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Performance Art and Digital Communication: Exercises in Empathy

By Justus W. Harris **

In an attempt to connect with one another, it is not uncommon to communicate via text messages, status updates, dating applications, and e-mail all in a matter of hours with smartphones. [5] The performance workshops I am developing demonstrate the disruptive shift between digital and in-person communication and the effective limitations of digitally mediated communications existing without the ability to include physical, sensory, and temporal queues. I am motivated from my experience as an artist using performance techniques to communicate with others and from my personal frustration trying to make and maintain relationships through a combination of various digital platforms. My goal is to describe how these techniques can emphasize the body and real-time interaction and provide tools to increase empathy and overcome challenges when moving back and forth between in-person and digital communication.

Theater and improvisation techniques have been used to develop technologies in Human-Computer-Interaction; however, they have often been limited to research that is not accessible to a wider public. [8,11] Two performance techniques, *Theater of the Oppressed* and *Contact Improvisation*, foster empathy using role-playing and body awareness. I have adapted these techniques to link digitally-mediated and in-person communications through a series of workshops at the Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery in Chicago, IL. (Harris, 2014) [6] While participants shared many personal experiences, the workshop was not designed to resolve individual challenges. Rather the intent was to explore physical and sensory tools for participants to use in reimagining and interpreting digital communication.*

Methodology: Theater of the Oppressed & Contact Improvisation

Theater of the Oppressed uses role-playing and imagination to act out events from participant's lives through an exercise called "Forum Theater." All participants are both spectators and actors, and are permitted to replace a character or comment in a scene at any time. [3] Brazilian actor, activist, and legislator, Augusto Boal, developed many of these techniques during a period of violent military coups in Brazil during the 1960's where overt physical oppression was common. During Boal's travels to places such as the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, he observed that many participants in his workshops were dealing "with oppressions where there was no visible, tangible,

present oppressor, which can be seen as ‘emptiness’ and ‘fear’.” [2] In the workshops I hosted, participants were instructed to look at this emptiness and fear as disappointments that can come from unmet expectations and rejection expressed over a variety of interactions that occur both in-person and through digital communication platforms. Participants used Forum Theater in our workshops to act out these interactions in real-time from multiple personal perspectives and modes of communication.

In conjunction with Theater of the Oppressed, participants engaged in Contact Improvisation, an improvisational dance form developed by American Choreographer Steve Paxton in New York in the 1970’s. In Contact Improvisation, two or more people try to keep bodily contact at all times. Traditionally, high-contact touching, weight-sharing, and balancing are used in Contact Improvisation to explore interactions among people and the spaces they occupy including the floor and walls. [1] In our workshop, we focused on contact through more simple actions such as walking and improvised gestures to create continuous physical awareness of one another and the gallery space. We integrated our smartphones into these movements to determine how the physical awareness of participants dramatically decreases when they shift focus from their bodies to their communication devices. Contact Improvisation was used to “give precedence of the body experience first, and mindful cognition second” in order to focus on participant’s interactions as a physical experience apart from the content of in-person and digital communications. [7]

These techniques emphasized physical experiences as part of digital communication. Both low-tech and hi-tech methods were used to adapt these techniques for the workshops. These ranged from simply using sticky notes to simulate text messages, to using contact microphones to amplify the sounds of the human body and mechanical processing of smartphones.

Eight participants, some from inside and others from outside the arts community, came to the performance art gallery for five hours per day for two consecutive days. In our workshop, we conducted the following three exercises that progressed from sensory exercises used in Contact Improvisation to role-playing exercises common in Forum Theater from Theater of the Oppressed. Although the workshop was limited to a small group, the exercises are the basis for future workshops involving more participants.

Example 1: Sensory Amplification

In the first exercise, we amplified the sound of people's bodies with contact microphones and the inside of their phones with coil microphones. This gave participants a heightened awareness of both their bodies and their communication devices through the sense of hearing as they tried to maintain constant focus. The contact microphones amplified the sounds of their pulse, the movement of their hair, stomach fluid, and skin. The coil microphones amplified the mechanical functions of their phones including the device's

processors, each of which had a unique sound and changed according to what functions were being performed. The sound amplification exercise acted as an introduction for participants to one another as they took turns running the microphone along their own as well as each other's bodies and phones, (*Figure 1.*)



Figure 1. Contact microphones used to amplify the sound of participant's bodies and coil microphones used to amplify the processing sounds of smartphones.

These sounds allowed participants to perceive the shifting focus between their bodies and their phones. Utilizing sound amplification, we created a physical sensory experience to help participants perceive in-person and digital communication *both* as physical acts. The purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate that communication is not seamless

but is a series of different physical experiences produced by switching between different modes of interaction. Shifting focus is not unique to alternating between digital and in-person interactions. A similar focus shift takes place when reading a book. However, the frequency with which people use their smartphones creates a perpetual shifting of attention that makes it more difficult to be attentive to detail. This observational exercise highlighted the amount of attention required to perceive the flood of information coming from participants' and the smartphones. [5]

Example 2: Movement Awareness

Building on the observational amplification exercise, we explored how participants actively communicated with their bodies through adapted Contact Improvisation movements including mimicry, low-contact touch (such as a simple touch of the hands), and walking. Participants improvised movements as a response to one another as well as to the architecture of the gallery, (*Figure 2.*) Participants were then asked to choose a favorite photo on their phone. They were instructed to keep constant eye contact on the photo while they attempted to move around one another as they had at the beginning of the exercises. This was analogous to the common experience like walking while browsing the Internet on one's phone. The difficulty they experienced in maintaining awareness of each other was evident as basic contact with one another became increasingly difficult, (*Figure 3.*)



Figure 2 (left). Contact Improvisation movement in the gallery.

