

TELE-CITY - TELEMATICS AND PEDAGOGY⁹²

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Abstract

“Tele-City” was an interdisciplinary project which aimed to explore the educational potential of telematic performance and the specificity of audience participation in the live event. This paper will analyse the process of creation and presentation of the 40 ensuing performances, as well as the impact of the project on the high school students who participated as both performers and audience. The results are drawn from 241 questionnaires the students completed and from my own observations as project coordinator, filtered through the lens of educational performance practices and audience participation theory. Could “Tele-City” inspire alternative and interdisciplinary teaching methods that integrate technology in a meaningful way?

Keywords: *telematic, participation, site-specific, devising, interdisciplinarity*

Introduction

Technology is often blamed for our apparent loss of connection with the physical world and with each other. This is even more relevant in the case of young people, who are notoriously and perhaps wrongly assumed to be smitten by

⁹² This article draws on a previously published essay: Marina Hanganu, “Telematică și Pedagogie”, in Marina Hanganu, Paula Mihai, Ion Mircioagă (eds.), *Tele-City - Telematica și Pedagogia*, Editura Alpha, Buzău, 2016, pp. 10-29.

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technology. If so, could digital performance in an educational context help reverse its potential downsides? In what way could telematic performance, combined with audience participation, facilitate the process of *learning*, understood as “an individual’s acquisition of new skills, or else new forms of knowledge and understanding”⁹⁴?

“Tele-City”⁹⁵ was a cultural project which aimed to stimulate the creative use of smartphones and the Internet by high school students aged 15-18. At the same time, it acknowledged that teenagers are already inclined to use digital media creatively, perhaps even more so than older generations.

As initiator and coordinator of “Tele-City”, I will further present the stages of the project and analyse its impact on the students who participated as both performers and audience.

What is Tele-City?

“Tele-City” took place between September and November 2016 in four prestigious high schools in Buzău, Iași, Brașov and Brăila, which were paired during the project. For a start, I selected five professional artists⁹⁶ and identified the coordinating teachers in each school. In total, 110 students participated as performers. They were split into teams of twos, threes or fours. Each team created a 15-30-minute *telematic participatory performance* starting from public spaces in their city, which they presented in real time via video-conferencing to students from a different city. Simultaneously, the performances were live-streamed on YouTube. One week was devoted to devising the performances

⁹⁴ Neil Selwyn, *Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates*, Continuum, London and New York, 2011, p. 3.

⁹⁵ “Tele-City” was organized by Teatrul Dramatic “George Ciprian” Buzău and co-funded by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund.

⁹⁶ Prof. PhD Ion Mircioagă, Armine Vosganian, Andreea Darie, Bianca Trifan and Daniel Onoae.

with the students in each pair of cities and one week to the reciprocal presentation via the Internet. The project ended with the publication of a book containing essays and data analysis, but also informal accounts from the coordinating artists, teachers and some of the students.

Definitions

What is *telematic participatory performance*?

Closely related to theatre practice in its way of framing human actions in space and time, *performance art* is a borderline, interdisciplinary form⁹⁷. “Tele-City” belongs to performance art, since it involved artistic actions that were not contained by a fictional matrix. The performative situation was real: the students’ *actual journey* through the urban space (not *represented* on a stage), while interacting as *themselves* with another group of students who were also behaving as *themselves*.⁹⁸ So, the students were **not** playing characters.

In short, **telematics** is the field of technologically mediated interactions via devices such as phones, computers and other data-processing systems⁹⁹. Telematic art brings together performances happening simultaneously in different spaces, usually connected via video-conferencing. In “Tele-City”, the performances connected student-performers on the field and student-audiences in classrooms.

⁹⁷ “The term *performance art* was coined in the 1970s as an umbrella for works that otherwise resisted categorization.” – Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory (revised and expanded edition)*, Routledge, London and New York, 2013, p. 39.

⁹⁸ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (trans. Christine Shantz), University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 1998, pp. 261-262.

⁹⁹ Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Telematic” in Sarah Bay-Cheng, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender, Robin Nelson (coord.), *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 99.

