

GREGOR RUTTNER VICHT



The year 2020 brought changes for all people and all areas of life nobody could have imagined before. From one day to the other real social spaces were transferred to virtual ones. Previous experience in the area of digital education had only been available in isolated cases. This new situation thus came along with great challenges and completely new working conditions for educators and learners. However, such constraints always offer the potential for new strategies and creative solutions (cf. Steiner, 2020a). Or, as Burow (2020) describes it, the corona pandemic was the „most effective training measure ever“. Pedagogues of all disciplines (as well as drama facilitators) had to deal with the transfer of their methods into the virtual space literally overnight. Even in 2022, the implementation of online learning is still not smooth. Superficial adversities, such as problems with the installation of specific software on the part of the learners or recurring connection problems, which often lead to a complete disconnection, are an integral part of any video conference.

Especially in the educational field, however, much more fundamental difficulties can arise, such as the fact that the family income of a participating child is not sufficient to equip them with their own device so that they can participate in such an offer. Or the spatial conditions are not even available to be able to participate in a virtual class in the frequently desired „quiet environment“ because siblings or parents are also in the limited living space. These circumstances in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic are continuously scientifically surveyed (cf. Fink/Steiner, 2020 as well as cf. Huebner/Schmitz, 2020).

Therefore, when transferring their offers and methods into the virtual space, drama facilitators first of all need to answer questions regarding the working conditions, such as space and family settings, the availability of the corresponding devices and also support by the legal guardians or other members of the household for younger participants (cf. Feifel/Heinemann/Stöckert, 2020).

The obvious solutions were the first to be implemented: Scenic writing, storytelling methods from the field of improvisational theatre, speech and voice exercises and those forms that do not require physical interactions even in real space. These do not even have to be transferred in order to work in front of a camera. Scenic performances are more difficult. But here, too, by experimenting with the optics of the cameras, situations can be depicted that were initially considered impossible. Or a scene is played out just as conditions demand, with the acting characters also encountering each other in virtual space. From there, you can quickly find other situations in which you don't have to be right next to each other: The fact that two people are separated by a wall and yet come close to each other is not only Shakespearean, but also a good application for theatrical interactions through a video phone call. Likewise, it can be a gate - who or what is behind it? - or characters who are each separately in the same situation, or preparing for one. Especially in the field of youth theatre, such forms of staging are pretty familiar. It is also possible to separate the speakers from the actors, which can be done by deactivating microphones or cameras as well as otherwise. Classic warm-ups and interactions in a circle can also be transferred to the virtual space with just a few adjustments. Once a sequence has been determined - this can also be done playfully - a circle can also be represented digitally.

The transfer of drama methods into the virtual space is particularly exciting when digitality is not perceived as a disadvantage, but rather becomes a conscious part of the lessons and the methods. The documentation of acquired material in video form is suddenly more accessible than ever before - simply click on record, everything else is already prepared. Apart from that, possibilities can open up that are simply not feasible in the rehearsal room. Actual everyday objects can become part of theatrical methods or scenic productions; no props have to serve as placeholders for them. Entire stages can be designed, although only a very small area visible to the camera is transformed. And surprise effects are also possible, since the audience really only sees what has been prepared when the camera is switched on. This way the participants can experience aesthetics and transformation in a unique way.

In addition to time-bound lessons, digital channels also allow for entirely new formats. These can be particularly useful if the intended target group does not have the opportunity to effectively participate in a video conference at a specific time, for example due to age or lack of appropriate technical requirements. Possible options



are pre-produced videos in which drama facilitators address the participants as if they were interacting with them live, and in this way convey instructions for action and play, asynchronous scenic writing in a shared text document, or the production of short videos that may also find their way into a real performance.

In any case, the transfer to virtual space opens up entirely new areas of application for youth theatre. Video conferences are often experienced as exhausting when used frequently (cf. Kerres, 2020). Drama methods that have already been designed or adapted for use in such an environment can also serve as loosening up exercises or novel forms of intervention in other online settings, be it other distance learning formats or settings in a professional context, such as meetings or training sessions.

There is much potential for drama facilitators to enhance these new offerings. In principle, it is already possible to work with built-in webcams and microphones or headsets. However, good image and sound quality requires investment in external microphones, the connection of video cameras, and the setup of headlights. In addition, there is plenty of scope for trying out hybrid formats, i.e. a hybrid of online and offline, as well as the conception of complete programmes planned exclusively for virtual space. It will be exciting to observe whether, even if external circumstances no longer deem it necessary, youth theatre offerings will continue to be made in virtual space.

Sources

- Burow, A.-O. (2020). *Bildung nach Corona – Wie Schule und Lehrerbildung zukunftsfähig werden*. Online resource: <https://unterrichten.digital/2020/04/10/burow-bildung-schule-digitalisierung/> (Retrieved: 10 January 2021).
- Feifel, I./ Heinemann, C./ Stöckert, A.-M. (2020) TUKI – Theatre & Kita Berlin in Zeiten von Corona. Vom Versuch der theatrepädagogischen Arbeit mit den Jüngsten in der Distanz. In: *Zeitschrift für Theatrepädagogik. Korrespondenzen* 77, p. 55-57
- Fink, M./ Steiner, M. (2020) *Zielgruppe Kinder und Jugendliche: Lebensbedingungen und Bildung*. In: BMSGPK (Hg.). *COVID-19: Analyse der sozialen Lage in Österreich*
- Huebener, M./ Schmitz, L. (2020). *Studie: Corona-Schulschließungen: Verlieren leistungsschwächere SchülerInnen den Anschluss?* Online resource: https://www.diw.de/documents/publikationen/73/diw*01.c.758242.de/diw*aktuell*30.pdf (Retrieved: 10 January 2021).
- Kerres, M. (2020). *Frustration in Videokonferenzen vermeiden: Limitationen einer Technik und Folgerungen für videobasiertes Lehren*. In Wilbers, Karl (Hrsg.) *Handbuch E-Learning*. Köln: Wolters Kluwer. [preprint]
- Steiner, Mario (2020a): *No child left behind? In Zeiten von Corona leichter gesagt als getan!* Online resource: <https://www.ihs.ac.at/publications-hub/blog/beitraege/oesterreichs-bildungssystem-im-ausnahmestand/> (Retrieved: 10 January 2021).

The original version of this article was published in German in "Zeitschrift für Theatrepädagogik" issue 78 in 2021.