

Documentary Theatre

Intro

Hello, my name is Dr. Lyndsey Bakewell. I'm Senior Lecturer and programme leader in Drama De Montfort University. This video is the first of five relating to the Documentary Theatre Workshop, a workshop I developed as part of the Creativity Project. This workshop is designed to introduce you or your students to elements of Documentary Theatre. Thinking about the ways in which we can gather materials from a range of different sources, we can focus on lived experience and personal perspective and also utilise the work of Bertolt Brecht in terms of creating work that speaks to a particular audience.

In this workshop, I encourage students to develop their skills in communication by working together; creativity by taking materials from a whole range of places and turning it into performance materials; collaboration not only as a group which is performing together, but also the collaboration between the performer and the audience; and also critical thinking, thinking about how we understand perspectives, how we gather information, how we work with other people's experiences in an ethical and moral way, and how we can utilise this not only to inform our knowledge, but the knowledge of others.

There are three key learning outcomes from this workshop, the first of which is to critically consider how we utilise our own and other people's lived experience to inform our knowledge and understanding. The second is to learn how to create new pieces of performance work, which utilise knowledge found in newspapers, archives, or in stories. And the third is to utilise the work of Bertolt Brecht, thinking about the ways in which we can work with an audience and alienate an audience to share information to inform our knowledge and understanding.

The workshop is divided into three different sections. Each of those sections has subcategories. Following this video, you'll find those three sections and then you'll find a further video which helps you or students to develop a piece of portfolio evidence to reflect on what you've learned.

For this workshop, there are some materials that you need. First of all, you need to download my newspaper game, cut it up and get it ready for your students. Secondly, you're going to need some newspapers. We're encouraging students to take stories from around them in their local area, but also nationally and internationally. So if you can get a range of newspapers that cover all of those formats that will be excellent. Students will also need a pen and a piece of paper

Activity One:

Before you begin your first exercise, I recommend taking 10 minutes to introduce your group to Documentary Theatre. This may or may not be a form that they have come into contact with before. And so providing some of these foundational principles will be really helpful to them in navigating the exercises that come after this in the workshop. If they're a group that you've not worked with before, you might find asking them some basic questions about drama, about performance, about how we create work, and where we create work from will give them a good foundation to explore their current knowledge. You will then be able to supplement this knowledge by saying to them, you're going to introduce them to a new form of performance that actually draws knowledge and understanding and perspective from different places, including newspapers, stories, lived experience, personal testimony, and so on and so forth. If they're a group that you've worked with for a long time, you may already know what their understanding is. And so you might want to do a bit of a deeper dive on what documentary theatre is, this might be a really good opportunity to question them on the work Brecht if they already know some about it, or give them a brief introduction to the work that Brecht created and his key principles. What we're really interested in here is an understanding with the group that we're going to be working with materials to generate our performances, we're going to be drawing direct quotation, key words and direct lived experience into our performance. And this comes with certain ethical and moral decision making, and that we need to be sensitive when we approach this material. If you yourself are unfamiliar with Documentary Theatre, then this definition that I like to use and this explanation might be helpful to you. I like to say to my group, that:

"Documentary Theatre is a performance form that draws upon lived experience and reported experience of individuals. The final performance or product from Documentary Theatre can take many different forms. And this includes storytelling, verbatim theatre, traditional performance narratives, and also physical theatre forms amongst many others. There are many places for us to look for materials to help us create Documentary Theatre. And this can include newspapers, TV shows, social media, pictures, interviews, surveys, or anywhere where we can get somebody's personal lived experience and perspective. Perspective is particularly important in Documentary Theatre, we must think about how we understand what is reliable information and what is being shared through the lens of personal perspective. We must also consider whose perspective we share and how."

The activities in this workshop will help us to work through all of this. Once you've completed your introduction, you can move on to activity one, which I've called What's with newspaper headlines? I take about 35 minutes in total to complete this activity. But you can expand that or make it shorter depending on the needs of your group. You might want to play this a couple of times over a couple of different weeks, to get students really engaged with this idea of newspaper headlines and what they tell us about the story or what they don't tell us, in fact. What you're going to need for this exercise is my newspaper headlines game, which you'll find down at the bottom of this page in the activity resources. For this activity, I've identified key newspaper headlines that I think are interesting, or provocative in some way, or perhaps mislead the reader as to what the story is about and I've deleted one of the key words. Those key words are then provided in a separate list at the bottom of the document. You cut out the main newspaper headline

and the individual words, and you scatter them around the floor in the space. You then ask the students to go and select one word, and one newspaper headline that they think works together.

