

Institution: University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 33B		
Title of case study: Delivering actor training online: changing embodied teaching and learning practices		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-19		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Jonathan Pitches	Chair of Theatre and Performance	2006-present
Dr Carole Kirk	Project Assistant, then PGR	2012-18
Period when the claimed impact occurred: March 2014-present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Professor Jonathan Pitches' design and delivery of a pioneering Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) has offered specialised actor training to vastly expanded groups of learners than would be possible face-to-face. Informed by his research into 20th century Russian actor training methods (2003-2019) and digital pedagogy (2013), an online learning programme of performer training has contributed to the personal and professional development of 29,234 participants from 6 continents (as of 1.10.20), aged from below 18 years to above 65. Independently accredited as CPD and delivered on the commercial FutureLearn platform, two versions of the course were designed, one specifically for teachers, the other for a general audience. These have impacted on the practice and cultural awareness of learners in three key areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • on teachers and their teaching practices (in secondary and tertiary contexts) • on professional actors and their training • on the practice and learning behaviours of individual participants 		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Two main areas of research underpin the MOOC: 1) historiographical research in which Pitches discusses performer training exercises as 'objects', subject to (and expressive of) cultural and political influence; 2) investigation into the benefits of using digital technologies as tools for facilitating creative reflection in ephemeral practice.</p> <p>Pitches trained in biomechanics with two Russian Masters (Gennadi Bogdanov and Alexei Levinsky) in the mid-1990s, including learning études (short physical studies), which form the basis of the training. The rationalisation of this practice and its dissemination for teachers and practitioners formed part of Pitches' monograph published in the Routledge Performance Practitioners series, Vsevolod Meyerhold (Routledge 2003, Revised Edition 2018) and the historical and cultural specificity of this practice was first examined in his book <i>Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition</i> (2006). This foundation research was conducted before Pitches joined the University of Leeds and laid the ground for a detailed discussion of the processes of embodied learning in historical training exercises, once he took up his post there in August 2006. This work has consciously focused on overtly vertical traditions (i.e., those passed down from generation to generation), such as Meyerhold's biomechanics and Stanislavsky's System [1,5], exposing how these lineages are constructed and illuminating their sensitivity to environmental, cultural and political influence.</p> <p>In 2012, following a collaborative project on Digital Storytelling funded by JISC (GBP50,000), Pitches was awarded GBP47,000 of competitive funding by the Leeds Academic Development Fund to lead interdisciplinary pedagogical research into what became termed 'digital reflection' –</p>		

the use of technology to enhance reflection on ephemeral, practice-based work. The research for this project (*Digitalis*: <http://www.digitalis.leeds.ac.uk>) resulted in a new model of reflection [4], in which **Pitches** and project assistant **Kirk**, advocated an approach to deeper learning by enabling learners to look again at material that would otherwise have been lost in the creative process, using digital forms of documentation. Findings suggested that forms of non-textual reflection, such as images and video, can better enable expressions of tacit knowledge, presenting opportunities to *show* rather than *explain*, while providing richer data for understanding creative practice. Informed by the research findings, modes of digital reflection were adopted for the final task for both online courses. Here, students from all over the world uploaded their own creative responses to the video tutorials on biomechanics, often imaginatively manipulating digital technologies to express their experiences of the training [3] and using their own digital artefacts as starting points to evaluate their learning. In 2015, **Pitches** formulated a new methodology for critiquing actor training exercises as examples of embodied history, considering them as 'objects' of 'material culture' reflective of their specific socio-political contexts [2]. This approach underpinned the philosophy of the FutureLearn online courses as well as a case study of digital reflection [4].

Between 2014-19 **Pitches** developed the online course in collaboration with the Digital Education Service at Leeds, following an institutional level QA and approval process (internally peer reviewed and rated 5/5*). The first iterations of the course provided the reference point and original data for two reflective pieces of research on digital education and performer training [3, 6], the former being the most expansive. In this piece qualitative analysis of the comment threads is conducted and the potential for online training to increase access is evidenced. The underpinning insights thus reflect the action research of the Impact Case Study as a whole: a specialised embodied practice, which is firstly theorised, then reorganised as a practice-stimulus for others and, finally, reflected upon in digital form at the massive scale possible with commercial online learning platforms. In recent performer training research (Camilleri, 2015; Evans, 2019; Allain, 2019; Roms, 2020), **Pitches'** MOOC is acknowledged as playing a foundational role in a digital revolution in performer training which is growing in pace. For Evans it has helped 'creat[e] new economies and ecologies of performance' (2019, p.147); for Camilleri the course was 'among the first - if not the first - to explore the possibility of teaching aspects of actor training [in a MOOC]' (2015, p.25).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

