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## ARTICLE

# Connecting Performance and Performing Connection: How the Performing Arts Can Usefully Engage an International and Interdisciplinary Cohort in Pedagogy and Research

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This article draws upon my experiences from the last several years (2014–2017) of leading collaborative performing arts projects with students and faculty from US liberal arts colleges and Asian partner institutions. Herein, I describe how the performing arts, like other forms of embodied learning, can usefully function to convene students and faculty who operate in different disciplines and languages. The performing arts could be more central to and useful in education about and engagement with environmental issues by enlisting embodied learning, memory skills, transdisciplinarity, social networks, emotion, and liminal spaces of imaginative vision. The performing arts offer powerful tools for constructing international and interdisciplinary collaborations and exchanges. Applied voice study in the liberal arts context also offers help in lowering language barriers in intercultural exchanges. Included are brief descriptions of performing arts projects which helped cement collaborative relationships in past projects. An epilogue follows, describing how development of a performance can also be a form of cultural research in and of itself, using Augusto Boal's (1985) model of 'participatory action research.'

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**Keywords:** performing arts; embodied learning; transdisciplinarity; LIASE; social networks

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As a humanist and a practitioner and teacher of the performing arts, I am writing to the audience of my faculty colleagues in ASIANetwork who have a strong interest in interdisciplinary collaboration with institutions in Asia, and who have a commitment to environmental initiatives. So many voices have been raised in the past ten years in response to ‘wicked problems,’ encouraging teachers to change pedagogy, to change course content (Hanstedt), and to equip the younger generation of thinkers with the critical wherewithal to approach the environmental challenges that threaten to destroy our world (Brown, Harris, and Russell 2010).

“...understanding the human response to climate change is becoming at least as important as understanding climate change itself. Perhaps it takes a humanist—well practiced in balancing intellectual and emotional effort—to help connect the accumulating signals to their true human significance.”  
(Seidler 2017, 308)

Worldwide environmental developments most definitely will require enormous changes in our ways of life, and perhaps much sooner than our current national response would indicate. The performing arts have evolved in every culture; they provide pleasurable and useful tools for helping humans face challenges together. I cannot claim to know all the benefits that these practices bring to us, but I have noticed that several seem important enough to bring to your attention in the context of addressing global environmental catastrophe. I am adding my voice to those who are advocating the consideration of alternative avenues for pedagogy, in hopes that sharing my thoughts and my experience will help you make your work more impactful and activating for your students.

I came to this project with a unique perspective, and perhaps as somewhat of an outsider. I believe I was the only faculty member to attend the Luce LIAISE conference in fall 2017 who was teaching primarily applied music. Although I work often in Asia, with Asian musicians and with Asian literature and music, in LIAISE discussions I am frequently the only advocate for the applied arts in the room. In the past few years, by listening carefully to my colleagues from other disciplines describing their processes, I have gradually learned what my discipline in particular might lend to the

LIASE project, and herein I will attempt a distillation. In this article, therefore, I invite you to reconsider how you think of and collaborate with the applied arts at your college. I write as a teacher of voice, director of operas, and germinator of activist movement/sound performances by my students. I understand that many of you have only a passing knowledge of what goes on in the choirs, orchestras, theatre plays, dance performances, and other applied arts programs in your colleges, and I am here to extend my hand in greeting, on behalf of the embodied arts at your colleges.

For some faculty in the liberal arts, the applied arts will need no apologia. For some or perhaps even many others, the applied arts are considered ancillary disciplines, mute hangers-on in the taut critical discourse that determines the intellectual life of the campus. For these latter thinkers, the applied arts operate as derivatives of, not causative agents of or in equal conversation with, other disciplinary work. This perspective is all the more easily adopted in a collegiate academic environment, because written work is the 'coin of the realm.' Borrowing from McLuhan, the 'medium is the message': many students and faculty often perceive embodied applied arts as 'soft' and 'fun,' while their written work in science and the humanities is 'hard' and 'rigorous.'

Those who fault the performing arts for lack of the written word are missing the point: In return for this neglect of the written word, the applied arts offer direct access to resources that faculty in other disciplines may find elusive: deeply engaged embodied learning, memory skills, native transdisciplinarity, powerful international social networks, integrated emotion, and perhaps even spirit.

