

**Higher Education Dance, Drama and Performance through distance learning  
beyond times of crisis  
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**Abstract (300 words)**

Since its evolution from traditional correspondence study courses in the 1800s, online learning has emerged as an invaluable tool for connecting teachers and students. Learning by distance enables students to train at any time or place without geographical boundary constraints. Learners with limited financial capabilities are often more able to combine studies with their professional practice. Also, learners who have physical or mental challenges that inhibit their participation in face-to-face classrooms potentially find it easier to utilise online learning platforms. Distance learning (DL) students can often dictate the speed at which classes are completed while having a wealth of knowledge available to them. Additionally, during times of national or international crisis in which security and social restrictions may arise, DL has played a pivotal role in enabling learners to continue their education.

In this chapter the author considers the feasibility of teaching Bachelor of Arts (BA) Dance, Drama or Performance degrees through online learning. In Britain, the government appointed independent body Quality Assurance Agency for United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (QAA) sets guidelines for university courses by reviewing systems and standards (QAA, 2020a). The author examines the standards necessary for a formidable and comprehensive BA Dance, Drama or Performance education as espoused by the QAA's learning outcomes and then questions whether these can be achieved through DL. This position paper features a critical review of relevant literature investigating the learning and teaching of performing arts subjects through DL, particularly during times of crisis like the 2020 COVID-19 global pandemic. The author concludes that third level students would be disadvantaged if practical face-to-face ensemble collaborations were not included as integral components of future online performing arts degree courses. This chapter is of particular significance as British HE providers consider whether to continue their online provision beyond emergency provision.

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Since its evolution from traditional correspondence study courses in the 1800s, online learning has emerged as an invaluable tool for connecting teachers and students. Learning by distance enables students to train at any time or in any place without the constraints of geographical boundaries. Adult learners with limited financial capabilities are often more able to combine studies with their professional practice. Also, learners who have physical or mental challenges that inhibit their participation in face-to-face classrooms potentially find it easier to utilise online learning platforms. Distance learning (DL) students can often dictate the speed at which classes are completed while having a wealth of knowledge available to them. Additionally, during times of national or international crisis in which security and social restrictions may arise, DL has played a pivotal role in enabling learners to continue their education.

In this chapter the author considers the feasibility of teaching Bachelor of Arts (BA) Dance, Drama or Performance degrees through online learning. In Britain, the government appointed independent body Quality Assurance Agency for United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education (QAA) meets with a taskforce of university providers, regulatory bodies and student groups to set guidelines for university courses by reviewing systems and standards (QAA, 2020a). The author examines the standards necessary for a formidable and comprehensive BA Dance, Drama or Performance education as espoused by the QAA's learning outcomes and then questions whether these can be achieved through DL. This chapter also features a critical review of relevant literature investigating the learning and teaching of performing arts subjects through DL, particularly during times of crisis like the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) global pandemic. The author questions whether third level students of Dance, Drama or Performance would be disadvantaged if studying these creative and practical subjects in an online context beyond emergency education.

### **Learning by correspondence in Higher Education: A brief history**

In Britain during the early 1800s 'The Philanthropic Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge' (Mokyr, 2009) encouraged self-education through their printing and distribution of educational materials. This led to correspondence-based courses involving teacher and student interaction which were advertised as early as 1833 (Garrison, 1985). Education by distance became more structured and developed with courses to learn shorthand in 1844 (Tait, 2003) enabling students to receive teacher feedback on submitted work (Hunt, 2020). This impacted the development of private correspondence in Britain for educational purposes, that began to thrive in the late 1800s, largely in part due to the development of the postal service and the continued construction of railway infrastructures. In 1858, a Royal Charter stated that the University of London would allow the enrolment of students by correspondence to sit examinations as the University no longer required a certificate of study from a recognised institution (Hunt, 2020). This greatly influenced Higher Education (HE) institutions at the time and led to the University Correspondence College, Wolsey Hall and the Rapid Results College offering tuition by correspondence course for each University of London examination. "In 1865 71% of those who registered as 'private' students failed to pass. By the end of the century, thanks largely to the efforts of the correspondence colleges, the situation had reversed (Kenyon-Jones in Hunt, 2020, 348)."

Particularly during times of war and conflict, correspondence colleges enabled British people the opportunity to complete qualifications ranging from matriculation level diplomas to master's degrees (Hunt, 2020). Between 1887 and 1931 a total of 39,326 students passed examinations through University Correspondence College despite the impact of the First World War on British families (De Salvo, 2002). The Commerce Degree Bureau of the University of London was founded in the wake of World War I, to offer tuition in Economics via correspondence (Tight in Hunt, 2020). Similarly, correspondence colleges partnered with the Institute of Army Education during the Second World War to provide tuition so that service personnel could avail of classes ranging from secondary school to degree level courses that were accredited by the University of London (Morrish, 1970).

Correspondence education ultimately progressed as technological advancements grew. In 1963 Michael Young established the National Extension College as a not-for-profit college combining television and radio recordings with course material by correspondence and face-to-face instruction. It was described as a “multi-media college” (Smith, n.d., 36) and impacted the formation of the ‘University of the Air’ which later became the ‘Open University’ in 1969 (NEC, 2020) which, to this day, is a leader in offering correspondence degree courses incorporating technological innovations (Hunt 2020). Today, many British universities offer DL courses through online technology because it is a flexible learning medium enabling adult students to complete their studies whilst remaining active in the workplace (Laurillard and Kennedy, 2017). Online education is defined as a form of distance learning that utilises computers and the Internet as the delivery mechanism, with at least 80% of the course content delivered online (Allen & Seaman 2008; Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). Poley (1998) believes that it is more about teaching and learning than it is about technology, however. Effective distance education course design initially focused on the provision of high quality, affordable learning opportunities at a time and place convenient for the learner. Technology was used to bridge the physical gap between instructors and learners, but it remained important that methods and technologies were appropriate to the instructional tasks and the learner was at the centre of the process (Poley, 1998).