1. Pitches, Jonathan (2011) *Russians in Britain: British Theatre and the Russian Tradition of Actor Training*, sole edited book, Abingdon: Routledge, 218pp.
2. Pitches, Jonathan (2015) "Contrasting Modernities: the Rural and the Urban in Michael Chekhov's Psychological Gesture and Meyerhold's Biomechanical Études" in *The Routledge Companion to Michael Chekhov*, eds. Meerzon, Y. and Autant-Matthieu, M.C. Abingdon: Routledge. pp. 219-234.
3. Pitches, Jonathan, (2019) "Simultaneity and Asynchronicity in Performer Training: a case study of Massive Open Online Courses as Training Tools" in *Time and Performer Training*, eds. Evans, M., Thomaidis, K. and Worth, L. Abingdon: Routledge. pp.181-193.
4. Kirk, Carole & Pitches, Jonathan (2013) "Digital reflection: using digital technologies to enhance and embed creative processes", in *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*. DOI: 10.1080/1475939X.2013.768390. pp. 213-231.
5. Pitches, Jonathan (2007) "Tracing/Training Rebellion: Object Work in Meyerhold's biomechanics", in *On Objects: Performance Research*, 12.4: 97-103.
6. Pitches, Jonathan (2016), Introduction to *Meyerhold on Theatre* (ed. Edward Braun, Bloomsbury). pp.1-18.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Pitches' historiographical and practice research into Meyerhold's biomechanics was translated into online learning content in collaboration with learning technologists in the Digital Education Service at the University of Leeds. The two resulting FutureLearn online courses - *Physical Theatre: Meyerhold's Biomechanics (PT)* and *Exploring the Slap (ES)* -were devised and led by **Pitches** and have aired repeatedly on the platform since 2014 (the total iterations as of

October 2020 number 48). Course content, comprising short video tutorials and filmed lectures, animations and interactive exercises, stimulates comments from participants and in turn responses from the Lead Educator, distinguishing this course from other more recent digital platforms for training which have no interactive functionality (e.g. Routledge's Performance Archive and Methuen's 'PATAZ'). Informed by the model of digital reflection expounded in [3], a key moment in both courses is when students are invited to upload documentary evidence of their own embodiment of the exercises to the platform reflecting on their choice of digital documentation, in prose, stills or video [A]. Learners who chose to reflect in this way had their artefacts critiqued by peers and by **Pitches**. Patterns of learner engagement and participant comments indicate that they valued highly the opportunity to share ideas and comments in parallel with others of varying levels of expertise, as well as noting unique benefits from being able to learn alongside such large numbers and with such broad global diversity [A].

In quantitative terms the impact of these two online courses is to have exponentially expanded the demographic and international reach of biomechanical training, moving it from the seclusion of the studio (a ratio typically of 1-20) to the openness of the FutureLearn platform (1-2000, on average across four, three-week courses). In the five years since the MOOCs were launched **Pitches** has reached over 29,000 students, from more than 90 countries working with students ranging from younger than 18 years to over 65 [B]. These are predominantly learners who would not be able to access the tightly controlled courses in biomechanics led by the two Russian masters or by a small coterie of their disciples. An average of 297 learners joined each of the 10 course runs of ES during 2019. In March and May 2020, the period when the UK and other parts of the world were in full lockdown as a consequence of COVID-19, each run attracted 1080 and 1199 respectively, nearly a four-fold increase in take up and engagement on the previous year [B].

As the first practice-based courses of their kind on a commercial platform, both courses have had an international impact across three clear groups of beneficiaries (see Section 1). The *kinds* of impact for these groups may be summarised as: a) changing the ways people train for performance; b) creating new means for mediating their training; c) influencing attitudes towards training; and d) revolutionising perceptions of where training can occur (i.e. virtual/actual spaces, home/studio). The impacts claimed have been achieved primarily by learners' involvement in the 48 online courses and substantiated with some targeted follow-up activities with selected groups, including workshops with A-Level students in the UK and focus groups with teachers in the UK, Japan and Australia. As the beneficiary-set is so wide in online learning communities, selected 'impact stories' are identified here, following threads of influence related to each of the areas of impact above. The full qualitative data are included as Source [A].

