CHAPTER 10

PRACTICE AS RESEARCH: SOME INSIGHTS INTO DEVELOPING A THEATRE-VOICE BASED PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will identify some of the processes that I workshopped during the coursework of my Theatre and Performance MA that I undertook at the University of Cape Town in 2004 and 2005, which fed into my development as a theatre voice practitioner, and my construction of various voice courses that I taught from 2006 onwards at both the University of the Witwatersrand and UCT as a part-time lecturer. Practice as research was a key component in developing my student-centric approach to voice and I hope to share some experiential exercises or ways of working that can be co-opted into multiple performance spaces.

This chapter focuses on two key components to working in a PaR-focused space that I utilised during my three practical projects as part of the coursework MA programme at UCT. The first key concept was the notion that 'action is the impetus for motivation'. I began my research with very little idea of what I wanted to achieve and found that PaR offered a useful way to just *begin*. The second concept was that 'clear and rigorous and unflinching boundaries offer the best framework for creativity'.

I shall be drawing on work from a poetry project that I undertook entitled *It takes a word*, as well as a six-week exploration of various *Hamlet*-themed texts that culminated in a shared workshop experience, and some of the exercises I developed in the first-year course I was required to teach during the MA. As my research focus was ultimately on the development of a pedagogical approach to voice work, my primary material was the actual students themselves, and the way they used their voices. My background was in contemporary Western voice practice, as embodied by practitioners such as Cicely Berry (1991), Patsy Rodenburg (1992), Arthur Lessac (1996) and Kristen Linklater (1976), all of whom have written handbooks on working with the voice. My creative research lens was the contemporary subcultural phenomena of rap, slam and freestyle poetry as a way of disrupting a prescriptive approach to theatre voice.

So how did I do what I did?

The traditional social sciences have published many handbooks that offer frameworks for practical research and ways of constructing research parameters, usually conducted using a deductive approach where a hypothesis is developed before the research starts. A deductive research process is likely to run along the following lines:

1. Theory
2. Hypothesis
3. Data collection
4. Findings
5. Hypothesis confirmed or rejected
6. Revision of theory

(Summary: Social Research Methods, 2013)

What I found Artistic Practice as Research useful for, are those times when *one doesn't even know what the questions are.* When one is starting with a tiny hunch, a flickering notion, a microscopic pull in a certain direction, the key is to *play* first and foremost. In that playing I discovered that action begets motivation: to move, to play and to just do 'something' was the only way to discover what it was I wanted to be asking.

Inextricably linked to this concept is the notion of a framework – a structure within which to play. I use the words 'clear and unflinching boundaries' as a descriptor for how to construct a framework. Basically, in simplistic terms, it means 'creating the rules of the game'. The rules can be physical, such as a demarcated space set aside in which to move, which creates a physical proximity that could elicit a particular reaction. The rules could be vocal, as in one is only allowed to say a certain word in the space, etc. What the rules actually are is often arbitrary, it is what they do, which is to offer a common experience, a safety in the space (knowing what is and what is not allowed upfront) and allowing work that is detailed and precise.

A common experience or levelling of the playing field is useful when working with participants from a variety of backgrounds and skill levels, in order to make the experience valuable for all participants. 'Safety in the space' refers to both a physical safety of the body, and a release from the fear of failing. I used the concept of freeing yourself from the 'tyranny' of getting it right. A safe space is where there is no concept of failing, where the only way to fail is to not do anything at all. Working for detail and precision is useful in that one can focus on small elements of the work, taking care to fully experience all aspects. A word of caution here against overly prescriptive rules that can inhibit action as much as the lack of any framework. Discovering the optimal balance becomes a part of the processes the practical researcher needs to engage with. What follows is a description of the above two concepts as applied in a workshop session that I conducted sometime in 2004 or 2005 (my journaling system was not very precise unfortunately).

