Jumping into creativity: encounters with performance as pedagogic intervention in on and off-campus contexts

Miki Flockemann, with Judyie Al-Bilali and Verity Vass

> 'I knew by the writings on the brown paper that I have jumped into a different pool of creativity'. [1]

> To work imaginatively involves the remaking of culture, knowledge and consciousness using performance as a way of knowing. To imagine is not to re-create but to discover the gap between things…and the futures they hide. (Frederick Hagerman, 2005:179)

The role of the imagination in tertiary learning and teaching contexts is an under-researched field in South Africa, not least because of the difficulties of measuring its effectiveness in the academic environment beyond designated drama, music and fine arts departments. On the other hand, this is also symptomatic of a "blind spot" in National Education Policy. In order to situate tertiary institutions within a competitive global economy this policy favours career-oriented fields such as science and technology at the expense of the Humanities. [2] However, academics situated within Arts faculties argue that this disregards the interrelatedness of developmental crises such as HIV-Aids, and the cultural contexts within which these need to be addressed. In a response to recent threats of funding cuts affecting South Africa's largest distance learning university, John Higgins advocates a shift from rigid disciplinary categories and argues that humanities courses be recognized as crucial for developing areas of learning which enable successful cross-cultural communication in an emerging economy (Higgins in Macfarlane, 2007: 9). More importantly for this discussion is his claim that the very expansiveness of humanities programmes can play a vital role in developing much-needed critical thinking and analytical skills.

The aim here is to identify some of the pedagogic implications arising from engagements with performance as object of study, as practice, and as creative process. The focus will be on how areas of learning are extended in the way Higgins advocates. To do this synergies will be explored between engagements that occur within the formal teaching and learning context, and those that students participate in as off-campus activities. While not formally linked to the curriculum, these engagements nevertheless enhance the learning experience in productive ways. The discussion draws on the interactions between myself as academic situated in the English department at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and co-researchers, Judyie Al-Bilai, founder and creative director of the Brown Paper Studio Company and Verity Vass, a researcher and member of the company, both situated at UWC.

Referring to the importance of extending the role of the academy beyond the confines of the university as site, US education theorist Henry Giroux cautions that "[n]ew spaces, relationships and identities have to be created that allow us to move across borders, to engage difference and otherness as part of a discourse of justice, social engagement, and democratic struggle" (1992:82). This is a challenging claim, yet it nevertheless has a particular resonance for those of us located at a 'historically disadvantaged' (read black) campus such as the University of the Western Cape. It is significant that there are strong overlaps between the aims of the Brown Paper Studio project described by Judyie Al-Bilali, and the requirements for progressive teaching and learning contexts outlined by Giroux. For instance, according to Giroux, "Academics can no longer retreat into their classrooms or symposiums as if they were the only public spheres available for engaging the power of ideas and the relations of power" (1992: 82).[3] When her project was initiated at UWC in 2004, Judyie set up her Brown Paper Studio in the recently opened Centre for the Performing Arts situated, tellingly, at the far end of campus. The Centre does not offer accredited courses, yet provides a space for additional learning and teaching opportunities in the performing arts for students and local communities. Students and members of the community in the Brown Paper Studio programme participate on a voluntary basis and do not receive formal accreditation for this.

The term Brown Paper Studio comes from the practice of having brown paper sheets on the walls for participants to write on, thus transforming the room into a place of playfulness and creativity. As Judyie puts it:

> Graffiti and writing on the wall is part of youth culture, globally. So when you come into a room and there's brown paper on the wall, you already feel at home, you're invited to write. From primary school all the way to adulthood people want to write their names on walls! They want to say, 'I am here. I exist. We are taught not to write on the wall. So that when you tell people that they can, it's a signal that 'oh, I can play – I can express myself differently.'
> (in Verity Vass, 2006:3)

She describes the genesis of the project as follows:

