

## **How to give students a professional production experience whilst still teaching technique, discovering strategies that can be used moving forward**

This paper aims to analyse strategies for enabling an environment for student productions that is as close to the professional world as possible, whilst ensuring the environment simultaneously allows students to learn and develop skills.

As an Acting Lecturer for the last seven years I have directed over twenty student productions. The hope is always to create a professional production which also gives the students an exciting and fulfilling educational experience. It is important that all students are part of a creative process where they have autonomy but also that the pressures of 'getting a show on' does not get in the way of their learning. Issues that can arise when working with students on productions are lack of skills, a lack of understanding of rehearsal etiquette, students' fear of failure and also that students are able to be part of productions but aren't developing their skills just regurgitating the same habits/issues. The aim of this paper is to assess strategies and methods that can solve some of these problems. This paper is a reflection on experiential research of directing Level 4 Acting students in two productions 'Boy' and 'Buckets' during the 2018/19 academic year at The Northern School of Art. The following will include details of theoretical underpinning of the work undertaken during the process, reflective points from staff and students and concludes with findings from this practice-led research.

Prior to beginning the rehearsal process students were working on their first module, Core Acting Skills 1, where they were introduced to foundation work looking at voice, physicality and characterisation. This module was used as opportunity to try to get all students to a certain level of understanding of the basics of Stanislavski and to foster a feeling of ensemble within the group. This is achieved through regularly sharing work from an early stage and creating a safe environment where play is encouraged. 'Theatre must always retain its playful dimension' (Lecoq, 2009, P68). Although basic discipline is

required with regards to punctuality and attendance, a lot of the Core Acting Skills module in the first few weeks of term is about eradicating ideas of right and wrong within the young actor's mind. This is done to encourage openness and help students get over a fear of failure that can plague young performers. In my experience students who come straight from FE often struggle with experimentation and play as many A Levels and BTECs, on the whole but not all, can be prescriptive in content and outcomes. Whereas the aim of the degree level study is to develop a deeper understanding and gain autonomy as a practitioner.

My dual roles as an educator and a director can cause a friction when directing student productions. During a rehearsal process when working as a director/lecturer on a student production this friction can occur and what often happens is that by succeeding in one role the director/lecturer has possibly not fulfilled their other role. For example as a director I want to work one to one with a student to give really specific notes or guidance for a role. However, one of the learning outcomes looks at students taking autonomy of their character creation, so if I was being too prescriptive to a student/actor I would be taking away their opportunity for success on that particular learning outcome and taking away an opportunity to develop creative skills.

As a professional director my approach for projects generally follows the same process. This comes from my experience as an actor, with regards to ways I felt were most productive from directors I have worked with. It follows a similar structure to that of Mike Alfreds splitting the process into three strands;

'I divide the work into three strands - work on The World of the Play, on Character and on Text – which all proceed in parallel through a large portion of the rehearsal period. I usually work on them in that sequence, starting with the more open, rather broad work of Worlds, moving to greater specificity of Character and ending with Text.' (Alfreds, 2015, P159)

This structure has worked well for me in industry and in education. This structured approach also informs my teaching practice as I feel the organisation and discipline encourages creativity. It gives structure and also variety so students/actors feel each day is different. To begin with a general discussion of the themes, ideas and structure of the play with the whole ensemble is a useful jumping off point. Following Core Acting Skills 1 (the first module of the semester) the students began work on their Script Interpretation module. As part of this module our first production of the year was 'Boy' by Leo Butler. In a review by the Guardian it was stated that; 'The fleeting scenes that make up Boy might have blown in like scrap paper from the pavements outside the Almeida. Returning outside, you look and hear differently.' (Clapp, 2016). I felt this would be an interesting contemporary challenge for first year Acting students. The play had an ensemble feel, as all actors would be playing multiple parts which I felt would be a good opportunity for students to showcase a range of skills.

There is a friction when in the director/educator role here also with regards the choice of a play. In the professional environment there are a variety of factors that impact on the choice of play to produce. These vary from financial and market pressures to creative decisions or choosing a play that suits the space/touring schedule. When choosing a play for students the choices are firstly governed by cohort size, whether to double cast, what will engage young actors and what will offer creative opportunities in addition to thoughts about content or subject matter. In this instance the play would be the first in our new theatre, so I wanted something that would not be too technically challenging with regards to sound and lighting, as I was unsure how well the theatre would function and what technical support was possible. I also looked at this module as an opportunity for students to engage with contemporary theatre. I wanted a really current ensemble play as opposed, to for example, 'Road' by Jim Cartwright which, although a modern classic, is now thirty years old.

