Action Research Project

The Application of Practice as Research Pedagogical Principles in Traditionally Designed Performance Modules

by Luis Campos.

This action research action project explores the possibilities of applying basic pedagogical and methodological principles of Practice as Research (hereafter PAR) to traditionally designed teaching modules. The term 'traditional' is here understood to describe modules that have not been conceived to use PAR methodologies when written and that are not normally taught using PAR frameworks.

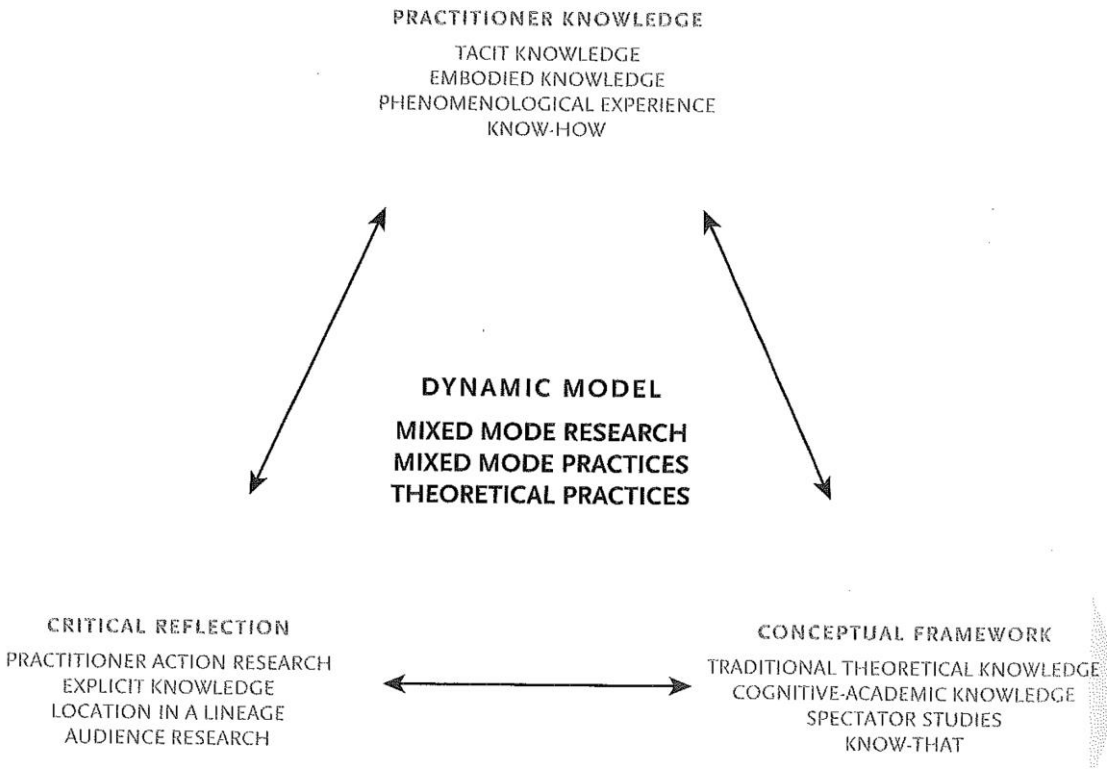
As a general introduction, in this project, following Freeman (2010), research is defined as,

> always a form of re-search: a drawing on one's previous experience and developing this into knowledge. Viewed in this way, practice as a research is about developing practical work into knowledge by transposing the experience of what it is that one does into data and then subjecting this to the type of reflection, analysis and discipline that is involved in serious compositional study. (Freeman, 2010: 264)

With this in mind, PAR implies, as Freeman discusses, modes of executing, exploring, experiencing and conceptualizing the interface between theory and performance practice: the imbrication of theory and practice. This imbricational mode has been termed 'praxis' (Nelson, 2013: 5). In the context of this research, praxis is employed to mean a mode of pedagogically facilitating intellectual and practical skills; that is, a mode of knowing that incorporates multi-modal relationships between the materials explored, produced and reflected upon during the teaching encounter. Here, this mode implies an experiential and embodied manner. Additionally, the term, as Robin Nelson (2013) explains, is used as a mode of pedagogical protocol,

emphasizing the dialogical relationship between the elements that inform the teaching encounter. Further, the term sees no differentiation between the process of teaching and the content of teaching – knowledge in the making, emphasizing what we call here ‘the doing’ and ‘the doing of the doing’ rather than abstractly conceived knowledge and skills. This is a contribution to new ways of thinking about interdisciplinarity and a pulverization of the difference between making, reflecting and studying.

