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'Digital Pedagogies Open Studio': disruptions, interventions and technoempathy

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Abstract
This article shares a recent project I have co-set up with UAL colleagues Richard Parry and Natasha Sabatini called 'Digital Pedagogies Open Studio', which explores a set of questions emerging from move to online/virtual forms of learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. These questions include: 1) How do you disrupt the digital space pedagogically? and 2) How can you replicate chance happenings or an interruption online? Referring to the shift to online teaching and learning forms as generating a space of empathy between tutors and students during lockdown, the article refers to an iteration of the studio where members of the UAL LGBTQI+ student network were invited to experience a piece of live immersive storytelling via Zoom to generate a further space of technoempathy.

Keywords
critical digital pedagogy; technoparticipation; empathy; polycontextuality; disruption; immersive storytelling

Introduction: Technoparticipation
At the start of 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, I edited my first collection, a two-part book volume on critical performance pedagogy, *Leap into Action, Critical Performative Pedagogy in Art and Design Education* published by Peter Lang (Campbell, 2020). One of the sections of that volume, called *Technoparticipation: Traversing Physical and Virtual Thresholds,* explored critical digital performative pedagogy in both theory and practice, conceptualising critical digital performative pedagogy as a space that embodies polycontextuality (Elstad, 2016), the condition of being in more than one space at the same time. In terms of having multiple concurrent 'presences', *Technoparticipation* authors including Mark Childs (Durham University) and Pauline de Souza (University of East London) considered how disruptive (positively and negatively) polycontextuality can be for creating a 'third place'. Thinking about digital technology as a kind of disruption, I asked, 'how can the digital teaching and learning space be imagined or reimagined as a site for creative interruption?'. Proposing that some of the by-products of a digital teaching space might be the glitches (Russell, 2020) that happen in virtual/online space, authors put forward examples of where glitching can be artistically employed in a really creative way. Another section of Technoparticipation considered the relationship between technology, intimacy and community.

No one could have ever predicted that only three months after the launch of *Leap into Action* at the end of 2019 at London College of Communication, with the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak and the UK being placed under lockdown in March 2020, would the questions and ideas underpinning *Techoparticipation* become so pertinent not just to those working in education, but to everyone who experienced varying forms of disruption to their daily lives.
Discussions that I then had with students in my work across CCW Academic Support revolved around students' then feelings of isolation and the decrease of sociability online. Responding to this, I began

to think how to re-animate the possibilities of a community online for both students and tutors together in a collective shared space, and how a sense of community when we are online and geographically distant might be enabled. Whilst then finding shared aspirations with fellow colleagues in Academic Support, Richard Parry and Natasha Sabatini for exploring these ideas, led to the emergence of the Digital Pedagogies Open Studio (DPOS), this endeavour was not entirely new for me. As explained below, these aspirations have underpinned my approach to critical digital pedagogy since 2015.

I define critical digital pedagogy (Lunevich, 2022) as a philosophy and social movement where the digital is the framework within which critical pedagogy is practiced. As an artist, educator and interdisciplinary practitioner with pedagogical interests in the role of technology for improving access, participation and collaboration within the arts, I employ technology to rapidly multiply the spaces and opportunities for collaboration and participation — to achieve what I define as *technoparticipation* — using the digital learning environment as a space to not only reflect upon artistic practice, but also to produce it as well as prompt statements and responses to its limits. Technoparticipation is also the name given to a research project I first conceived in 2015 at Loughborough University thanks to the generous funding support of a Teaching Innovation Award (Campbell, 2017) (Figures 1 and 2).[1]
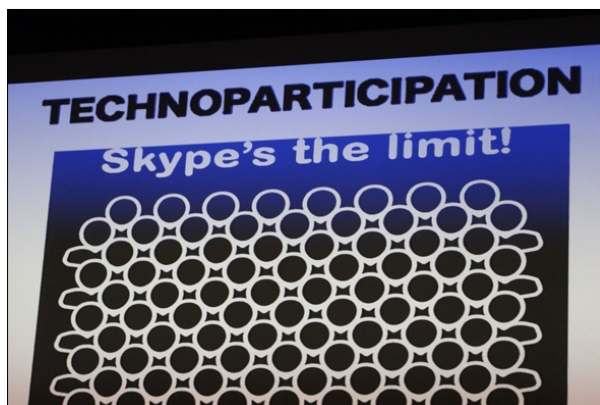

Figure 1: Technoparticipation lecture, Nottingham Trent University. Photo: Campbell (2016).

Figure 2: Artist Carali McCall Skypes-in during a Fine Art lecture at Loughborough University. Photo: Sharples (2015).