> Slowly and then with increasing momentum students began to wander in – curious, hungry, eager, cautious and enthusiastic. Many came and went. Many stayed. Three years later we are a self-defined company of independent minded, heart centred creative individuals with connections, experiences, relationships and a shared vision. Even in the short time we have been together all that has happened is a book.
> (Al-Biali, "Across the Threshold: Sharing a Big Vision for Art, Education and Human Evolution", 2006:1)

The 'threshold' referred to in her title is (coincidentally) in keeping with Giroux' call for a border-crossing pedagogy, and this is fleshed out in her summary of the philosophy and aims of the programme:

Brown Paper Studio is a multi-disciplinary arts process based on theatre practice designed to access creativity in both the individual and the group. The resulting creative energy can be applied to academic, business and community learning environments. […]
[It] promotes communication between diverse cultural and language identities and encourages participants to appreciate diversity.[…]
[It] prepares youth for participation in civic society.[…]
[It] is advancing a new field of teaching artists as support for the education system. (Al-Bilali, 2006)

Currently the company has two additional locations apart from the Centre at UWC, namely a studio space in District Six in Cape Town (a location associated with the forced removals of the apartheid era) , and at Glendale Secondary School in Mitchell's Plain - an area associated in the popular imagination with poverty and gangersterism. From video-taped interviews with learners at the Glendale after school programme who participated in a research project conducted by Liesel Hibbert of the Ilwimi multilingualism centre [4] a number of trends surfaced. These will provide a comparative framework for discussing responses to encounters with performance as part of a final year English elective course on topics in theatre in an academic context. These trends are identified from comments made by Glendale learners who participated in a play written and produced by Brown Paper facilitators under Judyie's direction, and the 'self-fashioning' activities initiated by Liesel Hibbert as part of her research on the Glendale project.[5] The observations quoted below foreground a variety of pedagogic implications which could become the subject for further research.

These include, firstly, the development of self-reflexivity about roles and identity negotiation. This is suggested in a learner's confident description of the self-portrait she constructed: "I know who I am, not what others see me as". Secondly, in commenting on the experience of being away (literally and figuratively) from the school premises during a week-end camp, a facilitator and learner noted how this provided them with scope for alternative learning perspectives, as well as opportunities for social interaction and seeing peers and 'others' with fresh eyes. Thirdly, the interrelationship between learning and pleasure was evident in the delight and gusto with which stereotypes were staged, played with, and appropriated in performance, and this contributed to a sense of agency and empowerment. Fourthly, a comment by a learner who claimed with some surprise and pride, "I did not know I could act", suggests her being able to envision other possibilities, other selves, and the potential unlocked through creative engagements that leads to a newly discovered or enhanced sense of self-worth. Finally, the therapeutic value of the off-campus involvement in performance activities was summed up in a facilitator's claim that, "Brown Paper Studio saved my life". He noted how this involvement can become a way of locating oneself in relation to present, past and future selves, and comments on the way the interaction between the school, university and community develops a sense of communal and civic responsibility.

The issues raised here are in line with Giroux' claim that that a university should not merely "cultivate the life of the mind", nor should it "simply be a place to accumulate disciplinary knowledge that can be exchanged for decent employment and upward mobility" (1992:90). Instead, he insists that the university experience "should embody a vision capable of providing [students] with sense of history, civic courage and democratic community" (1992:93), as well as fostering the ability "to dream a vision of a new world" (1992:92). In summary, the interviews highlight the need for crossing perceived thresholds in learning contexts; these 'thresholds' are both seen as limits and entrances to something new. Of course the comments quoted point to issues that have been explored at length by education theorists, such as the significance of subjectivity and identity in how meaning is made and the conditions in which learning occurs. Furthermore, the inclusion of leisure-time activities associated with off-campus contexts has also been described as vital for the way knowledge is acquired. For example, it is argued that de-contextualized knowledge encountered in academic contexts becomes usefully re-contextualized after being encountered in a social or leisure-type situation, such as associated with the voluntary participation in off-campus activities (See Slonimsky and Shalem, 2004). [6] As noted by Giroux, the role of "affective investment" and pleasure in making meaning should not be underestimated here, as indeed the function of an enhanced sense of self-worth and the therapeutic aspect of these encounters with performance.