## Universities adapt to distance learning during the 2020 global pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a gradual increase of the number of UK HE institutions offering courses through distance education. Online learning made up 16% of all provision at UK higher education institutions, with the Open University accounting for 65% of all online learning (Universities UK, 2018). At that time, the majority of HE institutions in the UK reported that they “had invested or were aiming to invest” in online provision (Universities UK, 2018, 14). It was probable that this provision would be largely aimed at adult learners in employment seeking to enhance their careers. Also, online learning courses would likely be designed to address the needs of employers who needed to develop their workforce with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) (Universities UK, 2018).

The 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic prompted British universities to adapt their teaching and learning strategies to assure the continuation of academic quality and standards whilst emphasising student and staff safety (Universities UK, 2020). Universities were encouraged to consider flexible modes of study (Universities UK, 2020 in guidance literature written by Universities UK, Independent HE and the Association of Colleges. Degree awarding bodies were told to be conscious of geographical challenges that may be present for the teaching provider (Universities UK, 2020) such as multi-site campuses, overlaps with public spaces, and transport accessibility. Additionally, HE institutions were prompted to engage in discussions about changing the method and location of course delivery and/or assessment requirements (Universities UK, 2020). Faculty who had experience altering course material and assessments for online, digital or small group delivery were encouraged to share good practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic made HE institutions “quickly pivot” (QAA, 2020b, 1) to digital teaching and assessment. HE providers released statements regarding their intent to either retain a wholly digital approach, return to onsite provision, or offer a blend of both (QAA, 2020b). It was anticipated that digital learning approaches would remain a crucial aspect of how academic quality was maintained. As a result, the QAA published a guidance booklet to enhance the quality of HE digital provision (QAA 2020b) emphasising the importance of having a strategic focus when designing future university courses in Britain so that they consider programme design, approval and management. The new QAA guidelines addressed student centred learning, teaching and assessment considerations and also discussed the impact of digital learning on

teaching staff. Learning resources and student support were also the focus of the QAA booklet (QAA 2020b), which highlighted the importance of budgetary concerns, security measures, timetabling, student support, and the access and training needed if implementing new technologies.

Whilst universities in Britain could avail of independent and government documents offering guidance on how best to transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online learning, third level students had to also adapt to new learning experiences whilst potentially also facing stressful safety concerns, isolation or anxiety due to financial worries (Casagrande et al, 2020; Flett and Hewitt, 2020). “Whilst there have been extensive discussions and analyses of the merits and challenges of online learning... such learning is best when it is planned in advance or involves a gradual transition (Besser et al, 2020, 2).” Besser et al’s (2020) article ‘Adaptability to a Sudden Transition to Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Understanding the Challenges for Students’ reflects the experiences of university students in Israel and documents the extent to which an abrupt transition to synchronous online learning impacts university students. Students were asked to rate their learning experiences after engaging in emergency online education. The researchers also measured student adaptability by utilising a version of Martin et al’s (2013) Adaptability Scale to gauge levels of coping. The broad personality traits of the participants were measured due to an expectation that there would be associations between the ‘personality traits and adaptability’ and between ‘adaptability and responses to the pandemic’ (Martin et al, 2013). Participants included 1,200 undergraduates from five academic colleges in Israel all studying a variety of specialist subjects, but very few had been exposed to online learning prior to the pandemic. Data collected from online questionnaires indicated that when compared to face-to-face instruction, participants felt that online learning was a less positive experience (Martin et al, 2013) and increased student feelings of stress and isolation “as well as negative mood... and lowered levels of concentration and focus, motivation and performance (Martin et al, 2013, 12).”

It is important to note the context of this study, however, when putting the research into perspective. When considering the quick turnaround of HE academic courses from traditional to online formats, it is understandable that learners may struggle to adapt. Israeli academic institutions were given one week to urgently adjust their courses and students and faculty were not expecting the alterations (Martin et al, 2013). They had “little, if any, experience with online

learning, in general (Martin et al, 2013, 6).” An area of focus for future research would be to revisit this sampled group once a more structured programme of online provision has been implemented in Israel. Additionally, the researchers do not identify how soon after the online learning began that the study was completed. There is no analysis of the students’ personality traits nor levels of stress and anxiety prior to beginning their online learning. Finally, for many learners there was an ongoing exposure to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including terror attacks that involved negative mental health consequences (Martin et al, 2013). It is suggested that some of these students may be failing to adjust to the pandemic due to their past traumatic experiences.

Verawardina et al (2020) disagree slightly with Besser et al (2020) and argue that online education is necessary to ease disruptions to education caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. In their literature review the authors primarily refer to the experiences of Indonesian learners, but highlight that UNESCO (2020) supported online learning across international HE institutions during the outbreak of the global pandemic by publishing a list of online apps and appropriate online learning platforms. Verawardina et al (2020) emphasize the positive attributes associated with utilising online learning in Indonesia. They suggest it has economic advantages because HE students can potentially shorten their learning time. Also, students can engage directly with the academic materials and instruction can be accessed at any time. The researchers acknowledge the limitations that are associated with online learning during the pandemic, however. In particular, fast internet connections may be lacking in remote areas leading to a “digital divide” between university students based on their locations (Verawardina et al, 2020, 391). Also, a motivation to learn needs to be fostered amongst students. HE institutions need to encourage the socialisation of student groups engaging in online learning and also teachers should avail of training to master new technologies of which they may not be familiar.