Tapping into the increasing importance of digital and virtual realities in students' lives — while helping students to engage with multiple technologies to build digital literacy, thus ensuring that teaching and learning does not displace students' unique life experiences — one of the project's core aims is to

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[1] For more information on *Technoparticipation,* see:
https://leecampbelltechnoparticipation.blogspot.com

disrupt the digital space pedagogically and explore how the interruptive plays out in the specific context of digital pedagogy (Campbell, 2020).

What's at stake with disruption? Disruption goes back to the Situationists (Debord, 1994)—un-working passivity, activating agency and subjectivity, ethics and desire by provocations. Disruptions and interruptions literally cut people loose from their bearings. Disruption forces one to find an orientation. Desire might be radicalized in the way that people who might have had a near-death experience refine their reason for being in the world. While Maggi Savin-Baden (2007), Professor of Higher Education at the University of Worcester, suggests that interruptions can provoke self-reflection and deep critical thinking, Michael Vale, MA Theatre and Performance Design Course Leader, Wimbledon College of Arts, asserts that interruptions, disruptions and disturbances have the power to produce new knowledge, new taxonomies and revised thinking (2017). The project recognises that the process of learning is in itself a series of interruptions involving scales of interruption from those subtle to those not; silence as an interruption; being observed as an interruption and so forth (Campbell, 2018). I connect Michael's assertion above to the disruption of habits to Arthur Koestler's exploration of habits (1970):

> We learn by assimilating experiences and grouping experiences and grouping them into ordered schemata, into stable patterns of unity in variety. They enable us to cope with events and situations by applying the rules of the game appropriate to them. The matrices which pattern our perceptions, thoughts and activities are condensations of learning into habit [...] Habits have varying degrees of flexibility if often repeated under unchanging conditions, in a monotonous environment they tend to become rigid and automatized. (Koestler, 1970, p. 44)

He goes on to propose that:

> Habits are the indispensable core of stability and ordered behaviour; they also have a tendency to become mechanized and to reduce man to the status of a conditioned automaton. The creative act, by connecting previously unrelated dimensions of experience, enables him to attain to a higher level of mental evolution. It is an act of liberation - the defeat of habit. (Koestler, 1970, p. 9)

In conversation with artist James Lewis in 2020 and curator Jean Matthee in 2019, James suggested the following:

> What is fascinating about your practice is that there is nothing outside the research, it seems you fold in art and life. It's concerned with emancipation, it's an open closed topology. You think about the lectures you give and the teaching you do, experiences you have, the relationship to your partner and your partner's voices. Everything seems to be a site for research – and whenever you are triggered in terms of being heckled or made to feel uncomfortable, you see that as a place of real potential for the trans-disciplinary! An incredible long body of practice. You went through different theories on that journey – pedagogy, comedy, ethics and participation – different frameworks of study, but what's really at stake in the work is: desire. (Jean Mathee in conversation with Lee Campbell, 2019)

Whereas James suggested that 'The world of heckling and the world of interruption is at the core of everything that you are doing' (James Lewis in conversation with Lee Campbell, 2020). Connecting both ideas together, I view all of my practice forms, both artistic and pedagogic as generating interruptions as critical thinking tools, to use interruption as a means to prise open and obliterate habits and accepted norms of behaviour. Referring back to the term 'desire', I view this practice (including all the practice forms that I have thus far mentioned in this article) as a means to open up ways of discussing how we might state what we desire, and to reflect upon what it actually is that we think we desire. I view these practice forms, through their interruption of the everyday, the

banal, the monotonous, the habitual as embodying German theatre director Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), which means the world 'made strange':

> The achievement of the A-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely practiced way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing. [...] The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. (Brecht, 1978, p. 143)

Digital Pedagogies Open Studio

Extending these ideas of Savin-Baden and Vale, the latest iteration of the project is the online Digital Pedagogies Open Studio co-set up between myself, Richard Parry and Natasha Sabatini. DPOS is an online space accessible to both staff and students where personal approaches and personal narratives shed light on key questions/pertinent themes relating to disruptions, interventions and liminalities. Structurally, the studio operated as both a method and platform to bring together a diverse and fascinating mix of people together. We have taken an asynchronous approach where conversations between invited guests (including Mark Child and Pauline de Souza) are recorded, edited and then made public during a live public screening open to UAL staff, students and external guests. A set of questions explored during the conversations can be contributed to before and after the live screening via Academic Support Online as a means to directly engage UAL staff and students. These questions include:

- What does participation mean when we work across different worlds?
- How is my behaviour different?
- Does technology prevent intimacy?
- Do we keep in the glitches?
- What's a real community anyway?