i) **Teachers** indicated how their practices have positively changed when engaging with Meyerhold online: 'It has been eye-opening' said one, 'and given me a whole new way to look at teaching drama in the classroom' [A]. They valued highly the access to new resources and the associated opportunity to enhance their own approaches to reflective, inclusive learning. Responding to the mode of digital reflection, an A-Level teacher testified: 'My first efforts of keeping it simple for my young learners has just been uploaded. It is also a first pass at documenting a process such as this [...] I will be encouraging the students to think about their studies of theatre and scripts in such ways in the future' [A]; 'This is my second time teaching Meyerhold to Year 12. It has been so much more interesting using the videos in the course. I'm watching groups of students interpreting the work of Meyerhold for their assessment task. One group in particular have shown an amazing understanding of the physical requirements and have worked constantly to create precision in their work. They have used discipline and also playfulness in the workshop they're devising' [Facebook data, A].

A vocational acting tutor at a UK conservatoire described using the MOOC materials to enhance inclusivity in her own teaching practice: 'This style of transmission is so accessible to multiple learning styles which is fantastic. Students have visuals of the entire arc of each exercise; they have visuals of information as well as hearing all of this from you; they have kinaesthetic learning in manoeuvring through these exercises themselves' [C]. Another noted how pupils' awareness of physical stamina was enhanced: 'By breaking down the actions it also helps to focus the actor and brings them into the moment on stage. Having facilitated the learning of The Slap with my Year 12 class it becomes apparent that they have a new respect

for the physical performer and the level of fitness needed' [A]. A further UK teacher stated: 'I am planning to build upon this course, research further and develop a BTEC scheme of work on biomechanics' [A].

Ideas of embodied history also influenced teachers working across cultures: 'The issues raised here make me think of many of the conversations I have had in the cross-cultural drama workshops I'm involved in (I'm from the UK, my students are from China) [...]. It's fascinating to think about [how] embodied knowledge can be linked to the gestures of a particular culture and /or the movements of a particular acting style' [A].

Teachers actively identified their experience with (and documentation of) Meyerhold online as pivotal in their understanding of theatre and in how they will teach it in the future: 'I am certainly going to expose my students to Meyerhold and his techniques...I am much more convinced of the important influence of this work than I was at the start. I shall continue to research and follow through on what I have learnt'; 'I have new teaching tools which is always exciting and want to consider the best way of integrating them into my teaching as well as practise them more first' [A]. In autumn 2019 **Pitches** worked face-to-face with 14 A-Level Theatre Studies students and their teachers from two local schools who had followed the 2-week ES course. Teachers valued the wider contextual perspective brought by the course, helping to shape students' understanding of how Meyerhold's work fitted alongside better-known practitioners, such as Stanislavsky. Students themselves revealed that they previously had little or no awareness of Meyerhold and biomechanics but were subsequently able to identify ways in which the practical skills they had acquired from the course helped them prepare for performance by building important qualities of trust and discipline [G].

Reviewed with 5-stars in *Drama & Theatre*, a leading industry journal for UK teachers, the 2-week course was commended: 'Professionally delivered, top-quality content and hugely enjoyable [...] This holistic, rigorous and detailed short study grabs you by the lapels, whets your appetite and is the perfect springboard for deeper engagement' [F]. The local teachers working directly with **Pitches** echoed this assessment, observing 'Part of the course at A-Level is to see influences of practitioners and that's where this [online course] will help [them] further down the line [G]. Similarly, secondary school drama teachers in Brisbane, Australia who piloted the course with their students, noted in a focus group led by **Pitches** (2.5.14) its value in presenting 'absorbable chunks' of information that they would return to for further exploration. These teachers also agreed that they were 'so inspired' as the course gave students 'a fundamental, that can then springboard into other thing[s]' concluding that they had 'never felt more engaged about the value of the *historical*' [H].

ii) **Professional actors** reflected on their skills development and on the application of biomechanics to their own practice, with many identifying transformational understanding and effects. One observed: 'As an actress I was painfully unaware of Meyerhold's existence as I was only taught Stanislavsky [...] However, even though the course only lasted three weeks, I feel I have a much better sense of the cultural background behind Stanislavsky. I feel I do know enough to join a conversation and look forward to reading and perhaps seeing some [Meyerhold] productions. I especially loved working with the stick and I shall continue to practice until I master the fine art of balancing' [A].