Similarly, Liu et al (2020) suggest that online learning platforms should be sufficiently represented in HE institutions. Their study compares popular distance learning platforms, whilst also presenting data collected from 40 semi-structured interviews with teachers from Russian and Chinese universities. After analysing online learning platforms such as Moodle, Open edX and NEO Learning Management System (LMS) for their system features, content support, content creation, user management and reporting systems, they found that Moodle was the most thorough learning platform (Liu et al, 2020). Similarly, after utilising the Moodle platform, 300

sampled undergraduates improved their attainment levels on testing that was issued both before and after implementing distance learning across a variety of subject areas. Respondents spoke favourably of applying distance learning technologies to aid learning, but researchers emphasise that the effects of online learning depend on proper planning and teaching (Liu et al, 2020). It was unfortunate, however, that this study had a small sample size and was completed without a control group nor a pilot study.

O'Shea et al's (2015) qualitative narrative enquiry considers the impact online education had on adult university learners in HE institutions in Australia. Completed before the pandemic, it uses Pittaway's (2012) Engagement Framework to investigate strategies that were employed by students to remain engaged in online learning. Whilst only having a small sample size of 38 questionnaire respondents and 19 interview respondents, this research is unique in that it also highlights literature that recognises the limitations of online learning. Specifically, the authors cite Saltmarsh and Sutherland-Smith (2010) who espouse that teaching represents more than 'content' (Saltmarsh and Sutherland-Smith in O'Shea et al, 2015, 42) and teacher beliefs, values and practices are often disrupted when the course is delivered through technology (Saltmarsh and Sutherland-Smith in O'Shea et al, 2015). In addition to student disengagement when using technology (Hughes, 2007), teachers can also show reluctance to adapt (Dyment et al, 2013; Mitchell and Geva-May, 2009) with Salmon (2005) commenting that teaching is "an individual and traditional craft (Salmon, 2002, 205)" which may not translate to an online format. O'Shea et al's (2015) research gives a balanced view of the Australian HE student experience when working in DL contexts. Some sampled adult learners wrote that online discussion forums were "unhelpful and largely a waste of time" (O'Shea et al, 2015, 50) if large numbers of students were present and the forums were unmediated. Also, others wrote of opinionated and forceful students in chat rooms which left classmates finding the experience of contributing to be "daunting" (O'Shea et al, 2015, 50). Respondents commented that online learners were sometimes a lower priority than on-campus learners (O'Shea et al, 2015) and that they did not feel engaged with the university. The majority of interview respondents voiced concerns over outdated materials, repetitive formats and poor structure (O'Shea et al, 2015) but felt that the flexibility of the programme was a positive attribute, even though one student claimed "I really taught myself... I just felt like I was teaching myself everything (O'Shea et al, 2015, 52)."

Fakinlede et al (2015) investigated the readiness of Nigerian HE students to engage in online learning by considering if students possess the technological and independent learning skills that are necessary to be self-directed learners. They suggest that Nigerian universities will lose relevance and will not be able to compete with universities on a global scene (Fakinlede et al, 2015) if online technologies are not implemented. Also, the authors cite Fabiyi and Uzoka (2009) who claim that 72% of Nigerian universities are over enrolled, over crowded, over populated and facilities are overstretched. Fakinlede et al (2015) believe that Nigeria's higher education needs are not being met. This mixed method study issued surveys and interviews to 119 Nigerian undergraduates studying a variety of specialist subjects at one university. Findings showed that students responded positively to the possibility of participating in online learning, but that Internet access was largely availed of in cyber cafes and on mobile phones due to poor online connectivity in Nigeria. The researchers would benefit from sampling a larger number of participants from a variety of Nigerian universities. However, there are many relevant points that were made in this study that are applicable to learners and teachers in different geographical locations.

Babcock et al (2020) investigated how the online student mentoring process has altered as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Their research reflects on how faculty at Northcentral University, a large American private online institution offering DL to students from 19 countries, supported learners to continue their studies amidst their stress and challenges. Faculty noticed that students had added financial worries, a loss of study time and mounting concern about sick family members. The Dissertation Chair and Faculty Senator wanted to support home schooling parents and therefore implemented a series of Zoom video calls in which members of the leadership team read children's stories to allow working mothers the opportunity to "have thirty minutes of downtime (Babcock et al, 2020, 62)." Additionally, staff coffee chats were formed to allow faculty to discuss how best to support students. Teachers discussed stories about learner experiences like one student who "contracted the virus... but was trying to work on their assignment in the hospital until nurses confiscated their phones and laptop (Babcock et al, 2020, 62)." Babcock et al (2020) found that faculty had a need for connection, support, community and resources. The research concludes that learners are helped if faculty acknowledge student circumstances during the pandemic. Also, an 'incomplete' grade option enables learners to avail of more time to complete assignments (Babcock et al, 2020). Online meetings were recorded so that students could retain information more easily. Additionally, individual student emails from faculty members enabled learners to feel connected to the wider university community.

Northcentral University have also implemented a virtual support centre to offer guidance through the development of podcasts, resources and blogs to teachers, as well as administrators and parents of school aged children (Babcock et al, 2020).

### **Regulating British Higher Education Dance, Drama and Performance courses**

Universities in Britain are autonomous and responsible for their own standards (Coughlan, 2014) but since 1997 the QAA, a government appointed independent body, has maintained and enhanced the quality of university courses by reviewing the systems and standards of institutions (QAA, 2020a). Peer-led QAA reviewers work with stake holders from regulatory bodies and student groups (QAA, 2020a) to offer advice and ensure the quality of university courses by addressing issues like course design, recruitment, learning and teaching methods, student participation, assessment, external examining, course updating, appeals and complaints, collaboration and research (McGhee, 2014). Reviewers ascertain whether providers are maintaining academic standards and quality as espoused in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (UKSCQA, 2018).