## **Memory and Embodiment**

The applied performing arts may be the last disciplinary area on campus in which memory is cultivated regularly. In an ever-changing world in which many facts are available instantly via internet search, memory is often outsourced. Insistence on memorized knowledge has become a rarity. In contrast, in final performances, music and theatre students must focus body, mind, and emotion in a unifying gesture of performance, without recourse to a score or script. In fact, this performance may guide them to experience an intensity of digitally unmediated presence that they may have never felt before. Although those of us who are from a previous

generation may be aware of how transformative this can be, our students may not have experienced this kind of wholeness. The performance of memorized material, whether it is in music or in theatre, is much more meaningful than a reading, both to the performer and to the audience.

If embodiment and memory are components of performance, students are engaged in the materials in a significantly more memorable way, and are more likely to carry this knowledge into future trajectories. If, as researchers have found, people are dismissive of, uncommitted to, or alarmed by climate change (Hine et al. 2016), perhaps the performing arts offer a way to spark both message retention and active commitment. Chantal Bilodeau, co-director of Climate Change Theatre Action visited Pomona College in fall 2017 to collaborate on a presentation of stage readings of short plays about climate change, presented by students of the Intercollegiate Theatre Studies Program. She spoke after the performances about the transformative potential of the project. Her experiences doing similar work at several other colleges led her to believe that the student performers themselves were transformed by the work, much more than the audience members were. Through the act of script study, partial memorization, and embodied performance, the students generally experienced a shift in their perspective toward environmentalist goals – which was not available via passive reception. This should come as no surprise: experts in effective pedagogy underline the increased engagement and retention in a shift from passive to active learning pedagogies.

### **Social Networks and Cultivating Larger Collaborations**

The performing arts world engenders an international and interdisciplinary network of learners and artists which usually persists for many years. Faculty such as I, who have deep engagements with Asian composers or choreographers, will often remain in contact with these colleagues over the course of entire careers, creating work together every few years. At annual festivals, and in international workshops and performances, the applied faculty will work intimately and face to face in 'real time' with their partners from other countries. The cultural community in each of the performing arts disciplines thus resembles a kind of non-biological



**Image:** Students from the Claremont Colleges and Burapha University create theatre together during their first trip meeting in 2018, across the Thai-English language barrier (Chanthaburi Province, Thailand). (All photos by the author.)

family (Haraway 2016) that reconstitutes itself regularly in these gatherings. These longstanding relationships could become the basis for germinating larger-scale exchanges of faculty and students for LIASE: they are a valuable form of 'social capital' which should be both resourced and credited.

In both years of the first two active projects at our institutions, the initial propagation of connection with principal collaborating Asian partner institutions came via the applied arts. Before our planning year, the Malaysian-Chinese activist composer Yii Kah Hoe was invited by the choral and vocal faculty at Scripps College to compose an environmental cantata about the decimation of the primary rainforest in his home region of Borneo, for the 80- to 100-person student choirs and professional soloists (Yii 2017). Projecting ahead for a possible tie-in with our program, I solicited material for inclusion in the cantata from our institutional partner in Singapore, Yale NUS: field recordings of frog calls from Prof. Jennifer

Sheridan's research in the Danum Valley, one of the last remaining areas of primary rainforest in Borneo. Yii included these recordings in the cantata, played through megaphones by members of the student choir as they circumambulated the audience, singing and shouting for environmental justice. Because of Yii's presence on campus, during the rehearsal, performance, and recording of the cantata he met students and faculty in the LIASE-sponsored program, and a foundation of trust was formed. This later provided the basis for building a clinic trip to Borneo, where Yii introduced our planning administrator and faculty to activists in his region who would be willing to share their stories. Just as importantly, Yii was able to introduce the idea of our Borneo faculty-and-student clinic trip to his colleagues there, preparing them for what to expect from us, and laying the groundwork for a positive reception of our visit.



**Image:** Malaysian-Chinese composer Yii Kah Hoe and the author, on a performance-location scouting trip to the Garden of Flowing Fragrance, Liu Fang Yuan, during his initial O'Brien Visiting Professorship at Scripps College. (Huntington Library, Archive, and Botanical Collection, San Marino, California.)