Before unpacking some of the pedagogic implications raised here in more detail, it will be useful to compare these comments from the off-campus contexts quoted above with observation made by students in the academic programme on their experience of engagement with performance projects within the curriculum. The way the theatre elective was structured allowed for the slippage between theoretical and practical approaches, as well as between the formal academic environment and off-campus excursions. Students were assessed on their knowledge of generic and theoretical approaches to performance forms based on thematically linked plays spanning canonical or 'classic' works to contemporary local works. These were studied as texts, but students also discussed and wrote reviews on local performance trends following a series of subsidized theatre excursions. In addition, students were expected to use initiative in presenting their own short plays as part of a performance showcase.

In response to a series of questions as part of the course evaluation forms, "Do you feel you have learnt anything new? Did the course alter any perceptions about what literary studies could entail? Did it change any perceptions about yourself, or your fellow students? Or university studies in general?", several trends emerged, as reflected in the responses below:[7]

> 'The course challenged analytical thinking which I think was great. It allowed me to extend my boundaries and the discussion in class allowed me to express my ideas' (student A, 2006).
> 'I learnt something new, and that is how to communicate in theatrical language and use the various terms. The field of literary studies appears more exciting after this course and I would like to pursue further studies in the literary field. It changed my

perception of myself because I see myself as more confident – working with fellow students showed me that we have brilliant students, with major potential' (Student B,2006).

'I think I learnt a lot about the history of South Africa through the plays' . . . 'it was a brilliant chance for me to see my fellow students beside university and to get to know them better. Because most of them come from a poor background, making friends with them in the leisure time was not that easy' (student C, 2006).

'I learnt so many things. Literary studies can more engaging and interesting" "I have seen more talent in one class than I knew UWC had' (student D, 2006).

Not surprisingly there are significant correspondences between these responses and the issues identified in the off-campus projects listed above. However, the responses produced within the academic context introduce additional aspects which have implications for the claims made by Higgins concerning the development of critical thinking. Apart from pointing to the crossing of thresholds or borders and changing perceptions of self, as well as to the pleasure of enlarged horizons of knowledge through the inclusion of leisure-time activities, the observations quoted above also refer to the interface between 'theory and practice'.   For example, students claim that the practical component enhances the ability to apply theoretical knowledge and analytical skills. Of interest here is the way excursions 'beyond' the curriculum appear to impel students to return to academic study with renewed interest. Also significant is the sense of agency implicit in references to being able to apply taught knowledge to the performance experience. This needs further investigation beyond the scope of this discussion, as it has bearing on curriculum design, and well as the transfer of knowledge.

Academic courses that allow for a slippage between academic, social as well as creative contexts, between on and off-campus environments, provide fertile ground for further research, particularly in terms of the processes of accelerated social transition experienced over the last two decades in South Africa.   I will limit myself to re-visiting the issue of identity and subjectivity raised earlier, and conclude by giving examples of some of the ways in which independent (and associative) thinking can be fostered through creative engagement. The usefulness of theatre and performance here is captured in the claim that, "theatre provides an ideal ground in which to explore and experiment with the transformation of identities, not least because it demonstrates ways in which identity is created in the everyday world, perhaps better than any other art form" (Krueger, 2007:54). Generally speaking, however, students tended to comment rather loosely on 'finding a new identity' or 'discovering a self', indicating a tentative awareness not yet fully articulated, of the ways in which identities are shaped, played with, and subverted through performative (re)enactment.[8] However, it was also clear that they were conscious of the 'situatedness' of their responses, and this emerged in their reflections on the processes of working together to present a show. A deepened and politicized self-reflexivity more commonly arises from involvement in Brown Paper Studio which provides a more sustained context for 'exploring and experimenting' with identity as suggested by Krueger. This is alluded to in Verity 's reflection on her own experiences as participant and observer. Referring to the race and class tensions evident in the Glendale school environment between oppressed people who still identify