In order to assure comparable quality and standards across individual degree courses in institutions, the QAA also publish criteria for each taught subject. The QAA's 'Dance, Drama and Performance' Subject Benchmark Statement (SBS) (QAA, 2019) describes the nature of these subjects and defines the academic standards that can be expected of graduates. SBSs provide general guidance for articulating learning outcomes but it is the university's responsibility to specify teaching, learning and assessment approaches. Subject statements aim to be sufficiently generic with a wide range and diversity of provision (QAA, 2019) so guidelines are applicable in a number of third level educational settings.

The 'Dance, Drama and Performance' SBS (QAA, 2019) details the characteristics of these specialist subject areas and then identifies their nature and scope by setting guidelines for the subjects' field of study. These should ideally include students engaging in practical work in a range of contexts, students partaking in critical studies and students developing their techniques and technical training for craft skills and development. Also, students of dance, drama and performance should be exposed to the integration of emerging technologies into performance and be prepared for employment within Performing Arts industries (QAA, 2019).

The QAA emphasise the common features that should characterise Dance, Drama and Performance degree programmes as seen in Figure 1. For example, courses should typically demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the ways in which performance originates and emphasise the importance of “acquisition of practice-based knowledge through physical engagement in technical exercises to develop skills in craft and technique (QAA, 2019, 5).” (See Figure 1).

**[Figure 1 here: Common features that should characterise B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance degree courses]**

Additionally, Dance, Drama and Performance undergraduates should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding in a range of areas as outlined in Figure 2. Students should have a grasp of practitioners and practices, comprehending histories, forms and traditions of performance, and also having a critical awareness of research methodologies (See Figure 2).

**[Figure 2 here: Knowledge, understanding and abilities that should be demonstrated by B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance graduates]**

There are also a number of subject-specific skill sets that undergraduate students of Dance, Drama or Performance should acquire. These include making, creating and performing skills, being able to analyse and critically respond to materials, and demonstrating the ability to consider applications and participation (QAA, 2019). More generic skills should also be emphasised, as outlined in Figure 3. These should include the ability to self-manage, have critical engagement, to communicate and present ideas and to use social skills when working in a group or a team (See Figure 3).

**[Figure 3 here: Subject-specific and generic skills that should be demonstrated by BA Dance, Drama and Performance graduates]**

Similar learning outcomes are expected of students across the performing arts subjects. The QAA (2019) state that teaching, learning and assessment will be underpinned by a commitment to inclusive practice and that experiential learning will be an important principle (QAA, 2019). However, the QAA emphasises that “reasonable adjustments” may be made, when appropriate, in recognition of individual needs (QAA, 2019, 11).

Teaching and learning should take place in a variety of contexts and include a balance of exposure to workshops, rehearsals, productions, practical classes, studio-based practice, screenings, lectures, seminars, tutorials and web-based interactions (QAA, 2019). These will often be characterised by group and individual learning through work-based and resource-based learning with tutor-led and student-led study. Undergraduates will use subject specific technology and also experience professional events (QAA, 2019). Additionally, diverse modes of assessment techniques should be utilised when giving formative and summative feedback to BA students of Dance, Drama and Performance. Ultimately, however, tutors should assess critical understanding knowledge, ability, technique, creativity, artistry and application through both coursework and examination, whether in practical or written forms (QAA, 2019). Also, the QAA (2019) insist that assessment should be valid and reliable, and should be supported by clear criteria for marking and grading (QAA, 2019).

### **Delivering Higher Education Dance, Drama and Performance courses through distance learning**

Prior to the global pandemic, British universities indicated that they valued the benefits of offering Dance, Drama and Performance courses through online platforms, as a variety of foundation, pre-degree, short courses, and MOOC classes in the performing arts were available online. Institutions realised that online learning could be used to teach many kinds of subjects to different populations in diverse settings (Bowen et al, 2013). Only two British HE institutions, Rose Bruford College and the University of Surrey, offered performance-based practical Dance, Drama or Performance BA degree programmes entirely through distance learning, however (DL portal, 2020). Theatre and drama are areas of performance and inquiry which usually assume engagement and commitment to the ensemble or group process supported by individual input (Philip and Nicholls, 2007). Philip and Nicholls (2007) question whether ensemble dynamics can be brought into DL performing arts courses without careful design and implementation to foster an atmosphere and ‘energy’ that is usually only gained through the physical engagement of students, teachers and mentors.

Rose Bruford College in London was the first UK university to offer a university level degree in Acting in the 1970s and is currently one of Britain’s largest drama conservatoires due to its student body from over 40 countries and the variety of courses that it has on offer (RBC, 2020). Rose Bruford College believe that their teaching, learning and training ethos emphasises artistry,

collaboration, community, discovery, diversity, employability, independence, and professionalism (RBC, 2020) with face-to-face Performing Arts students making and producing over 75 shows a year. Their online learning practical Theatre Studies BA Honours degree can be completed over a period of 3 years for full time study, or up to 12 years part time study (RBC, 2018) and is awarded through the University of Manchester. The programme aims to enable “anyone who is interested in theatre, but who cannot free themselves from commitments where they work and live, to study for a degree in Theatre at their own pace from home (RBC, 2018, 4).” They also hope to provide areas of opportunity for further study for those who wish to develop their careers in relation to theatre or the Arts (RBC, 2018). Rose Bruford College intend for their online learners to have an awareness of theoretical, historical and contextual aspects of theatre and performance, and to be prepared for post-graduate study. The programme proposes to enrich students’ experiences and appreciation of live theatre and production (RBC, 2018) and also to provide students with a range of transferrable skills in analysis, research and communication.