Audience participation is defined by Gareth White as the direct involvement of the audience in the artistic action, inasmuch as this belongs to the performance's very structure. Participation in this sense differs from pure audience *reactions*, such as laughing, crying, heckling etc.¹⁰⁰ The "Tele-City" performances were open to the audience's direct intervention, since the performers and the audience asked each other questions about their cities and exchanged information in real time, which ranged from the formal to the personal.

Context

To my knowledge, telematic participatory performance has never been used in an educational setting before, at least not in this form. However, "Tele-City" can be situated within the broader context of telematic performance practices, and I can mention the work of Dries Verhoeven, Yassine Khaled or Paul Sermon as falling into this category. With respect to the educational aims, the type of performance proposed in "Tele-City" shares elements with applied theatre and digital storytelling. In short, "Tele-City" uses devising to create live and embodied performances with an educational aim, working with non-professional performers based on their personal experiences, like in applied theatre. At the same time, these embodied events are also mediated by technology, like in digital storytelling¹⁰¹.

Devising

Devising is the practice by which performances are generated starting from source materials, as opposed to staging a

¹⁰⁰ Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Megan Alrutz, *Digital Storytelling, Applied Theatre, & Youth: Performing Possibility*, Routledge, London and New York, 2015, pp. 8-11.

pre-existent play. It is often, but not always, a collaborative and non-hierarchical process.¹⁰² We used devising techniques inspired by site-specific performance to help the students generate material. I and the other artists settled on a script structure which the students used as a set of guidelines, without being obligated to follow it closely. They also received a list of tasks to solve during our class workshops and directly on the field.

Firstly, the students chose their own objectives, which included city squares, theatres, museums, paintings, statues, parks, historical buildings (or simply buildings they liked), streets, places within their own high school, churches and even cemeteries. We advised them to include in their scripts a mixture of facts (historical, geographical, social, architectural) and personal information. The devising methods were:

- factual research (books, Internet)
- anecdotes
- visual analysis – we had a session on how to “read” images (a building, a statue, a painting) following the method proposed by Prof. PhD Adina Nanu¹⁰³
- film “storyboard”: framing images, camera angles and camera movements (explained by Armine Vosganian – film director)
- automatic writing in the space – immediate physical sensations, memories and thought associations
- finding “traces”, shapes and interesting details that could be filmed
- documenting the space in photos and audio recordings

¹⁰² Emma Govan, Hellen Nicholson, Katie Normington, *Making a performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Routledge, London and New York, 2007, pp. 4-7.

¹⁰³ Adina Nanu, *Vezi? Comunicarea prin imagini*, „Levintza” Modexim SRL, București, 2002.

- devising physical actions or games in the space (such as playing a piano in a quirky café in Braşov)
- imagining stories about the space

In order to prepare their film “storyboard” and get inspiration for writing their scripts, the students created audio-visual documentation of the spaces with their smartphones and uploaded all material (including the later scripts) on a common Google Drive that we, the coordinators, checked daily. We also created Facebook groups in every city and Messenger conversations with each team (to give them private feedback).

In terms of script structure, we recommended creating a catchy introduction, after which they could proceed to presenting their chosen sites. The student-performers were also encouraged to converse with the student-audience who watched them from the other city, as they could hear and see each other via the Hangouts app. The audience were also participating by asking questions and making comments about what they saw. In the transitions from one space to the next, the students usually compared their experience of living in the two cities. They trained their ability to guide the audience in test performances, while interacting with us, the coordinating artists.

Methodology

This was a **practice as research** exploration of telematic performance and audience participation in an educational context. According to Professor Robin Nelson, practice as research involves a triple process: know how (practical knowledge of your field), know that (contextualising your practice) and know what (reflecting on your process to see what worked and what did not).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Robin Nelson (ed.), *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013, pp. 32-33.

Research Methods

We created an online questionnaire that both the performers and the audience completed. It contained both qualitative and quantitative questions. There were 241 answers registered in total, 102 belonging to the performers and 139 belonging to the audience. Overall, the results prove Helen Nicholson's observation that: "Theatre education always involves a negotiation of different organizational structures, cultural practices and interpersonal relationships, and place and space have become increasingly important concepts through which to interrogate theatre and performance practices."¹⁰⁵

The context of "Tele-City" was that of a cultural project organized in four of the most prestigious high schools in Romania (top ten), all of them with high selection criteria and rigorous internal standards for learning achievements and student conduct. The students were considered some of the best in Romania and were somewhat expected to prove it, at least by their teachers. The specific context – which was educational – also imposed certain limitations on what could be said and shown by the students. Moreover, I dare say the school context made some of them rather tense and formal and more likely to include objective information than personal stories and observations.