All these factors went into my decision to choose 'Boy' as it has a very large cast, touches on contemporary issues of isolation that I felt were relatable,

had a wide range of interesting characters for the students to take on and also I considered could be produced with minimal technical support. I felt this would be an excellent play to foster an ensemble atmosphere as there would be plenty for everyone to do in what I felt was a fairly accessible play. However, it was obvious quite early on that a high percentage of the students did not like the play or understand the play as it has a contemporary structure with characters talking over each other and no clear narrative. This led to the opening investigations into the World of the Play and also the Characters of the play a difficult beginning.

At this point as a director and lecturer it was vital to hold my nerve and continue to put forward a positive attitude to the play. It was also important not to impose my personal opinion of the play onto the students as I hoped to create an ensemble and company feel where the lecturer/student relationship was much less hierarchical and more akin to my preferred director/actor relationship. As a result, I encouraged students to be open about their feelings concerning the play. I hoped to garner an ensemble and company atmosphere, as from my experience this is the best way to help students develop whilst producing a strong production. 'When anyone asked me what I wanted, what I believed in, I invariably answered 'A Company' (Bogart, 2003, P15).

Before beginning the rehearsal process I discussed expectations with the group. I asked them what expectations were fair for me to have of them. As a group they agreed that attendance, punctuality, openness and working hard were fair expectations. I also asked what their expectations were of me as their director in this process. As a group they wanted me to be organised, give constructive feedback and to push them. I feel that this laying out of expectations is useful for breaking down the structural hierarchy that exists within education. The aim of this is to hopefully create an environment where we can work as collaborators opposed to tutor/student.

At Drama School my tutor said to us that as a director the most important thing to get right is your casting. This stuck with me and the more directing I

do the more I agree with it. When casting student shows there are a wide range of things to consider that you don't have to consider when working professionally, again this is a friction between the dual role of director/educator. Do all students have the same opportunity for assessment? Are all students being challenged? How is the student's attendance and punctuality? These factors in addition to the standard concerns as a director of getting the right actor in the right part. From my previous experience of casting student productions friction can often develop between a positive group after castings with students unhappy with their roles or with who got what is perceived as the 'best part'.

With 'Boy' the auditions were to happen in week 7 as part of the Core Acting Skills 1 module. This allowed all students the same opportunity and meant the casting process felt fair as students were working from the same material. It also allowed nearly two months for me to weigh up the group, and individuals within the group's strengths. The overall quality was to a good standard for Level 4 students and I chose, where possible, to have gender blind casting. This resulted in the main part in 'Boy', the role of 'Liam', going to a female student. I feel, on reflection, that this choice was pivotal to students feeling the casting process was a fair one and I will certainly look to continue this as I direct other student productions.

It was clear though that some students felt that they didn't have much to do. As a result, my solution was to open rehearsals by working on creating a full group ensemble movement piece and meant that it was integral for the opening rehearsals to include the group as an ensemble. The aim was to have all students involved and feeling part of the production in this first rehearsal. This was achieved by beginning with a session looking at creating an opening movement section utilising Bogart and Landau's Viewpoints and Composition techniques;

'Viewpoints and Composition offer an alternative to conventional approaches to acting, directing playwriting and design. They represent a clear-cut procedure and attitude that is non-hierarchical, practical and collaborative in

nature. Both address particular problems and assumptions that a young person faces when entering the field, and offer an alternative' (Bogart, 2005, P15)

Viewpoints is split into nine physical Viewpoints and five vocal Viewpoints. My aim for the session was to teach the students about these techniques which offer up all the available options for a performer physically and vocally. After going through the basics of viewpoints theoretically and practically we then went on to utilise these techniques to create the opening movement sequence. This worked well as students gained knowledge whilst we also developed an opening sequence very quickly. One student commented 'I can't believe how quickly that came together'. This workshop on Viewpoints was essential to ensure that there was a shared language between director and actors/students. It meant I could use the same terminology I would do when working professionally from an early stage in the rehearsal process and meant students were learning in a real working environment as opposed to a hypothetical rehearsal process. This worked very well and meant that I could treat the students as actors and work collaboratively with them.

