectual awareness of self, aesthetic practice, and a responsibility to one another, including a commitment to [their] objects.”

In “Pedagogies of Praxis: Three Exercises in Embodying Social Justice,” Serap Erincin offers up detailed accounts of three exercises she developed for courses that pair embodied approaches and training in performance practice with a focus on activism and questions of social justice. Students are guided through processes that explore the material, metaphorical, and performative valences of civil disobedience (The Obstacle Exercise), prompted to connect personal affective attachments with seemingly abstract sociopolitical goals (The Beloved Object), and led to consider questions of materiality and indexical modes of representation (The Photo Exercise). Building on “intuitive ways of doing and knowing,” Erincin’s exercises are aimed at revealing “the sociopolitical contexts that already undergird [students’] emerging performance practices,” bringing the unthought known of experience into embodied, conscious awareness.

Chloe Edmonson brings the theory and practice of dramaturgy to an unexpected pedagogical site. In “Bathtub Dramaturgy: An Experimental Syllabus for Theater and Performance Studies Classrooms,” Edmonson explicitly addresses the isolation brought on by the pandemic and counters that sense of separation in her class by framing dramaturgy as a relational form: “the dynamic labour of building relationships with and between playwrights, technicians, designers, directors, actors, audience, communities, and institutions.” This course takes the unlikely yet ubiquitous site of the bathtub and uses it as a “microcosm for the complexity of human experience,” mobilizing dramaturgical methods to explore relationships between public and private and choreographies of intimacy.

Conclusion

Assembled together in this special issue of *Performance Matters*, the articles that follow offer up a material trace of the ephemeral collective life of the performance studies classroom. As performances go, teaching is a particularly durational one that is notoriously difficult to document. The texts assembled here constitute an archive of performance studies pedagogy. It is our hope that these scripts, scores, exercises, and the shared ethos they enact will be reanimated and improvised upon in the embodied repertoire of new classrooms. A throughline for everything we chose to include here is an ethics of care, sustainability, and usefulness. Our aim is for this collection to refuel us, and our readers, for the struggles that lie ahead in our collective intellectual, artistic, and political life.