Our research parameters were correlated to the educational aims of the project, as can be seen in *table 1*.

I will further analyse the findings of the project.

Table 1 Educational Aims	Research Parameters
Awareness of the cultural and personal value of urban spaces;	Human relationships (quantitative questions);

¹⁰⁵ Helen Nicholson, *Theatre, Education and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011, p. 11.

<p>Training aesthetic perception; Public speaking; Self-awareness in the moment; Research skills; Collaboration and communication skills; Creative use of technology as a means of delving into reality and of creating human bonds; Sparking interest in innovative art.</p>	<p>Experience of the city (quantitative and qualitative questions); Skills developed/ trained (quantitative and qualitative questions); Degree of audience participation (quantitative and qualitative questions); View on technology (qualitative question); Applicability of telematic performance (qualitative question).</p>
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Relationships¹⁰⁶

The students had to negotiate a complex set of relationships: with the other students (physically and telematically), with teachers and with the artists. All relationships were generally perceived as warm, friendly and inspirational. With respect to their teachers, most students felt the relationship was “warmer and more relaxed”, or as warm and relaxed as always. However, a small percentage experienced formality and rigidity in their relationship with their teacher, and the accounts of some of the artists prove this was the case in one city. In fact, a feeling of competition arose between students in the first two cities and I think this was because of the teachers’ attitude. In fact, “Tele-City” was, on occasion, at risk of being transformed into a general knowledge showcase or test, as one of the artists, Bianca Trifan, remarked.

However, considering the friendliness of the new relationships formed within “Tele-City”, we could deduce that the project opened a relational space that was both physical and

¹⁰⁶ See Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig 3, Fig 4, Fig. 5 in Appendix.

virtual, which goes contrary to the well-known caveat that technology is alienating.

Experience of the city¹⁰⁷

In relation to the city they got to know telematically, the students' response was broadly positive. Results show that almost half of them were left curious to find out more, 38.6% discovered new things about the city, although they had visited it before, and 22.8% experienced a sense of "being there". Only 8.7% said they did not discover anything new or that they did not care about the other city.

Responding to an open-ended question about whether and how their perspective upon *their own city* had changed, most students said that yes, it had: they realised they were not paying enough attention to places of cultural importance, they gained new knowledge about their city and started to see its beauty, sometimes by comparison with the other cities, noting that theirs was more beautiful! However, about a quarter of the students mentioned that nothing had changed in the way they saw their own city.

Here I will go back to Helen Nicholson's observation about the socially-constructed nature of space and place and their subsequent importance in educational performance. The pre-existent charge of the space influenced the performances in "Tele-City". For example, one student from Brăila said humorously during her presentation: "Usually, when I enter this place [school amphitheatre], I go through several states, the most common one being fear, because this is where we hold the majority of tests and exams."¹⁰⁸ Similarly, certain public spaces imposed a predefined type of behaviour on the teenagers – such as the city library, where

¹⁰⁷ See Fig. 6 in Appendix.

¹⁰⁸ Mihaela Neațu, "Amfiteatrul", <http://www.teatrulgeorgeciprian.ro/colegiul-national-nicolae-balcescu/>, accessed 12.11.2018.

they had to whisper and walk carefully. Nonetheless, the project allowed the students to *reshape* and *rewrite* their relationship with the spaces within certain limits by going against their normal behaviour within them. The girl from Brăila treated the amphitheatre with humour, so her relationship to it was modified by the “Tele-City” experience.

Skills developed/trained¹⁰⁹

Over half of the students chose the sense of observation as the primary skill trained by the project, followed closely by interpersonal communication and teamwork abilities. Other popular options were the interest in the urban space, critical thinking, public speaking/presentation and the aesthetic sense. Less prominent were general knowledge of art, interest in contemporary art and filming skills. The least developed seem to have been the ability to work with technology (perhaps since they already knew how to use it) and creative writing. The fact that we had one single questionnaire completed by both performers and audience might have contributed to the prevalence of the relational aspects in the written feedback. Looking back, it would have been better to separate the answers received from the performers and the audience, since their experiences within the project were different.