Allow and encourage your students to be creative. We're not necessarily interested in what the correct answer is, but actually what provides an interesting newspaper headline or a funny newspaper headline, or a provocative newspaper headline, or a controversial newspaper headline. We're thinking about how they work or how they don't work, and what the structure of these headlines are and how we might use them in our work. Give students time to move around to read all of the newspaper headlines with the words admitted and all of the individual words and give them time to select them. Then you move on to a discussion with your group, you ask them going around the circle to read out their headlines. Often this will lead to lots of laughter, lots of fun, some kind of gasping, depending on what kind of headlines they've created; and from the response from the group, we can start to understand how newspaper headlines are received by the listener and the audience. Once everybody has shared their newspaper headline, build in space, to ask the students, what happened? What did we learn? Why do newspaper headlines work that way? And what do we need to be considerate of when working with not only newspaper headlines, but the kind of work that we create?

This is a really great place to introduce that question of perspective, of ethical and moral decision making. We can make work and headlines and pieces of performance that are funny, and provocative and controversial with the stories we find, but how ethically right is that? And what is the moral decision making that we have to make to go through that? Likewise, we can make something that is very naturalistic and very true to the original story? Or what is the impact of that work? And is it more impactful if we play with it in a more creative way? We're not looking for any hard or fast answers here. We're just opening up to discussion for the group and getting them to think and provide their perspective on how this all works.

If you're working on your own from home or anywhere else, then I've provided an adapted headlines template. When you open the document, you'll find the headlines with the words missing and the list of words that you can then include. You'll also then find an answer sheet which you can look at once you've created your newspaper headlines.

The next step in this activity is to think about perspectives. You're going to select one of the newspaper headlines, and you're going to think about what characters might exist within that headline. For example, if the headline is mother and father are shocked at the price of childcare, you might have characters that include a mother and a father and a government official. You're then going to ask the group to identify two different perspectives that exist within this headline, and the surrounding story. So for this example headline, those perspectives would be the perspectives of the mother and the father, and the perspectives of the government official. Once you've identified your characters, you're going to ask for volunteers from your student cohort to embody and improvise this story. It doesn't have to be a long story, it doesn't have to be complex, but we do have to be able to present the perspectives. So once you have your volunteers, you're going to ask them to improvise the story from one perspective first. So for example, your three student volunteers who are embodying your mum, your dad and your government official, are going to perform this story from the perspective of the mother and the father first. There might be comments about how expensive it is, how they can't afford it, how they're having to work extra long hours in order to be

able to pay for their childcare. The students run this story until they get to the end of their improvised narrative and then they stop. You ask the rest of the group to give brief feedback on what they saw on what they heard. Keep this discussion quite short, we're going to have a larger discussion opportunity in a moment where we can compare the two different performance types. Once the group have provided you with what they saw and what they heard, we're going to re-run the story, but this time, from the alternative perspective. So in the second run of this, we're going to hear it from the perspective of the government official. So we might have things like we're trying to cover so many different costs within the country. We're struggling to make ends meet, we need to raise taxes, we need to ask parents to pay for things. Once this story has run its course, ask your student volunteers to return back to the group. Then take around 10 minutes to facilitate discussion.

In this discussion, we're going to think about what happens when we hear it from different perspectives. What happens when we only hear one perspective at a time? What happens to the narrative, our understanding of what the audience gets? and how much might we ensure that different perspectives have equal space and equal time? Finally, ask your students to identify some of the key challenges when thinking about representing perspectives. This might include how we make equal time for perspectives? How we gather the information which helps us to inform perspectives and where we gather the information from? and whether they already have perspectives applied to them? Once the students have answered all these questions, you can bring the discussion to a close and move on to activity two, which we'll find in the next video.

If you're working by yourself - In order to complete this first activity, pick one of those headlines and try writing a script for yourself. Again, thinking about the different perspectives, who are the characters and who are the two perspectives. Write the script for each of those different perspectives, and try performing them to a camera and listening to them back. Note down what is happening when you perform those bits of script. Think about what kind of language is being used and how you constructed those characters. This will put you in an ideal position to do the next activity which we'll find in the next video.

Activity Two:

Welcome back, and welcome to activity two, which I've called, What's the scoop?