For some context, I began the research for my MA with a hunch that the spoken word movement as it existed in the late 1990s and early 2000s had something valuable to offer voice work. That there was a connection between what was happening in the sub-cultural movement I had observed and a possible poetry curriculum that could occur in an academic context. I had watched the movie *Slam* (1998) and was transported by the poetic performances that I had seen, and the dexterous use of the physicality of language was inspiring to me. I had a hunch that my students found the repetitious nature of

much of voice work to be a bit 'boring'. I had had wonderful voice teachers who were passionate about language and text and the voice, which had inspired me to pursue voice work further, but I was struggling as a young teacher, and I wanted to do something new. What follows is an example of the development of an exercise which I subsequently used throughout my teaching career.

My first step was to create the structure of the group I was working with. I had four people in the group, because I needed a number that was easy to split into pairs and that was large enough to get varied responses from, but was not too big that I would not be able to concentrate on each student closely. As a young teacher I was still learning to control large classes and my instinct was to begin small. At the prompting of my supervisor, I chose two students who were strong at voice work and two who were considered weak, as I had previously seen voice to be a primarily remedial subject and the students as 'needing to be fixed'. This became the most important thing that I needed to unlearn as a young teacher and this workshop process was a part of that unlearning.

What is set out below is an excerpt from my notebook that I found while doing research for this paper. It is an example of what it means to *just begin*.

Notebook excerpt:

[formal frames] onto…
What beatboxing does? Isolating sound?
*What are you fighting against?
(slurred speech) lack of muscularity… lazy tongues
[rhythm/accompanied speech]
ORCHESTRA of consonants –
textures – aesthetic IS CLARITY
(of the form) /// ARTICULATION!
(Sharpening of the ear?)
Range+articulation skills – high and low – freedom of range
Textures?
Muscularity – heightened awareness – FUN??
[PHOLYPHONIC/?]

Figure 10.1: Scan of original notebook. Source: Sarah Woodward.

Here we can see that the idea starts with a series of murky fragments, and me trying to clutch onto a concrete notion. As Figure 10.1 shows the number of arrows in this document, criss-crossing the page, trying to link ideas, is essentially a rough spider diagram above all

else. My initial hunch was that there was a connection between engaging with a textual/vocalised image and articulation. To reduce it to its most simplistic form – if one is deeply connected to what one is saying, one will say it clearly enough for people to hear.

The "orchestra of consonants" that I had made a note of, was a reference to Arthur Lessac's "orchestra of consonants" that he describes in his book, *The use and training of the human voice* (1996). The precedent to align musical instruments to consonants was something I was contextually aware of, and my hunch was that students would have less experience with the instruments of a traditional orchestra than they would with the mechanical and industrial sounds they were exposed to in the city. I had a notion they would engage more strongly with beatboxing than with a viola. Therefore, one can see that the work didn't begin in a complete vacuum, but rather was sparked and inspired by writings I had been exposed to in my preliminary reading.

From these beginnings I can see on the next page of my notebook that I had the outline of what I called 'The Sweet Exercise' at the time. This is another transcription from my PaR journal.

Notebook excerpt:

Find a sweet from when you were a kid
Find a word (one word) to describe its colour – AND then what it FEELS like to chewy [sic])? (Find a movement for each one? Find a partner and intersect THEN begin to find a standoff? 2 against 2.
Then take move into voice. Then try to convince everyone that this is the way to say it...

A: brown smooth chocolate éclair
M: Chewy red rascals
L: Hard black liquorice balls
T: Crunchy brown TV bar
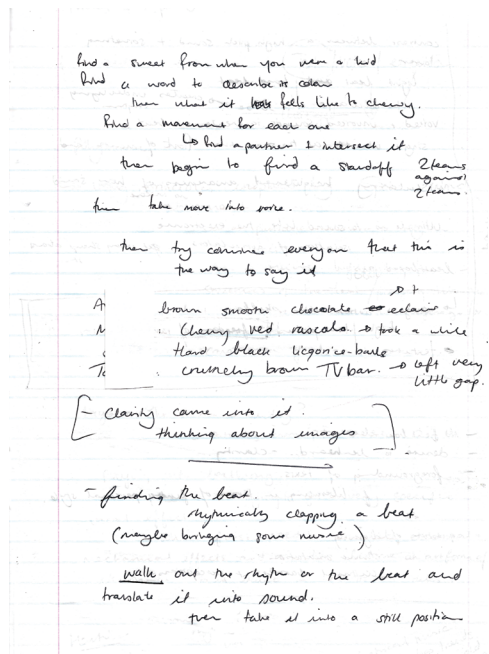*[clarity came into it? Thinking about images...]*

Figure 10.2: Scan of original notebook. Source: Sarah Woodward.