In this action research, we follow Nelson’s diagrammatic understanding of the production of knowledge as a ‘dynamic model’ that includes a conceptual background and framework, the previous knowledge of the practitioner and the critical reflection emerging through the constant findings in the studio/classroom. This triadic encounter forms the basis that articulates this action research project.



(Nelson, 2006: 114).

In this sense, following Nelson, we move away from traditional understandings of learning as an experiential and phenomenological mode, simply understood as how it feels to experience something, to an 'actively involving of the experiencers in a practical experiencing' (Nelson, 2006: 110). As such, the experiencing must be understood as a knowledge-making process that incorporates critical and reflective elements and modes of awareness, in which the student is incorporated in 'the purposeful creation of situations from which motivated learners should not be able to escape without learning or developing' (Cowan, 2006: 100).

In this context of purposeful experiencing, Nelson draws on David George (1996) to discuss how in performance practices,

> The term experience is crucial: for too long spectators have been equated with readers as decipherers of meaning … The traditional task of making sense is then replaced by unique experiences, which are both cognitive operations and forms of emotions. The word experience derives etymologically from the French "to put to test". Experience is an experiment. (George in Nelson, 2006: 111).

Nelson explains that the experiential encounter should be conceived as performative. He continues, 'research into performance may be insightful in unpacking the operations of cultural codes and conventions to reveal to reveal how social reality is constructed and knowledge is legitimated and circulated' (Nelson, 2006: 111). Furthermore, 'the increased acknowledgement of the value of the experiential "knowing through doing" has afforded recognition of how artist have gone about being rigorously creative in research' (Nelson, 2006: 111).

In this regard, following Estelle Barret and Barbara Bolt (2010), 'the production of knowledge … as a mode of knowledge production' is an aspect that is emphasized here (Barret and Bolt, 2010: 2). In doing so, rather than highlighting and 'attempting to contort aims, objectives and outcomes to satisfy criteria' (Barret and Bolt, 2010: 3) as fixed established points, here we

discuss how, within the pre-given parameters of the module's learning outcomes, a more fluid approach, in and through which the cognitive is explored learning in the classroom, can lead to the learners' 'own self-reflexive mapping of the emergent work as an enquiry' (Barret and Bolt, 2010: 30).

As such, 'praxical knowledge implies that idea and theory are ultimately the result of a practice rather than vice versa' (Barret and Bolt, 2010: 6) and that knowledge emerges through processes. Most importantly, the learner, in activating reflexivity through research,

> involves [himself] not only a focus of the validation of data and outcomes, but also the positioning of oneself in relation to other fields in order to reveal the character and source of one's interest … As a result of this reflexive process, [practice and knowledge] are necessarily emergent … rather than remaining fixed throughout the process of enquiry … The juxtaposing of disparate objects and ideas has, after all, often been viewed as an intrinsic aspect of creativity … [which, in turn,] creates conditions for the emergence of new analogies, metaphors and models for understanding objects of enquiry. (Barret and Bolt, 2010: 6-7)

With this in mind, a complex web of teaching protocols and processes begin to be woven such as the mode of facilitation; the implementation of an active and continuous formative feedback; a process of implementing teaching differentiation processes in the form of differentiation by content, outcome and task; and a careful structuring in the delivery of the teaching materials. This represents a major theoretical and methodological shift in the delivery of performance modules; that is, traditional approaches to the study of performing arts are complemented and extended by research pursued through the practice of them, creating a 'multiperspectival [and] interdisciplinary readings rather than full exploration of a narrow and highly specialist database' (Nelson, 2013: 54).

Within these parameters, the conceptualization of the teaching encounter can be considered as an evental open-ended work/system with a sense of togetherness. An open work in relation to performance making and analysing is more a work-system than a work as a final product. It can be said to constitute a set of protean elements, which can be organized in a multitude of different configurations through a set of structuring strategies. This is a model of work as a dynamic network of contextual relations that are constantly reformed and dissolved by the works' openness, its malleability, and the multiplicity of forms of expression and meaning it can generate. In this context, Sarah Rubigde (2002) explains, 'the thinking of the performance work is active, multi-directional, [and] polyvalent. It privileges, rather than merely acknowledges process' (Rubidge in Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 2008: 147).