In the second active year of the LIASE grant, which was also the first implementation year, our institution focused on Thailand. Again, the principal institutional partners in Asia had been brought in during the previous year via the performing arts, and again, by music faculty who had commissioned Koji Nakano to compose a piece for students and faculty to premiere. Nakano's work, *Imagined Sceneries*, juxtaposed contemporary recordings of locations described in the *Tale of Genji*, with newly composed music/setting extracts from the original 11th-century Japanese novel by Murasaki Shikibu, and early Buddhist texts in Pali from female disciples of the historical Buddha, as collected in the *Therīgāthā*. The piece was performed with synchronized projections of colorful Ebina prints illustrating the chapters from which each text was extracted. The resulting chamber work for Japanese zither (*koto*), voices, toy instruments, recorded sounds, and projections prompted the audience to consider the changing sound environment of Kyoto and loss of nature in the city center. Again, Nakano's presence catalyzed an interest in collaborating with his home institution, Burapha University, Thailand. This interest eventually resulted in our faculty/student clinic trip to southeastern Thailand to work with students from marine science and performing arts at Burapha's Chanthaburi campus. While faculty and students were at Burapha, one of the collaborative projects involved a day of musical and theatre performances by all students, staged in the mangrove forest of the King Project near campus. The performances were the culminating event that crowned a week of intensive work researching mangrove ecology and community attitudes toward the King Project mangroves. The performances were structured to welcome even the least confident performer, since the marine technology students and several US students had never performed on stage before, let alone on the boardwalks that crisscrossed the mangroves.

In both cases with Yii and Nakano, because the US performing arts faculty established invitations to the composers over a year before they were to arrive on campus in the US for their premieres, and because even these premieres preceded planning for the LIASE activities, both constituencies were able to get to know each other before invitations for further and more intensive collaboration were made. The relationships had a chance to grow naturally, with spaciousness and complexity,





**Image:** Rehearsing in the mangroves with students from the Claremont Colleges, Burapha University and Yale NUS (King's Project, Chanthaburi, Thailand).

person to person, with faculty from several disciplines, while the composers visited the US campus. The conversations strengthened naturally around areas of mutual interest, and shared visions of possibility. As roots of the mangroves provide a complex support for the central trunk that reaches far into the sky, these first relationships with our visitors provided a needed foundation of trust for the ambitious project of a future clinic trip involving deep collaboration of individuals and colleges.

The performing arts also come equipped with a wonderful disciplinary model for developing these connections into full-blown institutional collaborations: *the rehearsal process*. The applied performing arts place great emphasis on practice, or the need for actually undergoing trial and error in the development of performance. Much of the time spent in applied performing arts lessons is spent in a rehearsal arc, which typically progresses only over months. To my thinking, this rehearsal mindset is of great value in the development of large-scale collaboration between two institutions, across language, culture, and national differences, involving many



**Image:** Mangroves in King Project, Chanthaburi, Thailand.

disciplines. The small-scale prototyping of clinic trips early in the planning phase, starting with a few faculty and ramping up to faculty and student trips, allows for the two institutions to 'rehearse' their interactions with low stakes, before going to full capacity. This low-stakes process builds trust in small exchanges, and hopefully cements a foundation that will withstand the inevitable unforeseen challenges that usually confront all collaborations. These challenges can surface within each partner institution, or along disciplinary lines, as well as between the partner institutions, or along national/cultural lines. Those in the performing arts have experience with these fault lines and how to repair them. For example, the opera director – who routinely has experience coordinating months-long processes with lighting designers, costume designers, seamstresses, orchestral conductors, instrumentalists, opera singers, set designers, choreographers, dramaturges, fund-raisers, board

members, and house managers – has a decided advantage when it comes to planning interdisciplinary work over several years.

Part of the reason the performing arts equip practitioners with these sorts of skills is due to the structure of the curriculum, and the involvement of the body. The student in the applied lesson has a relationship to their practice and to their teacher that is unduplicated in the liberal arts colleges. Students in applied music often take lessons and/or participate in the choir or orchestra throughout their entire undergraduate career, returning each semester. Weekly meetings over years result in very close relationships among the student cohort and with their teachers. For example, in teaching applied voice lessons, I spend a minimum of half an hour with each student every week, sharing vulnerable moments of vocalism and exploring repertoire that challenges linguistic abilities and cultural aptitudes. The conversations we have regarding how they will personally embody music from a different time and place are quite immediate and intimate: the student must make choices based on critical interpretation, and then technically execute them. Failures are as valuable as successes in these contexts and often result in a foundation of profound trust between teacher and student. In turn, this often prompts the kinds of transformation liberal arts faculty hope for their students: changes in how the students relate to themselves, and accompanying changes in their perspective of the world. The applied music lesson takes place in the context of a larger musical studio of anywhere from 10 to 20 students, who regularly witness each others' performances and share joy in each other's improvements in the weekly hour-long performance class. These students invest in each other's success, and form a powerful community that shares in and encourages the growth of each member.