This first preliminary exploration became the following exercise as set out in my MA thesis. 'The Fruit Rant' was the culmination of a few weeks exploration as the students became more familiar with each other, and with what the exercise was requiring. The

rules had expanded to accommodate their ongoing ease with the process and with each other, and their developing facility at manipulating their own vocal states.

THE FRUIT RANT

Part one

Working by yourself, take your favourite fruit and imagine the smell/ taste/ feel/ texture/ weight/ shape, whether it is sharp/ sweet or sour. Begin to say the fruit name getting as much of that information into that word. Repeat the word, evoking as much of the fruitiness in the name as possible. Once your fruit name is infused with sensory meaning, begin to describe the fruit, relishing in the description.

Part two

Get into groups of about four people each and decide on a group fruit. The group visualises the fruit, and speaks about it all at once, generating as much vocabulary as possible around that fruit. Then, one at a time, speak about the fruit, while the rest of the group encourages and supports through nodding or verbal agreement. No-one is allowed to interrupt and only when there is an opening, can you take the floor. The next task is to begin to structure your 'fruity' rant and offer the next person to speak an open-ended rhyme to take up and run with. It helps to have the rest of the group form a rhythm of some kind, vocal or clapping or both.

An example might be:

Actor A: A sweet, delicious red cherry, deep in my belly, very tasty indeed, makes me need one more ...

Actor B: please feed me one more sweet cherry in my belly ...

The less sophisticated the verse the better, the pressure shouldn't be on you to think of highly creative and sophisticated rhymes. If they come to you easily so much the better, but confidence is built up in the group when you have the opportunity to be silly and accepted for it.

My analysis of how this exercise operated in the context of the overall research follows in this excerpt from my MA thesis.

> The objective of the production was to integrate all the aspects of the vocal landscape in order to serve the text in the most expressive way possible, as well experience the language on a more visceral level.
>
> I encouraged the students to engage creatively with the energetic impulses that created the texts to explore the physical effects on the articulators. They explored the quality of sounds, and what physiological reactions they provoked in the student. One of the ways this was achieved is with an exercise called The Fruit Rant (see above). It is about connecting a tangible object, something evocative

like fruit, to a sensory quality in the words that describe it. It is divided into 2 parts, the first part being where the student familiarises themselves with the vocabulary surrounding fruit and in the second part, they begin to construct the words into small rhymes, retaining the sensory vocal textures they have discovered. This is a gentle foray into the art of Freestyling and helps the actor to engage with language on an improvisatory level, engaging both the body and the voice.

I have also done this exercise using favourite childhood sweets as a starting point to evoke something real that they have an intense relationship with. Once the student becomes comfortable in the exercise they have the freedom to branch off into any direction they like. (Woodward, 2005)

WORKING WITH TEXT

In my pursuit of a pedagogical approach which ultimately would lead to a course in the academic curriculum, I knew that it was imperative that the students engage with written texts, both classical and contemporary. In this next example, my structural framework followed the mandate that students could choose any text they liked, as long as it was either from, or inspired by, *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. This led to texts from *Hamlet* itself, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead* by Tom Stoppard and *Hamletmachine* by Heiner Müller. Thus, structurally, the students had a shared fictional world that they were immersed in, while also having specific viewpoints of the same characters from the different cultural and stylistic requirements of the text they had chosen, from classic renaissance language to a contemporary absurdist tradition.

The action was a series of physical exercises that the students had to put the texts through, which was essentially textual analysis, but from an action-based perspective. The action was as follows:

Notebook excerpt:

Stamp on nouns/ fling arms open on adjectives/ jump on adverbs/ change direction on verbs/ I/ me/ us/ we – smack chest/ you, them – point.

Do a physical journey with the text – take it up a mountain, through a valley over a river.

Across a chasm.