themselves as black and 'coloured' (or of mixed descent), Verity notes: "as long as I can remember, the notion of being defined by 'race' and its accompanying labels did not sit well with me. I could not accept that a term such as 'coloured' could encompass all that I am and will be. I needed more" (2006, 4). She describes how the creative process of writing a play enabled her to re-contextualize' this: "Culturally, I would describe myself as a black woman, with the knowledge that culture is not a fixed entity. . . . This fluidity allows me greater freedom and pushes me to make my mind big as the world is big" (2006:4). The influence of Judyie's Brown Paper Studios methods also plays a role:

> [. . .] the idea is not necessarily for people to drop their self-definitions along the lines of sex, 'race' and wealth but to expand on these.
> 'You become bigger, rather than smaller. Rather than contracting into 'Who am I as a man or a woman? My sexuality? Am I rich? Am I poor? And then colour. And none of them are big enough for human beings in the 21st century. Add creative person. Add new South African. Make it so there's a huge long list of identities and it's never going to stop – that you're as big as your imagination'.
> (Al-Bilali in Vass, 2006:4)

The reasons for needing to encourage self-reflexivity in relation to identity is that in South Africa the currently celebrated notion of identity as a "project of the self", as something one can "produce", rather than being "given" or "imposed" runs the danger of ignoring the political setting in which this occurs: "This is usually in the context of a political project privileging certain identities over others" (Ivor Chipkin, in Krause, 2007: 10); this caution is also acknowledged in Verity's account.

It was thus reassuring that there was some evidence of attempts to theorise the concept of identity in an academic context as a result of encounters with performance. This was articulated in the portfolios students presented at the end of the course in which they were asked to reflect on their involvement in the creative process of play-making. These portfolios provided additional scope for extending academic discourse into the subjective and creative realms.[9] Nevertheless, there were advantages for this since the commentaries were characterized by a remarkably diverse range of discourses which foreground the 'positions' from which students were attempting to express themselves. These range from the confessional, testimonial, humorous, analytical, lyrical and poetic, as well as incorporating code-switching between discourses and languages. A final example of two students who discuss their involvement in the same play highlights strongly contrasting, perspectives.[10] The first as writer, director and performer with a background in Brown Paper Studio, the second as actor and critical observer. Both are gifted. Both accounts are in effect 'translations'. The writer translates (and transforms) her personal experience of trauma and anxiety into an aesthetic form incorporating the language of the body and visual imagery drawing on her experience with Brown Paper Studio. The engaged critic translates his assessment into theoretical paradigms, weaving a many-threaded textual tapestry of literary and critical connections.

The writer describes the evolution of her play as a journey: "My first piece in a foreign language is a private 'bohloka' that echoes the lullaby's funeral of my early childhood".

She sees it as a "personal escape. . . from internal graves of sadness [I have carried] from infancy to my young adulthood", noting that this encompasses her search for a "language that can give me a dignified therapy" (student E, 2006). The play is her attempt to 'relive' the confusions she experienced as a child about her cultural and biological heritage and identity. Student F, a highly articulate male student, in an inspired reversal of roles played the protagonist-writer's frenetically sweeping but speechless mother. In student E's often metaphor-laden description of the production process, she (like many other students) focuses on the nerve-wracking stresses of achieving her artistic vision given constraints of time and availability of actors: shortly before the showcase she confides, "My day was eroded by nervous breakdowns. I was scared of my script, my cast, and the stage directions weren't working." However, on the day of the showcase the cast had absorbed the script and were "ready to help me relive my past". She says that "together [we] became one soul on the day" (student E, 2006). On the other hand, student F comments on how proud he is of her play and then shifts into an analytical account of it, and of his role:

> I will say only one brief thing about it. A performative Lacanian Allegory. (This is but one of the many, many ways of interpreting the play. My interests for the past 6 months coincided with the themes and issues – I think unbeknownst to [student E]. Butler, Austin, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, Freud, Baudrillard [etc].) Loved its lack of dialogue and the pardody thereof by the interrogator – all and everything entrapped in the system. (Can't resist – have to say one thing more: my portrayal of the mother figure was meant to be ambiguous. 'She' is both female and male. In the male sense 'she' is feminized to become a female within this overwhelmingly andocentric discursive world. In the female sense, 'she' is masculinized to become a male to be accommodated in the male system. …). (Student F, 2006)

Clearly, this (abbreviated) response is not 'a brief thing said' after all; indeed, one has the sense that the student is responding to a wealth of connections which occur even as he is writing, demonstrating a refreshing enthusiasm for attempting to theorise and explain the work of a fellow student, which he 'reads' in relation to literary theorists as well as writers encountered in the academic context (Morrison's *Beloved*, Coezee's *Foe* are mentioned). At the same time of course, he is reflecting on his own involvement. This is evident in the juxtaposition of emotionally charged colloquial references such as 'I loved', 'can't resist', threaded into the list of theorists framing the response.

 For these two students knowledge is expressed and experienced in different ways. As suggested in the epigraph, the engagement with performance has 'become a way of knowing'. The diversity of the two discourses used to describe the play is indicative of the way the creative process can act as a catalyst for expanding the limits of knowledge, and it is significant that student F's analysis is based on the encounter with the creativity of a fellow student. What is demonstrated here is how the creative intervention has itself 'produced' knowledge through this interaction. One student's brave leap into creativity intersects with another's thirst for standing at the shore to plot the ripples.

NOTES:

1. Sincere appreciation is extended to members of the Brown Paper Studio Company as well as the 2006 class of the Topics in Theatre elective for sharing their creativity and comments. Particular thanks to Althea Trout for her contribution to the showcase, and to Manini Mokhothu.
2. The swing away from enrolment in humanities courses and the emphasis on 'performance models' of education outlined in recent national education policy are described by Muller (in Moore & Lewis, 2004:412). See also Ian Moll, "Curriculum Responsiveness: The Anatomy of a Concept" 2004, and Devi Sarinjeive,"'Small and 'grand narratives' of English teaching and social agency in South Africa post-1994", 2003.
3. Giroux connects this to the concept of intellectual 'work': "Foucault's notion of the specific intellectual taking up struggles connected to particular issues and contexts must be combined with Gramsci's notion of the engaged intellectual who connects his or her work to broader social concerns that deeply affect how people live, work, and survive"(1992:82).
4. Liesel Hibert presented her research on the Glendale project in a colloquium at the 14th International Learning Conference at Wits in June 2007. Her project, "Youth development through theatre training: a case study" demonstrated how a positive self-concept is nurtured through theatre and life-skills training, using DVD clips and interviews with learners and facilitators from Brown Paper Studio.
5. See Glynda Hull (2007) *et a*l on 'self fashioning' and identity in relation to digital story-telling projects in after school programmes.
6. Lynne Slonimsky and Yael Shalem draw on the work of Bernstein and Cummings to outline the role played by social and leisure-time contexts in how learning occurs (Pedagogic Responsiveness for Academic Depth", 2004).
7. The comments here are from assessment forms filled in by students. They were given the option of giving permission to having their views quoted or not. The responses were anonymous.
8. The concept of identity as 'performed' through speech acts (see Austin, in Parker and Sedgwick, 1995) has been used as the basis for claiming the transformative potential of performance in relation to identity negotiation; see also Anton Krueger ("Performing transformations of identity: 'Ethnic' nationalisms and syncretic theatre in post-apartheid South Africa" ,2007).
9. The two students in question have given permission to quote these extracts from their portfolios.
10. As suggested at the outset, this poses problems in terms of assessment given the constraints of academic course requirements. In this case the problem was circumvented by having the showcase and portfolios count for no more than ten percent of the total mark.

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