So in activity two, we're going to start working directly with newspapers. If you are a teacher or a facilitator, it'd be great for you to have a stack of newspapers which the students can come and grab. Separate your students into groups of two or three, and ask them to take a newspaper at random. What you want them to do is to select a story and read it. Now, often, we're inclined to look through the newspaper, think about what kind of story we would like to work with, and whether we have any previous knowledge. If possible, encourage your students not to do this. It's better if they don't know anything about these

stories. And it's also better if they don't think about it for too long. You can ask them to just open a page at random pick whatever story is there. Or they can look through and pick one as they come across them. But either way, as a students not to think too long and hard about this and what they're going to do with it. So the first thing you want them to do is to read that story, encourage everybody in the group to read that story separately, then they should have a discussion together to talk about what is that story actually about? What is it saying? Who's in this story? And what are we supposed to understand from it? What this will do will allow your groups to have a cohesive understanding of that story. They need this cohesive understanding in order to be able to create work to present to an audience. So you might find that some students have some slight disagreements, but that's fine, as long as they work it out before they start to create work.

Now, if you're working by yourself, this is an easy activity for you to replicate, grab a newspaper, grab a story and read it. And write out for yourself. What does that story mean? What is it that you understand from it? Who was part of this story and what perspectives exist? You're going to need this for the next part of the activity.

The next part of this activity is to identify key words and phrases. Students can use highlighters, their pens, piece of paper, whatever way they want to do this. You're going to keep this part of the activity really short, only five minutes, again, so they don't think too long and hard about this. The students are going to read through the story again, and they're going to highlight any words or phrases that they think are important in terms of telling the story. These words and phrases are going to form the foundation of their performance work. So get them to think about what perspectives are being created and how they utilise the key words and phrases to develop new perspectives, or to identify particular characters?

If you're working by yourself, you can do this exactly the same. Go through your story, identify these key words and phrases, we're going to use them in performance.

Once they've got their key words and phrases, your students are going to start writing their script. Give them around 10 minutes, and ask them to write a one to two minute script that they're going to use for their performance. This is around about 300 to 500 words. There are some rules for this script: the script must include all or as many as they can have the words and phrases they've just highlighted; there must be a character for every member of the group, even if this character is a bystander, or a duplication of another character; every member of the group must have something to say and must perform; And there must also be two perspectives present within the piece of text. The students can be creative about how they develop their piece of writing. It could be factual, it could be naturalistic, it could be comical. It could be anything that they want it to be. But the important thing is that at the end of the 10 minutes, they must have a piece of scripts that they can perform.

If you're working by yourself, you can do this activity, but perhaps you want to write a monologue rather than a multi character piece? Or maybe you want to perform all of the characters instead? Or perhaps it is a different type of of writing that actually speaks out to the audience, it's no not embodying the character necessarily, but actually speaking the perspectives of multiple different types of people? Either way, create your scripts that includes those words and those phrases.

Finally, we're going to ask the students to reflect on their writing and discuss what happened when they took their story from the newspaper, identified characters and perspectives and key words and then created something new. We're going to encourage the students to think about what the challenges were, what the problems were, how they made certain decisions, what they think the quality of their writing is, in terms of getting across that story and that narrative. Opening up discussion in this way will allow other groups to learn from each other. It'll allow them to go and develop their work further if they want to.

If you're if you're working by yourself, I suggest you record what you've written and watch it back. Do the reflection process yourself. What do you see what do you hear and what do you learn about what you've written? And what developments might you want to create? Once students have completed their discussion, they have finished the second activity. The third activity can be found in the next video.

Activity Three:

The third activity in the Documentary Theatre Workshop is called Brecht and performance. In this particular activity, we're going to start to introduce some of Brecht's key principles around alienation and working with the audience.

The first thing you're going to do is to ask your students in their groups to stand in a circle, they're going to select one of the characters each that they've written in the scripts, they're going to think about how they embody that character, with the face with their body with the voice and that attitude. They're then going to take it in turns to respond to each other. So whoever is character one will turn to character two, they will respond to character two in whichever way they think that character would respond. For example, if character one is a mother, and character two is a child, the response might be loving, it might be to hug them to kiss them, to have gentle facial features, to be an open presents. Once character one has finished responding to character two, they're then going to turn to character three, and again, respond to that character. Let's say for example, character three is a government official, who has just said that a mother cannot afford to send her child's childcare; chances are that mother stance is going to change physically, perhaps it will be tensor more closed off, the face will also change, the proximity to each other will likely change too. Then character one responds to character four. This carries on around the circle. So Coach two responds to one and three, then to four, and so on and so forth, until every character has responded to every other character, thinking very specifically about the way in which they embody the character and their emotions and their responses to each other.