The Theatre Studies BA Honours degree at Rose Bruford College adheres to the QAA’s Dance, Drama and Performance Benchmark Guidelines (QAA, 2019) by addressing the typical standards of Knowledge and Understanding, Intellectual Skills, Practical Skills and Transferrable Skills (QAA, 2019). Students complete written and practical coursework, keep reflective journals, complete assignments, watch webinars, engage in tutorials and participate in group forums. Modules cover subjects like ‘Theatre at Work’, ‘The Critical Audience’, ‘Elements of the Performance’, ‘The Playwright’, ‘The Director’, ‘The Actor and the Realist Tradition’, ‘Greek Theatre’ and ‘Musical Theatre’, amongst other topic areas (RBC, 2018, 10). Also, assignments and coursework include practical elements like the filming of performance videos, sketches, presentations or audio excerpts. Many students completing the Theatre Studies BA degree at Rose Bruford College are professionals who work in the Performing Arts industries and so the degree content complements what they are doing in their professional practice. This is also the case for students earning their one-year BA honours degree in Theatre at the University of Surrey. As part of the Guildford School of Acting, the performance-based undergraduate degree course is entirely online and advertises that it enables professionals the opportunity to continue their studies whilst working in the Performing Arts industries (UoSurrey, 2020). Their course offers a range of modules from contemporary performer training and political theatre to musical theatre, playwriting, theatre design and choreography with an optional professional training placement. Learning materials are provided electronically, and students attend seminars, lectures,

and correspond via email and group forums. Assessment is based on a combination of examination and coursework, including essays and creative assignments working on playwriting, choreography, theatre design or musical theatre (UoSurrey, 2020).

Philip and Nicholls (2007) believe that performing arts courses can be successfully delivered online if they are designed to be as engaging, interesting and innovative as traditionally designed courses. In 'Theatre Online: The design and drama of e-learning' (Philip and Nicholls, 2007) they investigate the process of designing a five modular online course entitled 'The Genres of European Theatre' for undergraduates at an Australian university. Their action research study gathered findings from student evaluation data that was collated over a period of three years. Data was also collected through observations and the examination of discussion board posts, chat room content, emails, attainment results and questionnaire responses (Philip and Nicholls, 2007). Online course design and delivery was also the focus in Karakas et al's (2008) study investigating the design of 'Understanding the Visual and Performing Arts', a large undergraduate Humanities course at Florida Gulf Coast University in America. Originally delivered in a traditional face-to-face lecture-style format, the course started to be taught by part time faculty and the consistency of the teaching and course materials tended to decline (Karakas et al, 2008). As a result, the course was made entirely virtual in order to provide coherence whilst reducing costs. The new online course consisted of three self-directed modules emphasising both the visual and performing arts through the use of a class textbook. Students completed multiple choice practice tests, submitted written essays and also completed examinations in the form of multiple choice and short essay answers. Students also worked in peer learning teams of six students to participate in discussion forums (Karakas et al, 2008, 203). To assess the effectiveness of the newly designed course faculty compared student assignment scores and student responses to course evaluations (Karakas et al, 2008). "Since the redesign, overall course grade levels have been relatively steady in spite of much higher enrolment levels of over 400 students per course section (Karakas et al, 2008, 203-204)." Researchers feel that by switching to an online-format students tend to demonstrate better content knowledge and application of skills. Also, course material is being provided in a consistent manner to a large number of students and student grades showed improvement (Karakas et al, 2008).

The use of videoconferencing to deliver dance instruction to school aged students in rural communities was the subject of Parrish's (2009) study. The researcher believes that

videoconferencing allows for synchronous face-to-face instruction through the use of two screens. “At a distance, the dance teacher can watch the class perform a dance, provide coaching tips, lecture, ask questions, discuss solutions, and conduct guided improvisations (Parrish, 2009).” Similarly, Weber et al (2017) researched international dance collaboration through the use of technological platforms. In their practice-led grounded theory research, the authors collected data from reflective journals, observations and interviews about their ‘Project Trans(m)it’ programme, aimed to aid artistic collaboration and the transmittance of embodied information, dance and movement via technology (Weber et al, 2017). After collaborating with colleagues in the US and the UK online for over 100 hours, choreographic work was performed on stage through the use of interactive video projection. Through their research, Weber et al (2017) compiled a list of best practice highlighting limitations and practical concerns. Ultimately, they believe that digital technologies can enable choreographers to provide a rigorous physical and creative experience for the dancers and also cultivate new collaborative ventures (Weber et al, 2017). They acknowledge, however, that dance has been slow to embrace digital technologies (Weber et al, 2017) which is also purported by other dance researchers (Whatley and Varney, 2009; deLahunta, 2002) who believe that the practical art of dance does not always translate well to the online environment.