DPOS prioritises the importance of ongoing conversations and producing a ripple effect from the set of questions above. DPOS was initially designed as an online discussion and resource space applying critical theory from the arts to cultural narratives of the Internet to provide a much-needed space to pause, stop and reflect critically around the online learning environment and potentially discover new ways of seeing (pedagogically) through the Internet as a very specific and nuanced kind of viewing platform (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of Lee Campbell during launch of the studio (09/12/20). Photo: Campbell (2020).

What has now surfaced as underpinning one of the core values of the online studio is the ambition to explore in practice (given the heightened move to online/virtual forms of learning and teaching due to Covid-19 and acknowledging and embracing technological disruptions and interruptions), how

technology can be used as both the form and content for being creatively disruptive. I remember how students I spoke to at the time were super-appreciative of speaking to tutors when the first Covid-related lockdown in England happened in March 2020. We now have the tools to carry on teaching but must be critical of those tools and move beyond issues of technology, such as providing accessibility. We have a responsibility to pause, be critical and approach the online environment though a questioning way. We must use our current and recent conditions to really interrogate the idea that form is content, which suggests that different (technological) forms provide slightly different ways of understanding an experience. DPOS encourages digital criticality and creative learning potential via student engagement in digital technology where educational formats (tutorials, workshops, seminars and so on) are viewed as 'performative events' (Nunes, 2006, pp.130–1) to help students develop as autonomous self-reflective thinkers and practitioners in a constantly evolving digital age. DPOS replicates chance happenings and interruptions online and proposes that the dynamic connection between students in a co-creative environment can still function when flow is constantly interrupted by technological imperfections. Rather than airbrushing out glitches and technological disturbances, the online studio sees value in not just reflecting upon technological imperfections such as momentary on-screen visual freezing but actually deliberately engineering these 'interruptions' to occur within teaching. Thinking through how the body may be configured and compromised when we are speaking/communicating online, moments when technology freezes momentarily online during teaching sessions are embraced as they bring in the materiality of the digital. The online studio also recognizes the weirdness when parties are attempting to look at each other but are synchronized, producing a 'technological uncanny'. Uncanny is a term taken from the German 'unheimlich', translated into English as 'unhomely', which itself derives from Sigmund Freud's conception of the 'uncanny' (Freud, 2003b).

It could be said that online working may be most attractive to those whose artistic practice directly concerns the digital and technological forms of making. Therefore, one of the ambitions of the studio moving forward is to attract a wide cohort of practitioners, who are engaged in physical forms of making, to really encourage contestation, deliberation and debate about what happens when we experience, for example, a painting, a sculpture, the artist's live physical fleshy body in performance art online. Natasha, Richard and I are keen to use the studio as a locus for discussions concerning what happens when we experience those physical entities through virtual presence and how this may affect viewer engagement? Is it altered? Is it compromised? How can the digital positively disrupt our ways of thinking around presence, encounter and engagement?
By acknowledging that time-zone differences may impact upon collaborative processes and also how certain digital platforms are not available in certain geographic regions, there are so many unique opportunities for developing an approach to arts pedagogy that is responsive to what the digital may offer. Virtual space disrupts our understanding of physical geography, of having to be physically present in a fixed location. As Natasha observed in developmental conversations about DPOS, 'We are connected now but at the same time we are geographically in different spaces. We may feel more connected to students because of the intimacy. Or is there a disconnection? Those two things happening at the same time – multiple things happening in this liminal space – is it amplifying or is it restricting?'. We also want to encourage creative practitioners and arts educators alike, to join us as allies and supporters of our studio, to contribute, co-explore and (re)imagine our practices as fluid, open-ended and fully responsive to contingent and changing conditions of teaching, learning and creative practice-making in (increased) technological forms. By doing so we open up potentially new ways of thinking about physicality, affect and presence within our respective practices.

During the planning stage for DPOS which took place at a time (mid-2020) when I really started to consider how empathy and communities may be built when a lot of our time (both socially and professionally) might now be spent online, Natasha and I discussed that although our communities might be smaller than they were before the Covid-19 outbreak, we are still in a blended mode and that has shifted our perspective as we have become more online 'creatures'. Concerning the relation

between intimacy and empathy, going back to the physical world now, a pertinent question to ask relates to how empathy may have changed perspectives when so many of us (as artists/creatives/tutors) have been developing material for an online audience. The move to online only forms of teaching delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic could be said to have generated a space of hyper-empathy between students and tutors. When I first experienced difficulties myself in delivering online paired with the then urgency instructed by institutions to tutors to get used to teaching online in as short amount of time as possible, students could empathise with me and likewise, so I could empathize with them. This empathy went beyond critical digital pedagogy but extended to creative artistic practice for both students and tutors (many of whom are also creative practitioners). Students and tutors alike had to get used to virtual modes of creation as well as online modes of learning at the same time. This situation, which I refer to as a collective *technoempathy,* has made everyone (re)think their relationship to working with physical materials, objects and processes within the real world.

