

OF1 Pre-Observation Form

Session to be observed:.....Acting and Performance: Digital Media
Lab.....

Size of student group:....30..... Type of activity:.....Presentations and
Feedback (Crits)...

Observer:.....Lindsay Jordan... Observee:....Andrew Goldberg.....

Observations

I came to watch your class while you were facilitating crits for the Year 2 Acting & Performance students at Wimbledon. The brief was to design and execute a performance where the actors collaborate with technology. The focus is on the practical/technical aspects on this brief, while the next one will focus on the conceptual aspects.

I arrived in time for the first performance of the session. After the first performance there was a general hubbub of applause and other reactions. You raised your voice to invite them to write some notes, etc., but they continued to talk with each other, which is fine – your desire is for them to respond to the piece, and that's what they're doing.

Before you invited them to share their experience of the piece you took the opportunity to introduce all the visitors in the room. They were very welcoming. Indeed, the positive energy they displayed in the learning space is somewhat at odds with what you've told me about the grievances many of them have expressed towards UAL. They *are* actors/performers, so perhaps they just have a strong 'game face' (especially when it comes to crits). You might not agree, but I do think it's an indicator that despite their grievances, most of them remain engaged with the learning activities and each other, and pleasantly disposed towards you and your colleagues. So, you must be doing something right!

During the feedback and questioning stage, the students responded generously to what they'd seen from the first group, describing the impact on them in terms of insight and affect. You invited them to share questions they have about what they'd seen and reminded them that the questions will be 'stacked up' for the performers to respond to as a group. The students shared their questions, which curiously (given the technical focus in this brief), seemed conceptual rather than technical (e.g., did the poem or the concept come first, and did the poem inspire the piece? How did you come up with the idea to isolate the facial features in shot?). One student said they didn't have a question, but they liked x, y, z. You asked them if they could express it as a question.

After each performance, the members of the group spoke confidently and authentically about the ideation and the process. You added input at various points, to emphasize specific considerations for incorporating digital technology into performance. I was struck by how confident and articulate your students are, compared to even third year BA and MA students in the classes I've observed this year. This is arguably to be expected in your discipline, but still, the difference is stark. Sandra (in our tutor group) had a public speaking expert come to lead a workshop with her final year Branding students this term; they really needed it! I wish there was more explicit bringing together of students of different disciplines at UAL, as there is so much that they could potentially learn from each other.

During the feedback process, the next group was setting up for their performance in the other room. This maximized 'time on task' for the students (Chickering & Gamson 1987).

Your colleague took over facilitating the discussion for the second group, asking for their observations. Some of the students confessed that they didn't really know what was happening. They identified funny moments, picked up on the contrasts in style of moment, and shared a desire to know what was being said when they were moving around. They moved on to questions without being prompted. Again, the focus was conceptual:

Does he actually wake up? What happens when he does?

What was the meaning of the lyrical section – what does it relate to?

You brought the focus back to the technical, asking a question about the compositional process of different layers of speech and sound.

You swapped with your colleague again to lead the third group's discussion. You asked the first student who spoke if she could identify a feeling or an emotion to her experience. Students said they found the optical effects pleasing. A student then posed a question and your colleague observed 'we've had our first question'. When another question came up you said, 'thank you for transitioning'. I'm noting that often they aren't attending to your 'experience' >> 'questions' structure. I'm not suggesting this is a problem at all—although it might matter to you—I am highlighting how you respond to students going off-piste, with gentleness and good humour.

Again, you brought the focus back to the technical by observing that the group had used the visual equivalent of audio feedback, using a glitch to create an effect or an aesthetic.

The third group spoke articulately and confidently about their piece. They are open about the limitations of the techniques they developed, which gives an impression of authentic reflection and a transparency around the learning process.

Some overall thoughts:

What I perceive you doing on this course is allowing them to play - to try things out, develop techniques, innovate while finding their way around more traditional skills through trial and error. Is that how you would describe it? The performances themselves are richly experimental. I'm not sure many people would pay to see them but that's the point, I think. They are taking creative risks and trying out things that aren't in their existing skillset.

The 'stacked questions' pedagogy you're using is fun; it's a bit like a conference panel. As you say to the third group: 'so, you have all these questions, you choose where to start'. This gives them the autonomy to tell the story of the piece in a way that speaks to their audience and what they want to know.

Some questions to finish:

- What would you like them to have learned in this session about the use of digital media in performance?
- How did the rest of the day go?
- Did/will you do anything to prompt them to reflect on what they experienced and learned over the day?

It was great to have the opportunity to see you working with your students. I hope some of my ramblings are useful and I'd love to hear about anything you'll do to follow up from this.

Your comments & ideas to follow up:

This was incredibly useful feedback, not least to hear that from an outside perspective the students seem so confident and articulate, something I perhaps take for granted, but with which I totally agree!

You're definitely correct that this unit is structured as an experimental lab. The exercises are short and intense and meant to be experimental. Excuses to learn and play with new technologies for the stage.

I'm ambivalent about the stacked question format. In a way it's meant to protect the artists from having to answer a question or critique that they don't find helpful. But for now, our students tend to (over)praise each other, so it may be unnecessary and overly didactic. I think it's important for feedback to be structured, I'm still playing with the best format for these students at this time in their development.

To be honest, at the end of six presentations and feedback for each, the students (and I) am exhausted at the end of the day. Even if there were time for reflection (and there usually is not), I don't think it would be the moment. As it is currently accredited, there is no written component to this unit, but I think introducing a weekly blog for students to record their experience encountering new technologies would greatly enhance the unit, and is something I will introduce next year.