Alongside working on the play 'Boy' I continued to teach technique for character creation. This began with what is called list work taken from Stanislavski's thoughts on the importance of an actor having a strong grasp of the given circumstances in order to create the character from. The given circumstances are the facts of the play for example place, age, epoch, time etc. The list work aims to have the students logically engage with their characters before emotionally engaging with the characters. The list work we carried out consisted of five headings;

- '1. Facts about the character
2. What the character says about him or herself
3. What the character says about other peoples-including those mentioned but not seen in the play
4. What other people say about the character

5. Imagery used by the character or by others to describe the character'  
(Alfreds, 2015, P206)

When working professionally I would have asked actors to prepare this work ahead of the first day of rehearsal. However in this instance we worked on it in class and regularly did list work at set points in the rehearsal process. This was to ensure it was done, as students tend to can lack the rehearsal discipline to see the worth of character exercises and also so that I could offer support for students struggling with this more analytical work. As the process goes on the list work becomes more creative and imaginative to look at things such as 'A line that sums up the character' and things you 'intuitively know about the character' in addition to the given circumstances. This can only be of use though if the basics of text and character work have been done at the start of the process. Students engaged well with this work on the whole and could see the worth in really mining the script for information. This list work proved useful for the students as it helped them understand their character's place in the piece as a whole and also find specifics about their character that were possibly missed on a first read through.

After this introductory work into the play and character we began working on the set scenes. For this we followed Stanislavski's system loosely. I was surprised at the lack of knowledge of Stanislavski's methods from the group in general. Almost all the students had said they had studied Stanislavski at either A Level or BTEC at Level 3. However it became apparent that students had a fairly basic or surface level knowledge and most were able to discuss key terms without fully grasping how to use these methods in practice. For example most students when discussing Stanislavski would predominately focus on 'Emotion Memory', exercises to help actors connect to the character's emotional life by reflecting on memories of similar emotions.

However, very few were aware that later Stanislavski rejected this in favour of his technique 'Physical Actions'. A more useful way for young actors to consider emotions in my opinion is the equation 'Given Circumstances + Actions= Powerful Emotions' (Merlin, 2016, P67). This means actors/students

don't 'play the emotion' but play the character's situation and wants instead and one hopes as a result they will then embody the character as opposed to mechanically reproducing generalised emotions.

At this point in the rehearsal process I began to give call times so that I could work on smaller scenes which had two or three characters. This is standard rehearsal protocol in most productions but can prove difficult when working with students if there are attendance or punctuality issues. In the first seven weeks of term the attendance and punctuality had been impeccable. I made clear to students that during rehearsals it was integral to be in for any call times as it would only be the actors for those scenes called. We again discussed our expectations for each other. This strategy of revisiting expectations seemed very effective, as throughout the seven week rehearsal process there was only one unauthorised absence and two incidents of lateness. This is outstanding from my experience of first year degree students and meant that we were able to work in a professional and productive manner.

Although I aim as much as possible to not have a hierarchical structure in rehearsals in these few instances of absence or lateness I had to react appropriately as a lecturer. This is a tension between the philosophy I hold as a director/educator, that the best way to foster a creative environment is to aim for a less hierarchical structure and the practicalities of the situation. However, it is clear that in this situation one must act as a director/educator in making it clear what is acceptable. One of the Learning Outcomes is linked to professional standards in a rehearsal process so ensuring students were aware that they were falling short of expectations was vital. This is also part of the student's educational journey to understand they have a responsibility as a member of the ensemble. As a form of discipline one student had one of their parts taken off them due to unauthorised absence. This acted as a warning to students of repercussions if standards were not adhered to. After this all students continued to work to high standards. I believe this supports the idea that students want a professional environment where there is a seriousness to the process. The discipline can then lead to a creative

environment. It may have been that a warning would have sufficed but it felt that if one was to allow this then the issue would occur again and would need to be dealt with at a later point anyway. I feel though that any discipline within a teaching or directing environment needs to be on a case by case basis taking into account personal circumstances.

One of the challenges during this process was teaching whilst directing. As a director I like to get scenes up on their feet as early as possible, but as a lecturer you need to ensure that all students are following the new techniques. In Core Acting Skills 1 we had looked at Stanislavski's system looking at monologues, but I still felt that students hadn't fully grasped the importance of utilising Units and Objectives. This is breaking up the script into 'Bits' focussing on what the character wants in that section and what tactics they are using to get what they want (Merlin, 2016). It is arguably one of the most common rehearsal tools in Western theatre, but it was clear the majority of students were not used to working in this way.