Many artists echoed this idea of enhanced practitioner knowledge leading to improvement in their own performance skills, for example: 'In my theatre education, Meyerhold and Biomechanics were simply footnotes in the study of theatre history, rather than an integral part of actor training. Now I finally have a better understanding of the technique as another tool in the arsenal that an actor can draw from, both as general acting exercises and in the development and performance of specific roles on the stage'; 'As an actor [...] these exercises are allowing me to move about convincingly on stage making it look less like a premeditated move when I do an action, less like I am thinking it and more like my whole body is doing it', and 'I think the exercises have given me a greater self-awareness regarding my movements, both on stage and in my everyday life, and the need to control them' [A].

Hard-to-reach learners are particularly evident in this section, with users in, amongst others, Brazil, Iran, Israel, Lithuania and Bangladesh reporting the appropriation of techniques embedded in the course in their own professional practice. For example, Bangladeshi actor and university teacher MA noted a new opportunity to blend biomechanics with her existing teaching

of physical practices (gymnastics, martial arts, circus and acrobatic skills) originally designed to counter a pervasive and problematic narrative of a 'frail and effeminate race' <http://granthouthasia.in/physical-cultures-of-bengal.html>): 'After the course, I now see clearly that Meyerhold had not jettisoned emotion entirely, but started off from the body to activate emotion as a result of action... The clarity that I have thus gained through the course is tested not only through my work with my students but also in my work as an actor.... I intend to develop Meyerhold's work further, in a manner that may incorporate the physical culture of the Bengali' [E]. In an interview with **Pitches** for The Theatre Times (31.5.20), Iranian journalist Niloofar Mohtadi noted the impact of his online course, and his wider Meyerhold research, on both the director and lead actor, Niayesh Nahavandian, for a 2018 Tehran production of *Hippolytus* performed with slap études [D]. Nahavandian herself acknowledged **Pitches'** influence on her practice in a subsequent Theatre Times article (17.10.20), observing how biomechanics' 'techniques as foreign instruments' offered her a stimulating relationship with 'the Iranian soul' [D].

iii) **Individual learners** report a range of positive reactions to the form of learning embedded in the online course, reflecting on their embodiment of the training in non-traditional spaces: 'It was a very positive experience, in some ways more positive than learning such skills in a studio environment. At home on my own, I really felt I was in a safe space to try the physical activities as many times as I wanted'; 'The MOOC has really challenged my preconceptions of what can be achieved in this sort of format. I doubted the efficacy of such a large, electronic forum to deal with the intricacies of physical training but I have been proven wrong in every way; The online format also opened up participant dialogue: 'In the comments we heard voices that would sometimes stay quiet in a rehearsal room, where in my experience the most confident and the most physically able would be the most vocal during such exercises'; and 'I felt as if I was learning with a group of people who, in spite of geographical distances, were all encouraging each other to achieve and take on the challenges' [A].

The treatment of training as a dynamic and material form of embodied history is similarly evident in learners' experience: 'My sense of theatre history has been forever altered in a positive way from participating. I think Meyerhold would be extremely pleased that we are continuing to learn and grow from his legacy'; 'I feel far better equipped to imagine Meyerhold's work in a practical, living way, not just as theatre history' [A].

For some this approach was transformational: 'When in the beginning we were speaking of theories and terminology, my reaction was that some professionals over-analyse everything and make the art of acting too complicated and mechanical. Now, after working on just these first few exercises, I have reversed my original thinking and see not only the practicality of practiced movement but begin to see how body training and control become part of the art of acting. Meyerhold has a new convert!' [A].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- A.** Portfolio: qualitative participant comments from the 3-week runs of the MOOC (2014, 2015, 2018); visual documentation from the Facebook event Runs 1 & 2 (2014, 2015).
- B.** Registration figures and participant locations for *PT* and *ES* (from UoL Digital Education Service) (3.10.14 – 1.10.20).
- C.** Email from Acting Tutor, Rose Bruford College, UK (25.6.18); their annotations and comments in response to draft of [3].
- D.** The Theatre Times articles (31.5.20, 17.10.20).
- E.** Email from actor/academic, Jagannath University, Dhaka, Bangladesh (28.6.20).
- F.** Teaching Drama Summer Term 1 2018/19 p.47 Review by John Dabell.
- G.** Annotated transcripts from A-Level sessions with Pitches at Ilkley Grammar School (30.9.19) and Prince Henry's Grammar School, Otley (7.10.19). MP3 audio files available on request.
- H.** Transcript of drama teacher focus group led by Pitches at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia (2.5.14).