Technoempathy in practice: Immersive storytelling via Zoom
Since November 2020, I have been developing a form of online poetry performance practice that uses the technological platform Zoom as an immersive autoethnographic storytelling prototype. Emerging as a positive of using Zoom under Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, I have explored the possibilities of how Zoom can really enhance my creativity in what I am doing in terms of combining my poetry performance and live cinema practice and generating a way of working with Zoom which can be something that isn't just 'more of the same'. Making full usage of Zoom's green screen effect as performative filmic backdrops, this involves me creating a bridge between video, poetry and performance and in turn proposing a new way of thinking about what the somewhat tired term 'collage' might develop into (Campbell, 2022) (Figures 4-6).
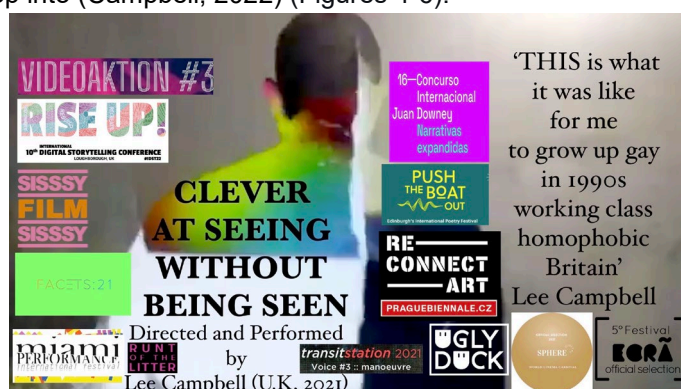

Figure 4: Promotional poster for *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen.* Photo: Campbell (2021).

Figure 5: Screenshot of *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen.* Photo: Campbell (2021).

One of these online poetry performances *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen,* recently included in *The Immersive Storytelling Symposium* at Lakeside Arts Centre, University of Nottingham in 2021 and

presented at *10th International Digital Storytelling Conference* at Loughborough University (June 2022), nails a specific talent queer people need to acquire – the title. During the performance, I speak my personal truth, my personal history of seeing and not seeing to confront the politics of seeing and underline how validating seeing can be, but also the difficulty of not being seen. The performance aims to provoke the audience to reflect upon the challenges queer folk face in terms of seeing and being seen.

Embodying *technoempathy,* in December 2021, I invited members of the UAL LGBTQ+ student network to attend a presentation of this performance online as an iteration of DPOS. Having watched the performance, audience members fed back how they felt empathetic to so many of the personal experiences that I shared throughout the performance because they had encountered similar experiences themselves. The performance generated a space of empathy to break down hierarchies between student and tutor in two ways. First, in terms of me and the students as mutual practitioners by me demonstrating how to combine physical and virtual forms in terms of my usage of physical props during the performance that bring to life certain parts of the poetry including cassette tape recorders from the 1990s and photocopies of a large scrapbook I made as a teenager between 1993-1998, and secondly, in terms of the autobiographic content of the poetry that I shared throughout the performance. During the post-performance feedback discussion, students said they appreciated the level of honesty that I shared with them in terms of revealing, at times, quite difficult personal subject matter but subject that they themselves could relate to: 'I smuggled *Gay Times* too!' (student feedback comments, Campbell, 2021). During the discussion, we began to explore how the optics at work for both audience and performer/speaker when engaging in Zoom might be (re)considered in terms of potentially opening up ways of thinking about the content of these performances, that of LGBTQ+ (in)visibility. As an artist whose practice for over 20 years has explored seeing/not seeing, vision and visuality and related concepts/themes, including a previous research project working with members of the blind community (Campbell, 2020b), one of the most exciting conversations to emerge so far from DPOS has related to (re)configuring the optics of teaching and the optics within social communication more broadly. During the online launch event of DPOS (09/12/20), Lecturer in Education at the Institute of Education, UCL, Annie Davey spoke of her discomfort with Zoom meetings:

> …Its sometimes homogenizing and weirdly turn-takey effects… we assign breakout groups... and yet, when in that space one is only partially *in* a group but looking *at* a group. Maybe it is the introvert in me... but I find it hard to get over this act of looking at people and being conscious being looked at.

