

Summary - Ethics of Online Playback Theatre Performance

This document summarized the main points of an online Zoom discussion facilitated by Michael Cheng (Singapore) and Nir Raz (Israel) on April 1, 2020.

There are 4 main sections:

1. Introduction
2. Issues or Questions of Ethics for Consideration
3. Suggestions for Good Practice
4. List of Contributors

1. Introduction

The Zoom discussion was initiated in response to the recent flurry of online playback performances. In examining issues of ethics, we acknowledge that this session is but a small effort in building best practices.

Because Zoom has been the preferred platform for most online performances, some points of discussions were centred on Zoom functions. Nevertheless, we invite you to consider the general principles and apply them to various online performance platforms.

The session was structured as follows:

- i. Setting the context
- ii. Discussion in breakout rooms
- iii. Sharing in main group
- iv. Responses to the sharing

We explored issues of ethics of online performances based on the following clause in the Code of Ethics distributed by the Centre for Playback Theatre:

Respect:

We interact with our audiences, students, tellers, company members, and colleagues with respect at all times. We acknowledge and affirm the integrity of the other party and behave in a way that does not seek to undermine or shame the other. We understand and respect the rituals, traditions, principles, and practices of Playback Theatre, and undertake to acquire that knowledge.

2. Issues or Questions of Ethics for Consideration

Structure/Format/Process

- Saying this is a “Playback Theatre performance” creates certain expectations in the minds of participants. While there are fundamental challenges in meeting those expectations, should we brand it as such? Should we qualify that? Should we call it a different name? Should we codify the name “Online Playback Performance”? How can we protect the integrity of Playback?
- What are the ethical issues of engagement and respect when there is an active chat happening alongside the performance?
- In this format, how many people should be in the audience? How do you get a feeling for who is in the room, eg demographics, social mapping? How can the audience also get to know one another? A large number seems to be contradictory to the stated aim of creating and maintaining connections.
- It is difficult to “see” everyone if we have a large audience, and also because of the platform used for online performance. Many may choose to have their video off. We may not “know” who is in the space with us.
- There may be other people “off-screen” that we do not know of. How safe and ethical is this, and what is the potential for harm to potential tellers?
- People bring different levels of attentiveness to their online interactions (e.g. checking their phones, talking to someone in the room, getting up for various reasons). How disruptive is this? What changes in terms of respect for the teller, the story, and the process? The challenge of being truly present.
- The challenge of reading body language, interpreting the energy of the room, and the multi-layered and multi-directional dynamics. It is difficult to be fully aware of what is going on, and fully respect the stories and the experience. How can we create real connections and build community, or is it even futile trying to replicate our work in the online world?
- Recording the online performance seems to negate the aim of taking good care of everyone (and not just those who can speak up). There is also an issue of peer pressure in giving permission.
- Posting the recording on an online platform. Are people really aware of the boundaries of the online space? What is the potential for harm for the teller (and those in the story)?

if this recording stays online for years and years?

- How can we honor the different languages since more people from different countries might be present?
- People can enter and leave without saying anything.

Ritual

- Virtual space is not a neutral space. We are inside each others' homes, countries etc. So what do we do to bring a sense of safety and neutrality to the "stage" in order for there to be less judgement and more respect? How to ensure confidentiality, security and safety, in line with a respectful approach?
- As well as offering them a safe space, do we have requirements of the audience in terms of their respect for us, respect for each other and the rituals of playback (quiet location, well lit, arriving on time, who is also there in the room and able to hear/see)?
- How do we choose the next teller? Often it seems to be whoever is fastest to type. Or when a few people have offered snippets in the chat, the conductor chooses whichever is more interesting, or whichever story feels more in the flow of the performance.
- How do we invite those who are slower and more hesitant to type or speak? In this modality, how do we even be aware of these people who need more encouragement. On this platform, the voiceless are often even more so.
- How do we exercise respectful care for the teller, acknowledging that there are differences to the ways that after-care can be provided online in cases when tellers are overwhelmed?
- To invite someone to the chair is to create an act of witnessing. How can we replicate the effect of witnessing (and safely) online? How to create new rituals that have the intended impact as our conventional ones?
- The teller can choose to stay offscreen or with the video stopped. How will the teller or the other audience members feel about this? How does it affect the witnessing?
- People among the audience can also choose to focus just on individual screens for any amount of time, without the individual knowing.

