

# Teaching the Large Ensemble

## Through Structures of Physical and Vocal Engagement

My own practice as a theatre artist/educator has spanned a multitude of contexts for close to thirty five years. Much of my work as an artist has involved the development of new work and much of my work as an educator has involved the a cross- disciplinary application of theatrical principles to encourage an attendance to the present and the development of the creative potential of participants. Years of practice led to a desire for a further investigation of how to create a truly collaborative creative process with a particular focus on the engagement of a large ensemble and what the role of director/ facilitator in that process would be. Over the past two years I have taken courses that have explored the vocabulary of movement, the body in contemporary performance, voice pedagogy, performer created theatre, arts based research, dramaturgy, contemporary styles of directing, theatrical adaptation, and sound art in both theoretical and practical terms. This research and practice culminated in the teaching of Drama 259, a course in Performer Created Theatre for Drama Majors in their second year. The Department of Drama facilitated the large ensemble by increasing the maximum enrolment of the class to 40.

In *The Empirical Case Against Large Class Size: Adverse Effects on the Teaching, Learning and Retention of First Year Students* Joe Cuseo outlines the following:

... **conceptual arguments against large-sized classes are reinforced by empirical evidence, which suggests that there are eight deleterious outcomes associated with large-sized classes:**

### **1** increased faculty reliance on the *lecture* method of instruction,

#### **Yes...**

Large classes do tend to encourage a lecture based model of instruction. As this model encourages passive learning students remain largely disengaged and express a diminished sense of satisfaction in the value of their learning experience.

#### **But...**

In classes dedicated to the development of creative performative strategies this does not tend to be an issue. It is literally meaningless, if not impossible, to engage in a creative practice without active engagement but the maximum enrolment in these classes is usually closer to 25. So now the emphasis shifts to how one creates an atmosphere of active engagement in the process of creation when the group expands to close to forty students. My response is there need be no diminishment in the capacity for meaningful engagement if pedagogical structure and strategy allow a movement away from an instructor- led model toward a model of leadership that functions in collaboration with students. I also believe this model has application beyond the performative arts.

### **2** less active student involvement in the learning process,

#### **Yes, but...**

A model of leadership that functions in collaboration with students facilitates an opportunity for extended student centred realization and development of skills.

I was interested in the possibility of facilitating the process of collaboration by allowing the ensemble to create and navigate its own terrain within a template of structures that I designed. To that end I set up structures of engagement with



various objects, sounds, architectures etc... and through their physical engagement participants acquired a physical vocabulary and gained access to a physical memory. This in turn triggered emotional, psychological, imaginative associations that then became the material of their personal narrative and the foundation of their contribution to the devised/ collaborative process. By engaging the large ensemble I also sought to shift the perceptive abilities of the participants to a fuller engagement and appreciation of themselves as both animated creator and responsive witness and more fully understand and appreciate the value, responsibility and necessity of both to the process of collaborative creation in and of itself and to its application beyond artistic parameters.

### **3** reduced frequency of instructor *interaction* with and *feedback* to students,

#### **Yes, but...**

In **this** practice instructors are *more* engaged with their students as the fluid nature of leadership in this collaborative atmosphere calls for a sensitive and heightened awareness of the present. I dislodged my position as the sole purveyor of content and made it possible, indeed necessary to collaborate. This perceived and very real necessity is another crucial cornerstone of the pedagogy. This approach demands a very particular kind of preparation and responsiveness; a thoughtful attention to the determination of progression and an active engagement in teaching that not only allows but, indeed, cultivates a fluidity of leadership. In so doing the facilitation of practice mirrors the practice itself and, it is hoped, inspires the engagement.

### **4** reduced depth of student thinking inside the classroom,

#### **Yes, but...**

This shift in emphasis from product to process is crucial to the pedagogy and not only allows more abandon to the moment and encourages greater risk taking

but in the establishment of a greater sense of ownership of practice also provides more opportunity for the translation and application of skills outside of traditional performative modes of practice. This is crucial to the BA Drama practice as it acknowledges that for the majority of students skills acquired will be applied in a multitude of contexts outside performative arenas.

### **5** reduced breadth and depth of *course objectives, course assignments, and course-related learning strategies* used by students *outside the classroom,*

#### **Yes, but....**

What is essential to the process of education is a belief on the part of the educator and made manifest in the system within which the educator functions that students are capable of engaging with the world as astute, passionate and creative practitioners on their own terms. “ On the basis of what we have learned about human learning (it) is best when participatory, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them”( Bruner vol. 2 187). In the pedagogy I set out to establish, the opportunity for engagement was paramount. The construction of repeatable structures established a framework that necessitated physical engagement. This is not, in and of itself, a novel paradigm. Much teaching in the performative arts models patterns of engagement with which the students actively engage. Where I locate my own extension of the pedagogy is in the encouragement of the ensemble to take over the creative control of adapting the structures of engagement to serve their own narratives. They do this by heightening their own perceptive abilities, by allowing the act of engaging to lead them rather than be led by someone external to their own physical practice. They make connections about themselves and others as a result of an awakening of memory triggered by the physical and vocal engagement and use that memory as a source for their contribution to the creative process of the collective. The body, and this includes the voice, teaches them how to inhabit and navigate their own creation and their creation is more substantively their own as well, and a truer model of collaborative practice.

### **6** lower levels of academic *achievement (learning)* and academic *performance (grades),*

### **7** reduced overall *course satisfaction* with the learning experience, and

### **8** lower student ratings (*evaluations*) of course instruction.

#### **Yes, but...**

Most of the students in Drama 259 either agreed or strongly agreed that their experience was excellent.

I do not mean to suggest that the way is easy or without its very distinct challenges but the large ensemble offers an opportunity for students and teachers to reshape their relationship to each other and opens the door to a renewed engagement in collaborative and creative learning.