Annie's comments interwove into further discussion I had students after my performance in terms of how certain aesthetics afforded to the online digital environment may offer a way to (re)think optics and how this investigation may also relate to issues of (in)visibility within the queer community. The virtual encounter is a crossed gaze in a way – you are looking but you are not being looked at back. Online parties cannot look at each other in the eye. This kind of direct visual encounter with another human is interrupted completely, in addition to the delay in reaction time (another resumption lag, albeit a technological one). Could there be a relation to how queer people see and are seen? During the discussion, we identified a relationship between my specific usage of the form and aesthetics of Zoom (optical one-way street, interruptions, disruptions, interferences) and LGBTQ+ storytelling in relation to ideas of (in)visibility.

Conclusion: Further explorations of *technoempathy*
DPOS has so far bought up a number of issues arising from how inclusive (or not) online experience is, finding the limits of that, how students feel more comfortable to engage online without the camera and just be able to engage through the chat, how it builds a community, how it builds this vulnerability for both staff and students. Everyone who has so far engaged in DPOS has come from a

practitioners' point of view, arriving as practitioners into the online space. As contributors have shared their personal experiences online, Richard, Natasha and I have been discovering so many things as conversations have unfolded. Although we had a clear idea about DPOS's structure and the questions we wanted to explore, we didn't know the direction it was going to go when we first embarked upon the project back in December 2020. That shared discovery between staff and students has created a more equal diverse teaching and learning space.

Since the inception of DPOS in 2020, we experienced several lockdowns, but the move (back) to on campus face-to-face teaching has now resumed, whilst some teaching delivery has remained online as part of a hybrid/blended teaching offer to students. But just as some of us are feeling more at ease with using online platforms not just for teaching delivery but also as part of our individual situated artistic practice endeavours, some of us are finding that the online environment can provide experiences irreplicable to those in the physical world. For example, I have found that I can *only* achieve the aesthetics that I strive for in my Zoom performances by using Zoom and in fact no other related platform, due to Zoom's green screen capacities.

The challenge now facing many of us in education relates to polycontextuality. Whilst the ambition for many institutions is to offer a blended teaching offer, the practical logistics of setting up and maintaining this can be overwhelming. As UAL's Head of Academic Support, Graham Barton pointed out in a DPOS event in March 2021, 'the disruption is in the return'.

In terms of future DPOS practice events, myself, Natasha and Richard have discussed a potential intervention (provisionally titled 'Waiting to be Interrupted'), where, in different Blackboard Collaborate rooms, artists (incl. me and Richard) are making work or having different kinds of conversations, performing, lecturing etc. Staff and students would be invited to interrupt us, in fact, we would challenge them to interrupt us. Anyone could drop-in, like an open studio, but possibly in a way which is more exposing, more terrifying. The intervention would be set up so that everyone knows understands the artifice in advance. This is intended to beg the question: is an interruption really an interruption if you know it's going to happen? We anticipate that the construction of the event produces an expanded idea of what drop-in tutorials are and a fundamental shift in power relations beyond the patriarch sitting in a room. The staff or student member connecting with the person(s) in the Blackboard Collaborate room might do so at a good time, or maybe at a bad time. We are keen to explore how for the person(s) potentially being caught off-guard, this may produce a different ethics of approach. Interruptions are proof that an experience is not pre-determined even if the structure or set-up is. And something not being pre-determined means there is potential for creative agency, multiplying the scope for resistance or alternative endings. We are excited about the potential of what may happen when those 'interrupting' the flow of events in their chosen room use or misuse the technology in creative, inventive, subversive and unexpected ways.

One of the other key outcomes of DPOS so far, has been the creation of shared spaces of *techno-empathy* with UAL students and staff. This has led to my current pedagogic research project *Exploring Empathy*: *How do you build empathy with students through CCW Academic Support,* kindly supported through funding made available from CCW's Learning and Teaching Fund. Two of the main aims of the project, which began in March 2022, are to, first, set up a discursive space to explore the relationship between teaching and being empathetic through embodied personal authentic experience and using one's practice to get a point across. Secondly, the project aims to support postgraduate students to build connections between students and Academic Support tutors' practices from across CCW by using the term 'empathy' to activate discussion in terms of: 1) how do different disciplinary practitioners understand empathy in relation to their practice; 2) how can empathy help us think about how we engage with materials within our practice, in an ethically responsible way?; and 3) as we go back into the physical world post-lockdown, how has empathy changed your perspective in terms of making work for an online audience as opposed to a face-to-face audience?

To conclude, the virtual environment, to some extent, may have held us hostage, but we are now liberated; and we retain the freedom to imagine beyond its constraints.

Acknowledgements

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Biography
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