This action research is divided into three sections. The first introduces the context of the research. The second one discusses PAR as a teaching methodology and as a set of protocols. The third, and final section, describes the outcomes of the research project.

1. Context of Research.

This research project was undertaken within the parameters of the European Theatre Arts program's 'European Theatre in its Social Context' module. The module is described as,

> The module provides a general introduction to European theatre, its use of space and staging and dramatic traditions. It selects aspects that best demonstrate the relationship between the play text and its theatre, its audience and their world. Plays are analysed through the consideration of the relationship between stage and audience and the ways in which social relations and values are embodied in dramatic form. (Module descriptor, 2013: 1)

The module is divided into two sections. The first one explores some of the notions and theatrical explorations of Greek theatre and Bretch, emphasizing aspects of chorality and staging modalities. The second section investigates the Spanish Golden Age, highlighting the same aspects within the given socio-historical context. This action research took place during the second section of the module. It followed five students who were randomly selected during the course of six three-hour sessions.

Within the specifications and parameters of the module, the assignment rationale is presented as,

> This assignment is designed for you to demonstrate your ability to apply your knowledge of historical, social and cultural contexts to the performance of a specific text. It asks you to reflect on, select, explore and apply the techniques you have explored in this module in order to activate the proscribed text. (Assignment specification, 2013: 1)

Students were asked to present a short ten-minute piece based on Cervantes' 'The Wonder Show' using processes of socio-historical re-contextualization, while keeping the original text. Throughout the sessions, exercises were explored to interrogate the staging particularities of the Spanish Golden Age, possible re-contextualizing potentialities and research, reflective and analytical skills (see appendix 2).

2. Principles of PAR as a Teaching Methodology.

This action research project uses PAR as a pedagogical tool. What concerns us here are both practice and research in the exchange of knowledge across research disciplines and the moments of discovery throughout the class-time and self-led rehearsals, which afford the creation of knowledge. The term 'affordance', following Nelson, can be described as 'the potentiality of an object, or an environment, which allows an individual to perform an action'

(Nelson, 2013: 41). As such, we can categorize the learner as a knower-in-action, whose critical reflection affords and emerges during the processes of doing-thinking throughout the creative processes.

With all this in mind, the teaching encounter enables artist-researcher-students to define their own research questions as they attempt to develop a definitional and analytical language with regard to their own practice. In doing so, the learners,

> confront the challenge to think about how they make judgments; choose criteria which are of relevance to them, when judging the quality of their own work; think about the strengths and weaknesses of their work in relation to these criteria; [and] perceive ways in which that draft work can be improved, in terms of criteria which they have chosen as important. (Cowan, 2006: 25)

From this point of view, the moment of the teaching practice is expanded: it includes the performance conception through its reception, documentation and knowledge-making capabilities. In this context, both the students and the lecturer are placed and immersed in world that encourages self-consciousness, as constituted by self-reflection. As Nelson notes, 'thus individual or collaborative critical reflection on experience, in the form perhaps of a documented conversation, may, through gesturing towards a more abstract conceptualization, assists in disseminating the (initially embodied) mode of knowing' (Nelson, 2013: 57).

This is a world that moves slowly and with a single-and-multiple-minded purpose towards its aims. In doing so, this methodology hinges on the extent to which aesthetic, performance-making and teaching practices produce knowledge and question the type of knowledge that is contained in a praxical work of performance. The producing of the work involves the creation of new knowledge and re-interrogates pre-existing knowledge, evidencing practices and findings over complete work.

This is a process of reflection in action, a process wherein the participant is never sure of what it is that one thinks until those thoughts are transported into the performance's mode of creation. As Ian McGill and Anne Brockbank (2004) describe, 'action learning builds on the relationship between reflection and action. Learning by experience involves reflection, i.e. reconsidering past events, making sense of our actions and possibly finding new ways of behaving at future events' (McGill and Brockbank, 2004: 12).

In this sense, students and teacher are both involved in a constant process of action research; that is,

> the process of practitioner action research is a conscious strategy to reflect upon established practice as well as to bring out "tacit knowledge" … Similarly, critical reflection is located in a conceptual framework, at minimum the baggage of education and experience which artists bring to bear in the making and critical reflection processes. (Nelson, 2006: 113-114).