The larger musical ensembles such as choir and orchestra that are active at most colleges also offer a pre-existing curricular home for these sorts of activities. In these ensembles, it is not uncommon for large groups of students (80–100) to convene regularly and collaborate in rehearsals and performances. In the larger standing ensembles, the dynamic is necessarily different from that found in the applied studios, but the result is the same: shared experiences and shared goals in a trusting environment, plus embodiment, lead to the formation of strong and enduring

community. These ties persist long after graduation: witness the popularity of choral reunions, or the *a cappella* groups that form the basis for lifelong friendships. The alumni networks of choral and theatre ensembles also provide an organic way of reaching out to a much larger constituency of alumni and institutional partners.

The applied music studios and musical ensembles are therefore important for those hoping to change culture, because they provide an already existing, curricular forum for the spread of ideas. By programming topical repertoire, these social networks are very powerful, and can be activated quickly to focus on pressing issues, with faculty or student leadership.

### **Working Across the Language Barrier**

Collaboration with Asian partners will almost always involve some negotiation across a language barrier. While some faculty will be familiar with a foreign language or two, undergraduates may find working across this language barrier particularly daunting. The applied arts offer relief in these situations via non-language activities: dance/movement, music, and visual arts. Those same non-language, embodied qualities that make these activities suspect in academe, therefore commend them to transcultural projects. Of course, having a translator for instructions is very helpful, but not always necessary if the framing of the activity has been adequately explained beforehand in both languages. Likewise, these applied arts activities can also convene and aid in group formation for faculty and students in transdisciplinary work, if all the faculty and students are open to participation in the activity.

Language barriers in applied choir and applied voice are a special case, meriting their own consideration. Faculty and students in applied voice usually already perform in several languages, although those languages are often limited to those spoken in Europe and the former USSR. Chinese and Japanese classical vocal repertoire is available more and more readily to those who might seek it out, with several piano-voice anthologies of art song in Chinese languages appearing in the last decade. The standing expectation that students will memorize and perform vocal repertoire in foreign languages on a regular basis prepares students for exploring repertoire that is sung in less well-known Asian languages, such as Thai, Pali, Bahasa Malaysia, Khmer, etc. The performance in a foreign language is usually accompanied



by some introduction and exploration of the culture from whence the text springs. Voice training also usually offers students pedagogical tools such as training in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), in order to facilitate student/faculty performances in foreign languages. (Parenthetically, IPA skills are also, of late, a highly valued skill at Google, for work on language-responsive devices.) The vocal and choral faculty and students are therefore wonderfully primed for involvement in international collaboration.

### Liminal Space

Finally, in the applied arts, the qualities of embodiment and memory combine with affective expression, to provide a liminal space into which students can powerfully project parts of themselves in ways that would not be welcome elsewhere in society or the academy. This projection can result in the cultivation of psychological tools for survival, such as courage, hope, etc., which may not be available via the rational mind. In his book, *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear describes how the chief of the Crow tribe, Plenty Coups, had a dream that resulted in his taking action to save his tribe:



**Image:** Dress rehearsal in the King Project mangrove forest (Chanthaburi, Thailand).

“...the radical hope that young Plenty Coup’s dream generated was itself a manifestation of imaginative excellence. It enabled the tribe to face its future courageously—and imaginatively—at a time when the traditional understanding of courage was becoming unlivable.” (Lear 2008, 117)

In a forum such as academia, where dream interpretation is not an accepted disciplinary discourse, the performing arts might be considered as parallel technologies of the psyche. These healing expressive experiences of performance are all the more powerful if the students create the content of the performance, as in Boal’s (1985) ‘forum theatre.’ In this type of theatre, participants are given a prompt, and generate their own scene in response. Ideally, the polarization of actor and spectator is dissolved, resulting in what Boal calls the ‘spectactor,’ who expresses and listens in dynamic dialogue with the other participants. This type of work also lends itself to participatory action research, in which communities form around issues and produce theatre actions that bring to light formerly hidden injustices. The production of the theatre work therefore constitutes a form of social research, sometimes extending ethnographic interviews into acts of creative allyship. This creative research can also be captured via more traditional conference presentations, and documented as scholarly output by student and faculty alike.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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