Take it for a walk/ climb– throw the text at the ceiling, scatter your text around carelessly, roll with your text, feel your text cover you like a blanket etc.
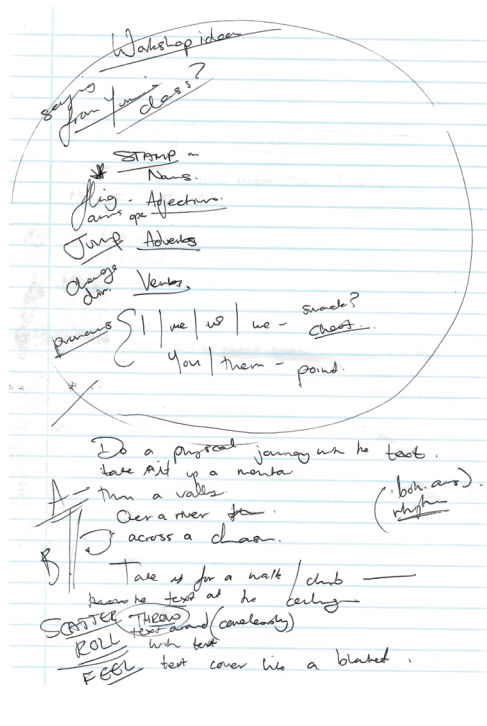
Figure 10.3: Scan of original notebook.

Source: Sarah Woodward.

The students had to speak the text throughout the above exercises, which altogether would take about an hour to an hour and a half to complete. The structure was quite deliberate, and the students would slowly become accustomed to every action. In some classes we had to take a moment to discuss what a noun or verb actually was, and then I would go even slower through the exercise. After each session, the students were required to take observational notes about what they experienced and what they discovered from the texts. The movements would need concerted effort from the students, requiring them to engage their breathing, their support, and the movement would inspire an energetic vocal shift. Essentially, what this exercise is designed to do is to evoke a visceral reaction as an impetus for speech. It is a means to embody a text.

Theoretical frameworks and post-project analysis

An essential component of working in the PaR arena is documentation. What I have discovered through this exercise of memory and analysis are the weaknesses in my own documentation process. A key component of any research is the dissemination of knowledge. It is the central tension between allowing a creative project to inhabit its own space and time, and to just 'be what it is', and the work becoming part of the so-called canonical 'praxis as knowledge' to be shared and built upon. Video, audio recordings, note-taking are all essential to the work of a creative researcher and my own lack in that regard hindered my post-practice analysis as a researcher.

What I have discovered in the years since I graduated was that many of my explorations would be grounded in a traditional theoretical framework, but it was only once I had engaged with the exercises from a playful intuitive standpoint that I could later

recognise concepts in the texts I was reading. An example of this is when I discovered that Laban's movement analysis theory, in the form of the eight effort actions, had been applied to voice work. Laban (Hodgson & Preston-Dunlop, 1990) posited the motion factors of weight, time and space (and flow) as being the components of all movement and practitioners such as Barbara Adrian (2010) have co-opted that framework into a vocal praxis. I now had the language of "dab, glide, float, press, punch, slash, wring, flick" (Hodgson & Preston-Dunlop, 1990) to describe vocal energy states that I had been playing with (unnamed) in classrooms for years. The ability to name an embodied state is essential to the work of the creative researcher.

LABAN'S MOVEMENT ANALYSIS THEORY APPLIED TO VOICE

Laban (Hodgson & Preston-Dunlop, 1990) posited the motion factors of weight, time and space (and flow) as being the components of all movement and practitioners such as Barbara Adrian (2010) have co-opted that framework into a vocal praxis. Drawing on Adrian's inspiration Sarah Woodward started using Laban's languaging along the lines of "dab, glide, float, press, punch, slash, wring, flick" to describe vocal energy states to participants.

CONCLUSION

One of the dichotomous tenets of teaching is that there is an inherent top-down power relationship in a classroom structure, but students often learn best when they are empowered and encouraged to take responsibility for their own development. I learned the most I ever learned when I became a teacher. My own practical research was as much about learning what it means to facilitate a learning process as it was about what was learned. The positionality of the researcher influences and directs the outcomes of the praxis as much as any other aspect, and therefore following a structured framework and positioning action before motivation allows for a process that engenders both participation and control of the experience. In my case, this was an essential grounding for what it means to be a teacher/ researcher.

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