As Stanley and Williamson explain, 'knowledge-how is a special kind of knowledge-that. The familiar distinction is preserved, only relocated as a distinction between different ways of grasping or understanding propositions' (Stanley and Williamson in Nelson, 2013: 58). Furthermore, Nelson, following Schon (1983)'s model of the practitioner-researcher, discusses how 'the key resonances in the overall praxis between know-how, know-what and know-that … is not quite a triangulation … but [a] model [which] does draw upon discovery of correspondence and corroboration … and a conceptual analysis of a mode of knowing' (Nelson, 2013: 65). In other words, as Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (2002) describe, 'students in performance studies classrooms routinely develop their critical, descriptive and analytical skills in the process of performance itself' (Stucky and Wimmer, 2002: 9).

In this sense, students are placed in world of active interpretation, research and critical analysis within the context of performance making. Experience Bryon (2009) explains that it has yet fully to be recognized that the theatrical

performance is ‘the act of the players in the act of performance executing the operations of a discipline’ (Bryon, 2009: 1) To this conceptualization, we would like to add that it is also the act of the students deciphering and interpreting, as an active hermeneutic process, in the act of the performance making and conceptualizing. Bryon states,

> since it is the event that happens on the stage through the act of performance, to choose of be aware of the fields of operations that contribute to a happening is essential – if the desired effect is to have all these operations working together in a network. (Bryon, 2009: 1-2)

In this sense, the act of doing is also the act of reading/performing/practice. Bryon explicitly describes that, within these parameters, one moves away from modernist hermeneutic notions of the author as the guardian of meaning towards an understanding of the act of practicing as the act of meaning creation. Moreover, Bryon explains that in this act of activation where exchanges are articulated in specific manners, the generation of an ‘active aesthetic’ takes place, where ‘meaning happens in the act of performance, not merely in the text or the construction of intertextual relationships’ (Bryon, 2009: 3). Subsequently, a set of interrelations, a complex system of elements emerges, but this is not a system that is regular and static, rather, quite to the contrary, a system that emerges at the very moment of activation; a system that is unique.

Within these parameters, the postulates of Jacques Ranciere (2008) become relevant. In conceptualizing the aesthetic experience, Ranciere coins the term, ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (Ranciere, 2008: 1). Although this term, heavily indebted to Foucauldian notions of power-knowledge, is a political enquiry into areas of democracy and aesthetics at the core of politics, a specific and simplified account of its content is useful here and can extrapolated to PAR as a pedagogical methodology. The ‘distribution of the sensible’ can be broadly described as: (i) a ‘fabric of experience’: the relevance of articulating concepts, ideas, representations, and spatio-

temporal frameworks; (ii) 'modal relations': the modes of articulating the participating elements in a teaching encounter and the manner in which the teaching materials are displayed as a set of interrelated elements; and (iii) 'the construction of arrangements': the arrangement of the teaching materials that develop a sense of learning active engagement

In this sense, Ranciere describes,

> It is a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and the way in which they are equipped for fitting it. It is a multiplicity of folds and gaps in the fabric of common experience that change the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable, and the feasible. (Ranciere, 2008: 11)

In the context of PAR as a pedagogy, the proposals of Bryon and Ranciere present distinct possibilities. This active learning process challenges conventional thinking in its premise that the practice of performance can be at once a method to investigate research and the processes through which this research can be re-examined and taught and experienced again. Most importantly, it places students as reflective practitoners. As Bolton describes, 'reflective practice is positioned firmly as a dynamic developmental process … it clearly delineates processes of critical reflection upon the forms, values and ethics of institutional organizations and structures … [it] result[s] in radical movements for change' (Bolton, 2005, 1). Furthermore,

> reflective practice is learning and developing through the examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutinity by others … reflexivity is finding strategies for looking at our own thought processes, values, prejudices and habitual actions, as if we were onlookers. (Bolton, 2005: 7)

In short, students are involved in action learning processes. Argrys and Schon (1974) describe,

> Action learning is a continuous process of learning and reflection that happens with the support of the group or 'set' of colleagues, working on real issues with the intention of getting things done. The voluntary participants in the group or 'set' learn with and from each other and take forward an important issue with the support of the other members of the set. The collaborative process, which recognizes set member's social context, helps people to take an active stance towards life, helps overcome the tendency to be passive towards the pressures of life and work, and aims to benefit both the organization and the individual. (Argrys and Schon in McGill and Brockbank, 2004: 185).

3. The Application of PAR Pedagogical Principles: Findings, Possibilities and Problematics.

This PAR pedagogical methodology demands an open and inquisitive response to the benefits, possibilities and problems of innovative performance making. In what follows, we review some of the findings in relation to areas of group dynamics, assessment and delivery.