3. Suggestions for Best Practice

These are collated suggestions and may sometimes seem to contradict one another. We invite groups to implement the suggestions that work for your context, and to do so in a safe space by

first having trial performances with audiences that are safe for you, and who will give you authentic and useful feedback.

Format/Structure/Process - Audience

- Keep the number of people in the audience low. Perhaps 15 to a maximum of 30 is a good number for an online performance.
- Start the connection among the audience even days before the performance. For example, share thoughts, moments, about the theme. Start a conversation in a Facebook group or event page.
- Inform your audience well in advance (email, messenger, etc) about how you want to work during the performance (whether or not to make a recording, whether or not to use the chat function,...). Repeat (the most important ones) at the beginning of the performance.
- Know who our audience is, for example, performing only for a closed group, or only for a specifically invited audience. For instance, some platforms have a “waiting room” option and the host then clicks in the subscribed audience into the main room.
- Close or lock the online space if possible, 5 to 10 minutes after the start.
- If the platform allows, consider opening up a waiting room for latecomers, that you can invite into the main room between enactments.
- Explore your chosen platform’s settings and find ways to avoid unwanted audience members. For example, don’t put the Zoom ID or URL on your announcement, but send it to the people who register. For free performances, you can also manage registrations for free via event platforms like Eventbrite.
- Encourage people to leave their cameras on at all times except for enactment. This encourages an active participation in the process as well.
- Consider having an online performance without a chat option.
- Or state clearly the rules of engagement for the chat option, for example:
 - Refrain from typing during enactment or interview; or
 - Refrain from private chats; or
 - Only use chat to submit technical problems or questions to the host.
- Make sure people can’t send private messages to each other. But keep the chat running so that people can still submit technical problems and questions to the host.

- If there is a chat ongoing alongside the performance, keep an eye on the engagement that is happening in there.
- Use chat as a way to connect. For instance, invite the audience to use chat at the same time. For instance, warming up the space or making connections:
 - at beginning of the performance;
 - before inviting stories;
 - audience to write a “I remember...” at end of the performance
- Invite the audience to use earphones, so that people “off-screen” are not privy to the stories told.
- Do not record the performance. Or be clear with the audience that any recording is only for the group’s reflection and practice. Do not post the recording online.
- Have an individual take care of the technical logistics (to ensure safety and security), like responding to technical requests, hosting functions, etc. Performers should focus on the performance, and the conductor to focus on relationship-building.

For conductors

- Build a new social contract with the audience, to maintain boundaries, confidentiality, atmosphere. Language of instruction needs to be invitational, rather than instructive.
 - Be open and transparent about the space. Explain in the beginning the very special context of this different kind of playback, to help with building safety.
 - Acknowledge the situation given rise to the proliferation of online performances.
 - Acknowledge the privilege of this platform.
 - Acknowledge the basket of emotions present locally, regionally, and globally at this time.
 - Invite the audience to share the stories they carefully consider to be okay for this platform. Be honest and transparent about the limits of safety.
 - Be aware that housekeeping business is much greater for online performances.
- The level and quality of interaction is also different. Conductors need to prepare the audience and frame this for them.
- To keep a close eye on the teller’s reaction during the performance. For this, maybe invite the teller to stay on screen before, during, and after enactment.

Ritual

- Use simple and clear language.
- Build a new ritual for the performance so that we can try to have the process work as close to the conventional as possible.
- Build new rituals for online forms so that they have the intended artistic and psychological impact.
- Be flexible with the ways we transit between stories, to take care of tellers and actors as they move between stories.
- One possibility for structuring who is seen on screen:
 1. During interview: conductor and teller on screen
 2. During enactment - only actors on screen (so that the teller can be private with their reactions and emotions)
 3. After enactment: conductor, actors and teller (possibly voluntary) on screen (actors in neutral, showing the respect back to the teller).
- Have 10 to 15 min after the performance for mingling between audience and performers.
- Possibility of break out rooms before and/or after stories.

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