### **Altering traditional British Higher Education Dance, Drama and Performance courses in response to the global pandemic**

Whilst there are examples of performing arts courses that utilise digital technologies to deliver and enhance course content (RBC, 2020; UoSurrey, 2020) adapting British face-to-face undergraduate Dance, Drama and Performance courses in response to COVID-19 was challenging due to the risk, complexity and uncertainty of the pandemic. British awarding bodies had to be conscious of physical environments and geographical challenges and in Performing Arts subjects the location and method of delivery needed to be adjusted to allow social distancing to take place. Teachers needed to assess student work outside of normal practices for highly practical or studio-based subjects (QAA, 2020b). To support teachers delivering British HE undergraduate Performing Arts courses the QAA published ‘Adapting to COVID-19: Smaller, Specialist and Newer Providers of Higher Education (QAA, 2020b).’ In this supporting resource the QAA state, “the pivot to digital teaching and assessment and the need to bring emergency regulations in March [of 2020] affected providers from across the sector including the work of more specialist providers... (QAA, 2020b, 1)” Their document addressed a summary of the main teaching and learning issues that were unique to specialist institutions during the

pandemic and it also offered a series of case studies in the hopes of sharing good practice between providers.

The QAA (2020b) encouraged institutions to complete programme-specific risk assessments and to discuss timetabling, strategic planning, assessment and the feasibility of group teaching, practical work, trips, work placement and recruitment. The handbook outlined the particular challenges relevant to creative subjects and mentioned the problems with social distancing requirements for subject specific concerns like voice projection or acting in close quarters (QAA, 2020b). They acknowledged, however, that it may be more appropriate to defer the completion of learning outcomes relevant to practical experience or develop alternative assessment. Also, they encouraged institutions to consider the need to purchase additional equipment so that resources could be issued to students studying offsite as well as examining the safe use of onsite space in anticipation of a phased return to campus (QAA, 2020b).

Four Performance Arts, Film and Media case studies were detailed in the QAA's support resource (QAA 2020b) with two pertinent to the undergraduate subjects of Dance, Drama and Performance. Information about how the University of Bolton's Backstage Academy adapted their learning and teaching delivery explained how leadership team members assessed risks and then adjusted student holiday time whilst also teaching online for the remainder of the academic year. Tutors were concerned about how to test student knowledge and skills that would normally be assessed using industry standard equipment (QAA, 2020b). As a result, they used online vivas in which students explained how they would address challenges posed by assessment scenarios. Additionally, lectures were delivered online and mobile apps with student discussion areas were designed through the use of social media platforms. The Conservatoire for Dance and Drama consists of six member schools based in Bristol, Leeds and London with courses validated through the University of Kent and the University of the West of England. At the onset of the pandemic they set up a task force which met on a monthly basis to agree a collective strategic response. They discussed how the use of screens, personal protective equipment, one-way walking systems and timetabling for group spaces allow for safe working and study settings when onsite. Student 'bubbles' and 'pods' were created based on living arrangements of students. Also, virtual learning environments were used to deliver lecturers and for students to submit videos of independent practical work.

Reisz (2020) emphasises the fact that the pandemic poses a severe threat to the future careers of performers and this will likely impact university student enrolment. He states, “Drama schools and conservatories could easily start to lose applicants if they are perceived as training people for jobs that are disappearing (Reisz, 2020, 1).” Reisz also comments that Performing Arts schools have had to respond to practical problems but that they are finding creative solutions. For example, public performances have been moved to ‘digital spaces’ to ensure audience safety. In rehearsals performers have temperature checks at the door, wear masks and sanitiser in rehearsal spaces and air conditioning systems are switched to ‘extraction mode’ in large studios (Reisz, 2020). Additionally, students create social bubbles to avoid cross contamination. For example, he suggests that intimate moments should be captured through a touch, a look or a close pass by (Reisz, 2020).

University Performing Arts departments have compiled resources and guidance documents to help performers and students navigate uncertain times. For example, Loyola Marymount University in California produced a document entitled ‘Teaching Theatre Online: A Shift in Pedagogy Amidst Coronavirus Outbreak’ (Sicre, 2020) to encourage the sharing of good practice between teachers and practitioners. It suggests creating performance spaces on rooftops, in outside areas, or using video split-screens to allow audiences to see the facial expressions and reactions of performers closely and at the same time. Reisz (2020) emphasises that major crises tend to generate creative responses and states that students have been involved in work that addresses the crisis, itself (Reisz, 2020). He cites initiatives like productions at London’s Central School in which a series of video performances in response to living in lockdown explored refugee communities and the impact on teenagers. Reisz (2020) believes that when studies return to normal the performing arts will be stronger due to its blending of traditional skills with new technological advances. “Flexible and adaptive artists [will be] capable of working across all platforms and those yet to emerge (Reisz, 2020, 1).” The impact that the pandemic has had on performing artists is also investigated in Neher’s (2020) article ‘Pandemic Theatre’. He suggests that practitioners will not know what live theatre performance will look like when it returns, nor who will be presenting it, nor who will attend (Neher, 2020). Neher (2020) tells of professional companies opening their archives to allow the public to access free recorded performances and of live-cast video performances, usually associated with fundraising endeavours. He adds that the need to create and communicate drives writers, designers, directors and actors but emphasises

that, “No replica, no video, no simulacrum can ever capture the power of live performance (Neher, 2020, 292).”

### **Beyond Times of Crisis: Teaching Dance, Drama and Performance through Distance Learning**

In 2020, HE institutions were forced to implement emergency education systems due to an international crisis caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic. “HE is being pummelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. This spring’s campus shutdowns led to a quick rush to remote learning, exposing the fragmented adoption of high-quality education technology and digital capabilities across thousands of colleges and universities (Gallagher and Palmer, 2020, para.1).” In Britain, government documents and advice (Universities UK, 2020; QAA, 2020a; QAA, 2020b; GovUK, 2020) helped HE institutions quickly implement new methods of working that would enable students and faculty to remain safe whilst attempting to complete course schedules amidst evolving health and safety restrictions. Official statements emphasised the importance of protecting academic standards in all HE provision, however, with GovUK (2020) emphasising that providers maintain the quality of their tuition and that they also comply with registration conditions relating to quality and standards.