One of the first observations throughout the process is that the methodology creeps into the territory of the lack of authorship and a clear leader. The lecturer is always on a process of continual renegotiation; that is, a process of facilitation, co-ordinating and taking a more active "traditional" role, all of which are happening concurrently. The facilitating and teaching enters into a 'cooperative mode' (McGill and Brockbank, 2004: 190); that is, 'the facilitator shares her power over the learning process and different dynamics of the set with the set and the latter becomes more self-directing in the interactions with the set … [in turn,] the facilitator is becoming one of the crew' (McGill and Brockbank, 2004: 190). Although this aspect clearly develops the students' autonomy and initiative, it can hinder the development of the materials and the full exploration of the pre-given learning outcomes. The lecturer is constantly involved in innovative processes or re-adjustment, which can make planning rather difficult in regards to the criterion given since the module was not designed to be taught implementing a PAR pedagogy. In this sense,

‘knowledge is not imparted as a formal structure … learning is an activity that develops capabilities, and knowledge [is] an aspect of that activity’ (Laurillard, 2002: 13). Learning is situated in a given specific context; it is a ‘genuine application of the knowledge, which allows us to build an increasingly rich understanding of the tool itself and how it operates’ (Laurillard, 2002: 14). Having said this, this aspect provided a catalyst for the encouragement of potential activities and the mechanisms for addressing them. As a result, the timeframe of the project became a vital element in the decision-making process regarding the type and organization of the teaching and learning materials and the examination of the operational platforms for the development of an effective collaboration and communication between lecturer and students, always highlighting self-reflection and reflection-in-action. At the start of the project, time had to be allocated to clearly set the parameters of the research framework and to give an account of the specificities of the process, enabling students to re-examine their assumptions and beliefs regarding the role of praxis in performance-making projects.

In relation to the group dynamics, one of the observed patterns is that the group composition and the participation patterns changed constantly, although it maintained a sense of cohesiveness. David Jaques and Gilly Salmon (2008) explain that cohesiveness ‘is a measure of the attraction of the group to its members … the sense of team spirit, and the willingness of its members to coordinate their efforts’ (Jaques and Salmon, 2008: 28). It became clear throughout the project that the group had a sense of coherence, but the normative formation and development of the group changed along with the procedures – the ‘explicit rules and conventions for ensuring that what a group wants to happen, does in fact happens’ (Jaques and Salmon, 2008: 30). In this sense, the structure and the maintenance of the group showed a constant development, which, in turn, made the facilitation even more challenging. Monitoring and establishing the intention for the overall project was difficult at the start of the project, but after forming and norming the group functioned vitally and energetically, creating a sense of common purpose and respect and self-direction in the learning.

Regarding the assessing process, the module was designed as a product-process binary, which may be said to contradict the basic principles of PAR as a methodology. The assessing process heavily relied throughout the sessions on formative feedback within the “restrictions” of the learning objectives of the module. The outcomes of the explored exercises was never fixed and always provided opportunities for identifying prior learning within a range of disciplines, highlighting group work and self- and peer-assessment. In doing so, within PAR, the distinctions between subject expertise and transferable skills such as analytical and research skills appeared blurry and selecting, linking, structuring and co-ordinating materials became at times complex. Throughout the project, emphasis was given, on the one hand, to opportunities for reflection and further formative feedback; and, on the other hand, to evaluating and problem-solving tasks that required the application of gained knowledge. It was an incremental process of complexity sustained upon a foundation of reflective learning and practical skills, which increased, it was observed, the autonomy of the students, but presented a problematic in relation to areas of consistency and operational procedures. Moreover, throughout the action research project, each exercise, following Bryon, was explored by the students using processes of diagnosis, interpretation and generation; that is, students actively engaged in developing their own creativity. However, in the first two sessions many of the skills taught in the classroom were conveyed by providing prompts and continuous - more than usual (this was the fourth project that the lecturer taught the same group of students) - explanations and re-caps. Modelling the use of prompts and then guiding the students as they develop independence was at times intricate and laborious. The application of Nelson’s triangular model in relation to feedback and assessing was also problematic; that is, the relationship between facilitating, prompting and students’ independent research became difficult to manage since the operational procedures such as guiding practice and supervising independent practice was constantly re-organized. During the independent practice and self-led sessions, students seemed to struggle, at least during the early stages of the project, to identify and explain the underlying principles. They needed to spend additional time rephrasing, elaborating and summarizing materials for their classroom presentations. The