Once the students have finished responding to each other physically and emotionally, we're going to build on Brecht's understanding of justice, and think about physicalising and embodying these characters. In the play scenario, we're going to utilise two different styles of performance that sit on a sliding scale from naturalistic through to over exaggerated stereotyped archetypal characters. First of all, with style one, we're going to ask the students to perform their script as their characters in a naturalistic way - they're going to try and embody these characters as true to life as they possibly can. Once they've done that, we're going to ask students to quickly think about what happens when they embody their characters like that?

What are they telling the audience? What are they getting across to their audience? And how is their audience likely to respond to them?

Once they've performed that first style and had chance to reflect upon it, we're going to ask them to perform style two, which is an over exaggerated larger than life version of these characters. They might be exaggerated bodily features, their voices might be loud, the way they speak, might be over exaggerated, the tone of their voice might be over exaggerated. Whatever way your students want to over exaggerate these characters is completely fine, but they should run through the script again from beginning to end, embodying their characters in this way. Once they've completed that, ask them again in their group to think about what happened when they over exaggerated their characters? What did they learn about them? What do they think that audience might have taken from them? And how does it alter perspective for the audience?

Once the students have tried that pieces in both style one and style two ask them to select which style they think works best for their story. This could be they're going to re-perform as entirely naturalistic, or they might perform it really exaggerated. Either way, get the group to decide what is going to happen. Then, each individual group will perform to the rest of your student cohort. They'll perform in the style that they've chosen, and then you will ask the audience to respond. The audience are going to give feedback on what they can see, what they've learned, what kind of characters they think are there in front of them, and what kind of perspectives they're getting. Do this for each group and facilitate that discussion. This will allow the students to critically reflect upon and analyse the type of performance that has been created, and how they've taken it from the newspaper, right through to practical performance.

If you're working by yourself, then you might want to think about embodying just one of those characters. Take the character and perform it. Recorded it to the camera, and ask somebody else to watch it and give you feedback. Or if you don't have somebody else to watch it, record it to camera, and leave it for a couple of days. Come back, rewatch the work you've done and answer those same questions. What did you learn about those characters? What did you see what perspectives were present on? What did you learn?

Once the students have finished this discussion process, then they have completed the Documentary Theatre Workshop. You may want to squeeze in an extra section here for wider discussion about what happens when we draw materials from different places and present stories back to an audience that don't belong to us? About what decisions they made and how they made them, why they made them and what they think the outcome was? You may also want to ask them to reflect upon the skills that they developed in this workshop. Remember, they're working on skills of creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication. So ask them to think about how this workshop facilitated that and how they might use them in the future, this will enable them to go on to create their portfolio evidence. There is another video on creating portfolio evidence after this one

Portfolio

Creating portfolio evidence is really important to reflect upon the skills that we've developed in these workshops. We ask students to pick up newspaper headlines to start to understand how they work in terms of creating perspectives and telling us stories. We then gave students the opportunity to engage with the stories themselves and to start to identify different characters, or different perspectives within those narratives. And then we gave them the opportunity to present them back. As the students or yourself have developed skills in communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity, and you've created a piece of performance one way in which you might like to reflect upon your work is to either create an audio blog or podcast about each of the stages on what you learned, where you can talk about the different perspectives, you can talk about how you worked with the materials, what you learned from the materials and how you developed work. Or you might want to write a theatre review that really reflects upon the final piece of work you created and how you got both of those processes will allow you to capture the ways in which those skills have been developed. The important thing here is to think about how you use those skills in the future.

Through engaging with newspapers and perspectives, in this workshop, we have been able to develop skills around identifying true knowledge and understanding. We've been able to recognise different people's understandings of different events, we've been able to be compassionate and empathetic to different sides of the story. This is so important when you go to higher education or employment. Being able to be open minded to hear different perspectives, to be able to take on different people's opinions is a vital skill. And this is something you're going to really want to put into your portfolio. Not only that, you are able to problem solve, and to create new work. Make sure you include those in your portfolio materials, they will certainly help you in your future career within education or within employment.