British HE institutions delivering face-to-face degree courses in Dance, Drama and Performance worked hard to quickly adapt to new government guidelines in the hopes of keeping students and faculty members safe (QAA, 2020a) whilst maintaining their academically rigorous standards. Faculty in Performing Arts departments who had never implemented learning by technology started initiating the use of video conferencing, online discussion forums and social media group chatrooms to enable connections between learners and teachers (Reisz, 2020; Sicre, 2020; Neher, 2020). This was more easily achieved if courses were primarily ‘theory’ or ‘history’ based performing arts courses (Philip and Nicholls, 2007; Karakas et al, 2008) but it proved difficult to ensure the quality of ‘practical’ performance-based courses if adopting an entirely online context (Parrish, 2009; Weber et al, 2017; Whatley and Varney, 2009; deLahunta, 2002).

As this chapter points out, two British HE institutions, Rose Bruford College and the University of Surrey, delivered practical Dance, Drama and Performance BA degree programmes entirely through distance learning prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Their performance-based BA Theatre Honours degree courses adhered to the QAA’s Dance, Drama and Performance Benchmark Guidelines (QAA, 2019) and maintained the academic standards and quality required

by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (UKSCQA, 2018). The BA Theatre Honours graduates at these institutions demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a number of subject specific areas as well as showcasing skills; both in general and also specifically pertinent to their practical performance disciplines (UKSCQA, 2018). The QAA's Benchmark Guidelines for Dance, Drama and Performance (QAA, 2019) acknowledge that performing arts courses of study are "taught by a range of HE providers" and reflect "breadth and diversity" (QAA, 2019, 3)." As a result, it can be assumed that performing arts courses delivered entirely through DL have the potential to demonstrate the academic standards and quality required by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (UKSCQA, 2018) if they are well-designed and comprehensive.

It is worth noting, however, that although delivered entirely through online platforms, the Theatre Studies BA Honours degrees offered at the British HE institutions Rose Bruton College and the University of Surrey often enrol students who have already secured positions in Performing Arts industries. Both online degree programmes encourage practitioners who want to gain a degree whilst balancing their studies alongside their work and family commitments (RBC, 2020) In their web literature A.D., a theatre designer, states, "What I particularly valued was being able to apply my own knowledge and experience gained through my work as a theatre designer to the ideas, issues and assignments that arose throughout my degree (RBC, 2020, para 5)" insinuating that project work could be completed in a Performing Arts ensemble environment and then discussed in the online classroom. C Long also added, "I'm currently employed as part of the entertainment team on a cruise ship and therefore I get the practicality of performing from my employment and the theoretical aspect through my degree (RBC, 2020b, 15)."

Even though these BA Honours degree courses are being taught through DL, students are able to collaborate with others in their professional practice and then reflect on their shared experiences in their college assignments. Although not technically considered to be 'hybrid' options, in which courses combine computer-guided instruction with traditional face-to-face teaching (Bowen et al, 2013), the inclusion of practical components through placement or work experience enables learners to experiment and rehearse in a practical setting with other performing arts specialists.

The Autumn 2020 academic term marked a clear inflection point as British HE providers of undergraduate performing arts degree courses considered whether to continue their online or blended course provision beyond that of emergency education. Gallagher and Palmer (2020) believe that this moment will be remembered as a turning point between the “time before when analog on-campus degree-focused learning was the default (Gallagher and Palmer, 2020 para. 3)” to the “time after when digital, online, career focused learning became the fulcrum of competition between institutions (Gallagher and Palmer, 2020, para.3).” The Dance, Drama and Performance SBS (QAA, 2019) encourages “live and recorded” (QAA, 2019, 3) modes of performance and the study of

work which integrates a variety of modes of performance and creation... including other media, digital arts and new technologies, and interdisciplinary and intermedia performance... the boundaries of the performing arts dissolve as new practice and processes challenge existing conceptions (QAA, 2019, 4).

The QAA (2019) believe that “it is vital that any definition of the subject does not constrain future innovation (QAA, 4)” and so when considering the common features that should characterise practical B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance degree courses (See Figure 1) those taught by DL can still demonstrate ‘Acquisition of practice-based knowledge through physical engagement in technical exercises to develop skills in craft and technique’, ‘Practical, workshop-based learning’ and participation in ‘rehearsal/devising processes’, ‘craft skills/technique development’, ‘production’ and ‘performance’ (QAA, 2019, 5) albeit through the completion of recorded individual project work, collaborative online rehearsal meetings, and the assessment of pre-recorded or live video performances (RBC 2020a; Parrish 2009; Weber et al 2017; Sicre 2020).

Whilst many British practical B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance degree courses employed online technology to deliver creative and innovative lessons during the global pandemic, the fact remains that physical group work is an important component of the performing arts. Even though ensemble work can still be achieved by individuals working remotely through the use of technology, after pandemic restrictions have been lifted undergraduate course designers should consider whether they are disadvantaging learners if students are not required to physically interact with others. Weber et al (2017) believe that young dancers and artists have technology as a constant presence in their lives. They state that “students’ approaches to personal creative

philosophies will reflect this impact [and students will] utilise the technologies they have to inform their choreographic pursuits (Weber et al, 2017, 119-120).” However, using technology to *enhance* performance, differs from performing solely through the *use* of technology. Replacing traditional face-to-face collaboration would negatively impact both the performer and the audience.

Anderson and Risner (2008) believe that technology sparks creativity through opportunities for collaboration and this fuses technology with innovative approaches which ultimately creates a stronger performance (Anderson and Risner, 2008). Supporters of integrating technology in the learning and teaching of dance, Weber et al (2017), disagree with this, however. They recognise limitations if learning performing arts subjects entirely in an online context. Weber et al (2017) write of how technology can change dancers’ movements and sense of embodiment.