lecturer had to provide more solid scaffolding – and actively put into practice the techniques learnt throughout the PGCLTHE such as the creation of a constructive alignment - for the more complex tasks to assist the learners with instructional support. Although providing scaffolding is a form of guided practice and a platform to enable students to become competent in the execution of the assigned performance-making tasks, the design of the materials – the distribution and operational mode of the sensible, as in Ranciere – needed constant balancing, which, in turn, augmented the workload of the lecturer. However, the work shown throughout the sessions by students, particularly in the final three ones, gained in complexity and dramaturgical articulation; the elaboration and review of the work became fluid; and students started to use very specific and performance-related language to explain their practices. Students clearly developed well-connected and automatic knowledge, but at different stages; that is, the overall group presented several stages of knowledge acquisition, which reinforced the application of teaching and learning differentiation techniques in relation to the preparation and delivery of the materials within the parameters of the module, which, at times, become rather “oppressive”.

Some other possibilities were observed:

- The teaching encounter became positive and dialogical and the students understood the content of the exercises and the manner in which they were being taught.
- Students became more explorative, looking for alternatives and contextualizing processes and becoming more critically aware of their progress.
- Students became more flexible, constantly adapting to new demands and commenting on the validity of their work.

Some other problematics were observed throughout the process:

- It was difficult at times to strike a careful balance between supporting and challenging the students' development.
- At the start of the project, some students became "fearful" and over-dependent on the lecturer with an increase number of tutorials and contact time in and outside classroom times. The number of emails that the lecturer normally receives from the same group increased by at least 15%.
- It took longer for the exercises and the exploration of materials to be completed. In the research questionnaires that the students filled in after the project, the majority of the sampled students described that the pace of the class slowed down.
- In general, students felt that it was hard to focus and take decisions because each new showing-presentation was met with new questions, potential approaches and investigating possibilities.
- A larger number of students became "more emotional" at the start of the project and took longer for them to gain confidence. This, in turn, affected the group dynamics.
- Some students mentioned that they fully trusted the lecturer. This trust, they said, allowed them to follow and engage with the project. However, they described that it could have been 'difficult to do it' with a new (or unknown to them) lecturer.
- In general, students became more competitive and wanted to "get it right" before other groups.
- The students' work, particularly at the start of the project, developed in manners and modes of presentation that were trying to "please" the lecturer; at times, over-simplifying approaches to performance creation.

In general, and as a conclusion, PAR as a pedagogical methodology and as a critical pedagogy,

> is about empowerment … [and] a method of critical collaboration between teachers and learners [that] explores pragmatic solutions … [and] facilitates … the process of education itself … [the emphasis on the] epistemological, the

> abstract and the embodied. (Stucky and Wimmer, 2002: 42-43).

It also allows for the development of 'inclusive curricula, encouraging critical thinking, decentering teacher authority, facilitating interactive and peer-oriented learning and ensuring that all students have equal access to instructional resources' (Stucky and Wimmer, 2002: 43). However, as the findings of this action research project have shown, it can become problematic when applied to modules that are neither specifically designed to be taught using such a methodology nor explored throughout an appropriate length of time. Although it empowers the participating students and clearly develops interdisciplinary skills, it also places the students in a learning environment and context that is always changing and adapting, which, in turn, may highlight insecurities and fears. The primary aim of this project has been to address the fundamental question of the relationship between theory and practice in a professional and vocational environment. The project has suggested possible ways forward regarding the possibilities and problematics of introducing a PAR methodology. The challenges have highlighted that this is a not an easy task but it seems obvious that there benefits in such an application and the possibilities of a more integrated curriculum, rather than expecting the students to make these links for themselves.

It might be difficult to generalise the findings of this action research project because of the limited sampling of students and the contextual and temporal particularities of the module within the BA programme in which it was implemented. However, there is, we propose here, a need for further development of innovative teaching methodologies to strengthen the links between performance and academic studies in supporting the learning outcomes from a practical point of view, in and through which the practical aspect of performance, within a multi-disciplinary approach, can incorporate critical, analytical and self-evaluative skills. The application of PAR can be used as a means by which lecturers are enabled to actively engage in combining the practice of teaching and the practice of research. It can also mean that students are giving a more solid and varied range of transferable

skills. The PAR methodology investigated here was primordially action-based, reliant on self-reflection by both students and tutors. As one sampled student put it, ‘the praxis improved my intellectual understanding of theatre in general, as well as enabling me to challenge myself critically’.

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