In their open responses, when asked if they discovered anything new about themselves, many students mentioned they have become more curious and more attentive to their surroundings. They also said that they discovered hidden abilities, such as leadership skills or artistic inclinations, as well as their pleasure of being in front of the camera. A small number of them also referred to the possibility of embracing an artistic career and of conducting similar projects in the future.

¹⁰⁹ See Fig. 7 in Appendix.

Degree of audience participation¹¹⁰

Only 19 out of 102 student-performers who completed the questionnaire chose to follow the other's performances only on YouTube. The physically present audience were free to choose their degree of participation. More than half of the students intervened in the performance and motivated their option by "I felt relaxed, free and among friends". Non-intervention or little intervention were prompted by shyness or unspecified reasons.

My personal observations show that the most active audience in each city was formed by the other student performers. Perhaps it was the result of them already knowing the rules of the game, or simply of their empathy towards their peers.

View on technology

Opinions were divided on this point. In open ended responses, around half of the students claimed that their view on technology did not change as a result of the project, mostly because they already knew how important and useful it can be, while the other half mentioned that technology appeared to them in a new light. They said they started using functions they didn't use before, such as Google Hangouts, or were simply fascinated by its potential to connect people and places in a performative manner. Some even referred to their previously negative feelings about technology, which had changed in this context. These mixed results show that we might too readily presuppose that teenagers view technology uncritically.

Applicability of telematic performance

Asked whether they think telematic participatory performance could be used as a teaching tool for geography, history, foreign languages, biology and not only, an

¹¹⁰ See Fig. 8 and Fig. 9 in Appendix.

overwhelmingly large number of students replied that yes, it would be “brilliant”, “amazing”, “it would make lessons more attractive and interactive”. Only a few students were sceptical about the extended applicability of this type of performance. Some of the enthusiasts, however, were sceptical about the possibility of implementing such teaching methods in schools. They pointed out that this would require a major reform of the education system and a change in teachers’ mentality, combined with an improvement of the teachers’ ability to use technology. I think they are right.

The “ignorant pedagogue”

In conclusion, I will turn to Jacques Rancière’s “ignorant pedagogue”, who orchestrates an experience of discovery for his student while relinquishing the premise of superiority. The ignorant pedagogue “does not teach his pupils his knowledge, but orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified”.¹¹¹ While it is true that Rancière seems rather sceptical about the benefits of participatory performance and his emancipation of audiences and students appears to be rather intellectual than embodied, his metaphor of the “forest of things and signs” actually evokes an embodied and sensorial journey.

These being said, we have sent the students into the forest of things, signs and stories of the city, armed with a smartphone with mobile data, a pair of headphones and a sense of play and adventure. Nevertheless, because of the short span of the project, the long-term benefits of “Tele-City” are hard to quantify.

¹¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (trans. G. Elliott), Verso Publishing, London and New York, 2009.

APPENDIX

How would you describe your relationship with your teacher in this project compared to other school/ extra-school activities?

241 responses

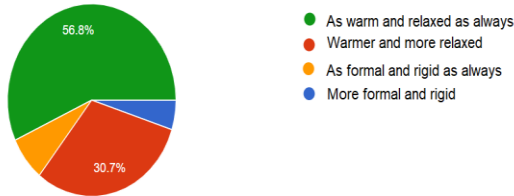


Figure 1

Relationship with the coordinating artists (multiple answer)