The art, process and effects of live performance are incredibly important in the current world of social media, digital technology and screens... being fully present with a group of tangible, living, breathing people is important to the art of acting and for the human spirit (ASC, 2020, para.1)”

Whilst it has been proven that practical performance-based British Dance, Drama and Performance undergraduate degree courses *can* be delivered solely through DL, (RBC, 2028; RBC, 2020, UoSurrey, 2020) the question remains whether they *should* be delivered in this context, beyond emergency education. “Nothing can replace sharing the same space, breathing the same air, with a group of performers (Neher, 2020, 292).” Rose Bruford College and the University of Surrey deliver successful practical Dance, Drama and Performance BA degree programmes entirely through distance learning, but undergraduates still have the opportunity to participate in face-to-face practical work placements to apply their skills. It is imperative that future online performing arts courses enable learners to gain practice-based knowledge, skills and understanding (QAA, 2019) through face-to-face ensemble experiences, which could then be reflected upon and discussed in the online classroom. “Theatre is a shared experience. Audience and performers agree to suspend their disbelief and journey somewhere together. It is a temporary kind of community (ASC, 2020, n.p).” The relationship between the performer and the audience cannot be underestimated in a live performance and it is one that is not fully realised in an online context. DL offers learners the opportunity to avail of flexible and affordable undergraduate education, but students of the performing arts need to “share spaces

and experiences with artists who are performing... and with fellow audience members (ASC 2020, para.2)” Only then can they appreciate the essential ‘atmosphere’ and ‘energy’ that is fostered through the interplay of students, teachers and other mentors within the learning space (Philip and Nicholls, 2007).

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## Figures

**Figure 1: Common features that should characterise B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance degree courses:**

- Knowledge and understanding of the ways in which performance originates, is constructed, circulated and received; this may include 'embodied knowledge' and 'practice research'
- Acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding through processes of research, action, reflection and evaluation of ethical practice and arts citizenship
- Acquisition of discipline-specific skills and techniques
- Acquisition of practice-based knowledge through physical engagement in technical exercises to develop skills in craft and technique
- Practical, workshop-based learning is normally a feature of all dance, drama and performance courses
- Practical learning can involve active participation in all, some or a combination of the following:
  - rehearsal/devising processes
  - craft skills/technique development
  - production
  - performance
  - digital media
  - production arts
- Reflecting the public and community nature of performance practice, particular emphasis may be placed on collaborative learning and heuristic principles, on 'learning through doing' in group contexts
- Study that may embrace analysis of theory and of performance texts, which may be written or notated. Equally, emphasis may be placed upon the study of the design and creation of performance as an event or process
- Research - practical and/or theoretical - is seen as a necessary requirement for engagement with all facets of performance and production practice and theory
- The location of practice within an appropriate framework of ideas, histories and skills

(QAA, 2019, 5)

**Figure 2: Knowledge, understanding and abilities that should be demonstrated by B.A. Dance, Drama or Performance graduates:**

- creative and intelligent engagement with forms, practices, techniques, traditions, histories and applications of performance
- creative and intelligent engagement with the key components of performance and the processes by which it is created, realised, managed, distributed and documented
- intelligent engagement with critical and theoretical perspectives appropriate to the study of performance
- intelligent engagement with key practitioners and practices and/or theorists and their cultural and/or historical contexts
- creative and intelligent engagement with the role and function of performance in social, educational, community and other participatory settings
- intelligent understanding of the interplay between critical and creative modes of enquiry within the field of study
- intelligent understanding of how to read and interpret texts, media, dance notations and/or scores to create performance
- creative and intelligent understanding of group and collective processes
- creative and intelligent understanding of key components of performance within the disciplines such as the role and function of ideational sources, performers, body, space, sound, text, movement and environment
- creative and intelligent understanding of appropriate interdisciplinary elements of dance, drama and performance and how to apply knowledge, practices, concepts and skills from other disciplines
- intelligent understanding of the responsibilities of performance practitioners to facilitate safe, environmentally sensitive, sustainable and ethical working practices

(QAA, 2019, 16)

**Figure 3: Subject- specific and generic skills that should be demonstrated by BA Dance, Drama and Performance graduates:**

- engage creatively and critically with the skills and processes of performance and production, and have an ability to select, refine and present these in performance
- engage creatively and critically with the possibilities for performance implied by a text, dance notation or score and, as appropriate, to realise these sources sensitively through design and performance
- engage creatively and critically with the creation and/or production of performance through a developed and sensitive understanding of appropriate performance vocabularies, techniques, crafts, structures and working methods
- engage creatively and critically in appropriate independent research, whether investigating past or present performances or as part of the process of creating new performance
- identify and interpret critically the cultural frameworks that surround performance events and on which these events impinge.
- have critical and analytical skills in developing ideas and constructing arguments and the capacity to evaluate and present them in a range of ways
- have a developed capacity to analyse and critically examine and evaluate forms of discourse and their effects on representation in the arts, media and public life
- be able to work creatively and imaginatively in a group and have the developed creative skills needed for the realisation of practice-based work
- be able to manage personal workloads efficiently and effectively, meet deadlines, and negotiate and pursue goals with others
- have developed the ability to constructively and effectively manage creative, personal and interpersonal issues
- have acquired information retrieval skills needed to gather, sift, synthesise and organise material independently and to critically evaluate its significance
- have acquired and developed appropriate information technology skills, and have developed considerable awareness of their application and potential within the field of study

(QAA, 2019, 16-17)