Figure 3 (right). Contact Improvisation movement with phone interactions.

Building on the sound amplification, this exercise actively challenged participants while they attempted to do Contact Improvisation and pay attention to their smartphones. The Contact Improvisation exercises require both observation and real-time to show the disruption caused by switching focus back and forth between in-person interactions and digital devices.

Example 3: Real Time Role-Playing

The workshop culminated in an exercise that started with a Theater of the Oppressed sensory recall technique that guided participants through each moment of a day that was important to them. The details of this day included what they smelled in the morning, the first person they saw, and the color of the room they slept in that night. They were then asked to choose experiences where shifting back and

forth between in-person and digital communication played a role in disappointments they experienced. Participants became storytellers and were assigned a co-pilot which is a technique commonly used in Theater of the Oppressed. The role of the co-pilot was to ask the storyteller for more detailed sensory information about the experience. The co-pilot also asked how the storyteller's experience could have had a different outcome than it did in the storyteller's memory of what happened. After talking alone with the co-pilot, the storyteller shared his or her recollection to the group. The purpose of the co-pilot was to coax more details from the storyteller that could be used to help participants imagine the scene that they were about to act out.

For example, one of the participants recalled a rejection from a love interest that had miscommunicated plans to meet the participant on their last evening before moving to a different city. This miscommunication occurred over the course of a day starting with an in-person meeting and then in subsequent text messages. Using Forum Theater from Theater of the Oppressed, the story was acted out by participants. In this instance, the actual storyteller was not one of the participants that chose to act out the story. Multiple participants acted out the scene with different people playing the same characters. Simultaneously, other participants wrote short sentences on sticky notes that abbreviated the spoken dialogue. (Figure 4.)

The objective was to simulate how the dialog in the scene could occur over text messages. Participants acted out the scene multiple times to find the best resolution for the storyteller to avoid miscommunication

and disappointment with the love interest. In this scene these actions involved changing dialogue, modifying body language, tone of voice, and eye contact. Afterwards, we reviewed the notes that had been made by workshop participants each time the scene was acted out. We discussed the experience of abbreviating in-person conversations in written form as a simulated text message. We were also able to discuss what each person in the story may have been doing during the time that passed between receiving text messages. In our discussion, this ranged from a few minutes to several hours between text messages.



Figure 4. A scene played out by multiple participants, simultaneously other participants wrote spoken dialog as if it were in text message form.

This final exercise demonstrated how the passage of time, physical queues, and the expression of the actual content of messages are important components of communication. The exercise was also designed to help participants understand how these elements are often invisible in digital communications. Through focusing their attention on these components, the exercise encouraged participants to use their imaginations to re-create and connect to the physical world of those with whom they are communicating. By focusing on multiple forms of physical awareness and imagination in the previous exercises, participants were better able to combine them to understand conversations that transition between in-person and digital communication spread over various time frames.

In combining exercises from Theater of the Oppressed and Contact Improvisation techniques, our workshops illuminated interactions by showing how digital communication connects to physical, sensory experiences. We modified these techniques by combining sound amplification, movement awareness, and role-playing to allow participants multiple ways to empathize with one another. These techniques helped participants use their imagination to bridge the gap between digitally mediated and in-person communication. The result was that participants had a better understanding of their interactions and relationships which often must be managed both in-person and over multiple digital platforms.

As said by a founder of performance art, Allan Kaprow, performance events often “reveal something and its oddness by removing it from

its normal usage.” [9] Technologies are becoming more integrated into the way we interact with the world. They will continue to do so as they become increasingly mobile with new developments, such as Google Glass, that augment our reality. The technologies themselves do not by default increase our ability to empathize with one another even though they may become less disruptive to use. Performance techniques provide people with unique opportunities to recognize their connections to their own bodies and the people with whom they are communicating regardless of the communication platform.

Theorists such as Sherry Turkle have written on the loneliness and physical isolation which can result from the use of these technologies. [10] While these concerns are a large part of the public anxiety associated with technology, the ability to understand how technology is a part of our physical experiences is often not addressed. Empathizing through understanding and imagining the body is an active skill that must be developed regardless of what type of communication devices and platforms are created. Our bodies are the constant interface in the evolution of new forms of human communication. Performance art may not be revolutionary, but as new technologies are developed these techniques may be, as Boal puts it a, “rehearsal for revolution” which joins understanding of the human body with social and technological innovation. [4]

Notes

* I will refer to myself and my two assistants for the workshop as “we” in the following descriptions.

**During the workshops Leontyne Wilson and JY Cho respectively assisted in the theater exercises and sound exercises. Joseph Ravens the director of Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery hosted the workshops. I thank all of them for their time and contribution to the workshops as well as those who participated.

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