Although I was concerned that I wouldn't have time to develop these techniques with students through rehearsals, actually by working with them in small groups on scenes we were able to have good one-to-one discussions on Units and Objectives that hadn't been possible when teaching the full group. Moving forwards I certainly feel that call times and working with the students in small groups helps develop much deeper levels of learning the practicalities of these techniques. As a strategy to deal with some of the tensions of the dual role of lecturer/educator I feel this is one I will continue to employ in future productions.

The other concern that I had was that students would not develop core techniques in terms of their vocal clarity and their use of physicality when developing characters. In general, young actors often struggle with regards to vocal clarity and often projection. I am always careful to be clear vocal clarity does not mean losing your accent in favour of an RP accent as any accent can be clear. In the first seven weeks we did lots of basics on voice to help to improve this, but it can be difficult to get young actors to engage with vocal

work. This can be for a number of reasons but a major one is embarrassment as a number of vocal exercises can be quite unusual if you haven't done them before;

'It is important that young people don't feel embarrassed about the exercises or the positions they are asked to take. Embarrassment will only lead to physical tensions and will inhibit good voice use.....You will get best results if you demonstrate exercises first. Give simple, strong instructions, with desired outcomes.' (Nelson, 2015, P129)

This was a guiding principle throughout my voice classes this academic year. Voice is not my specialism, but I have a wide range of exercises from my time studying. Lots of these are unusual and also are quite exposing at times. As a result I had timetabled Thursday mornings to be full class voice sessions. In each class we would look at a different aspect of voice for example clarity, projection, vocal energy, vocal texture etc. This meant that students who had received feedback previously on a particular area could investigate techniques to develop this area in a full group, but then could work outside of class on their own if they felt uncomfortable working on these more unusual techniques in front of their peers.

On the whole, these sessions were productive. However, as the process went on it was clear some students were working outside of class and some were not as they have had the same feedback all academic year on areas to develop. This is difficult as when it comes to voice work there is no quick fix and students have to put the time in and want to improve. As we went through the process and I began giving notes after runs of the show, a large amount of time was spent on technical notes rather than creative notes. This is disappointing and a concern I have is that students, when working on a production, put more focus on the final performance than the process of developing skills. However feedback from student interviews after the productions point to the opposite, where a number of students say they feel their diction and clarity have improved over the academic year due to getting technical notes throughout a rehearsal process. This highlights that although

so far this paper has discussed the tension of the director/educator roles, the students working on a production have a similar problem to overcome. The actor/student conflict whereby they want to improve but know they need to perform in a show. Although this is out of the scope of this paper it would be an interesting piece of research to work with two groups, one with a final public performance and one with a private showing to see what difference there is in terms of technical development.

The other aspect I was concerned about was whether the students would continue to develop their skills in terms of the physical characterisation that they had started to progress with during Core Acting Skills 1. In general, British actor training centres on text looking at Stanislavski and the cannon of great playwrights, whereas actor training in Europe is often much more physical. This is an over-simplification and there are excellent courses in Britain for Physical Theatre such as at East 15, but it is certainly the case that students coming straight from school have had very little exposure to Lecoq, Meyerhold and Laban. As a result, there can often be resistance to more experimental physical work.

However, I feel that to embody the character the actor can gain from using both logical text work and the instinctual work of the physical character creation of Laban and Lecoq. 'Be quiet, play and theatre will be born! That could be our motto' (Lecoq, 2009, P36). It could certainly be a motto for during my training. This quote from Lecoq has stuck with me since my training and during my time at Arts Ed as our movement teacher very rarely spoke, instead it was up to us to explore and play to see what we could create or be physically. I try to work in this style, but the students I have in general want to get things 'right' and are scared of getting things wrong and looking foolish. A lot of what I try to do is free them up and be happy to experiment but this does not always work. The fear of failure is an issue that often occurs in my practice working with students. From my experience it can be for any number of reasons, but especially occurs in students from more working class socio-economic backgrounds. I feel this is an area that would be rich for

further investigation possibly making links with other institutions such as Arts Ed, where there are much lower number of students from working class backgrounds, to compare the different attitudes of students.

The physical character work we undertook was looking at Laban's Movement Analysis investigating Movement Factors and Effort Actions. Laban's techniques were very important to me during my training and always form the cornerstone of my physical work when acting or directing. 'What attracts me to efforts is that they're holistic: starting from the physical they lead to the mental and emotional. By moving in particular and different ways, actors will think and feel different' (Alfreds, 2015, P229). For students who lack confidence physically or who are inexperienced in terms of physical theatre this was not an easy exercise. It consisted of the students working through the four movement factors and eight effort actions to find a physicality that suited their characters and investigate if the characters change physically through the play.

Some students clearly felt self-conscious and a couple giggled and as a result were distracting others who were working hard. This was disappointing as we had been working to build a collaborative, experimental and open ensemble atmosphere. Again I was forced to be more hierarchical and point out that this behaviour was unacceptable. The students responded well to this and did work with much better focus, but it felt that the collaborative non-hierarchical atmosphere was lost. This may well have affected students' openness as we progressed in the rehearsal process.

On reflection working in this way may have been a jump from what students were used to at that point in their educational journey. When working in the second semester on a production of 'Buckets' by Adam Barnard the students engaged much more fully with this exercise and there were clearer physical choices made in that production than in 'Boy'. Although I was disappointed in a few students' focus during this exercise during the 'Boy' rehearsals, a number of students in their reflective essay commented on how useful they found the Laban work, although others stated they didn't get much from it.

Personally, I like to encourage students to find their own process for character creation and feel my job is to expose them to as many different techniques as possible so they can take autonomy for their own process. As a result in some ways this exercise was a success in their development as autonomous practitioners.

As the rehearsal process progressed the students continued to work in a disciplined and focussed way, taking on board criticism and in general approaching the work with a seriousness which was pleasing to see. Once we got nearer the performance and were working in the theatre it became clear that projection and vocal energy was an issue. Regularly during technical rehearsals and dress runs students were not filling the space and were forgetting technique. This is where working towards performance is a hindrance to skill development and possibly not helpful. After giving specific notes on projection and taking warm ups to encourage better breath control it gets to a point where these notes are not useful. The last thing you want as a director is for your actors to go onto stage thinking about technique as opposed to being in the moment. On reflection I should have addressed this as a general group problem rather than giving individuals notes.

When working with professionals they generally have a more developed vocal technique so this does not have to be an area of focus. However, for young actors projection and clarity can often be their Achilles heel. It is difficult to come to a conclusion on how best to counter this issue. Some students, once in front of an audience, increased their vocal levels so one could conclude that having a public performance pushed them to develop this technique. However, others were clearly carrying tension which made it more difficult for them to fill the space vocally. This is certainly an area which would be of interest and rich for further research.

The final performance was pleasing and a number of students put together very strong performances that were a big development on their previous work in Core Acting Skills 1 and from rehearsals. As an ensemble students grew closer and it helped raise confidence in them as individuals to have such

positive audience feedback. This is something that isn't measurable but is an added benefit from successful public performances early on in the student's educational journey.

On reflection, it seems that there are areas that benefit from students having a public performance. For example, I feel attendance and punctuality was improved as they knew they had a show coming up. However, with regards to students developing vocal and physical techniques it is a more mixed picture. It seems to depend on the individual student and how much experience they have when starting the Programme.

With regards to strategies to overcome the director/educator tension I have made progress through this research. I feel the use of gender blind casting is a strategy that allows all students to feel it is a meaningful audition process which helps to overcome issues around students being unhappy with casting. I will also aim to ensure colour blind casting on future projects. The use of call times certainly was a success in giving an insight into professional processes, whilst also allowing small group work to encourage deeper understanding of the practical application of techniques. I feel the balance was good between allowing students creative freedom and ensuring standards were adhered to. This will, I hope, hold them in good stead for Level 5 and Level 6 where they have more autonomy over their projects.

An area that is still problematic is the choice of play. There are so many variables when it comes to this that it is hard to pinpoint specific strategies for future projects. However, the one thing I feel I can take from the choice of 'Boy' was that it was a new experience for students and if nothing else that is a positive for their educational journey to be working on diverse content either in subject matter or form. Moving forwards with my practice I will look for other strategies to encourage vocal development, this may be to work in small groups or even one-to-one. This would help to identify specific vocal issues with students and then to give more specific/focussed vocal exercises for them to work on outside of sessions. Overall, this practice-led research has

allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my practice and develop strategies that can be utilised in the future.

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