235 responses

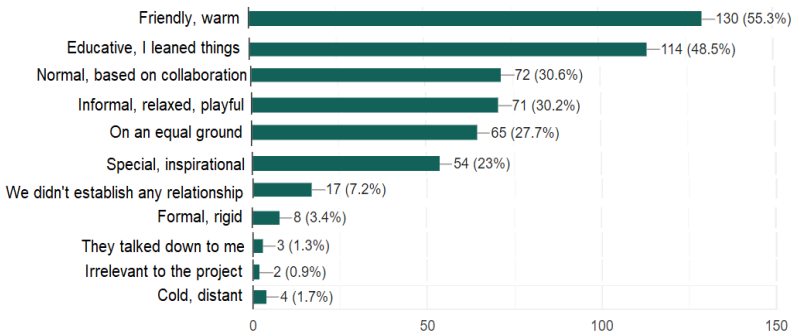


Figure 2

Relationship with the students participating in your own city

241 responses

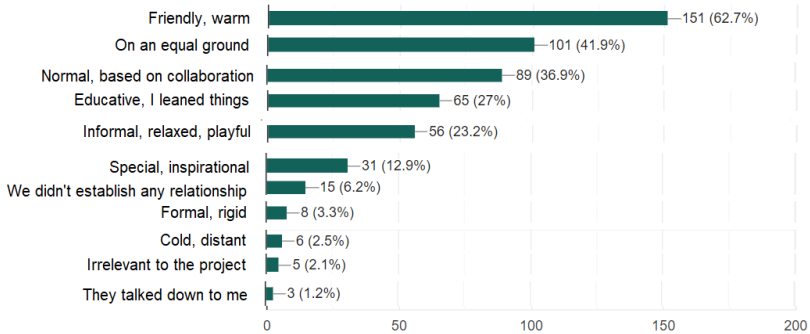


Figure 3

Relationship with the performers in the other city

241 responses

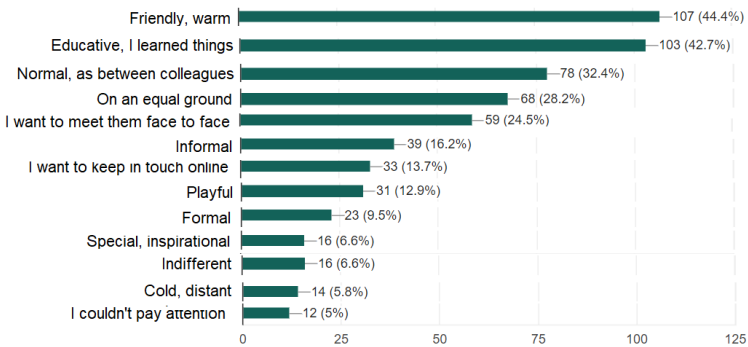


Figure 4

Relationship with your team

241 responses

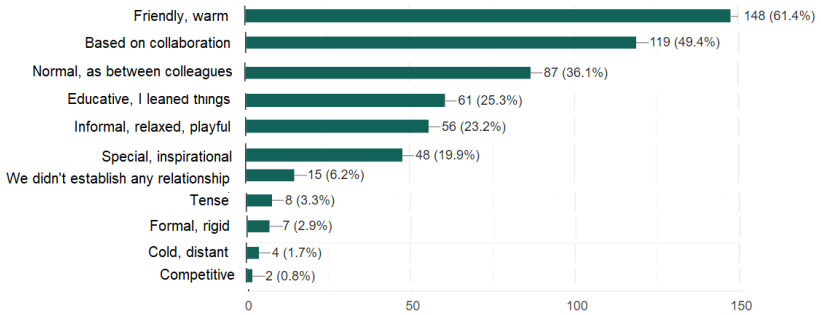


Figure 4

How would you describe your relationship to the city you saw on the Internet?

241 responses

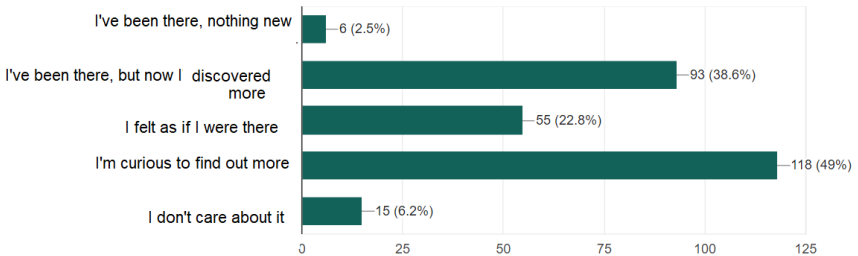


Figure 5

241 responses

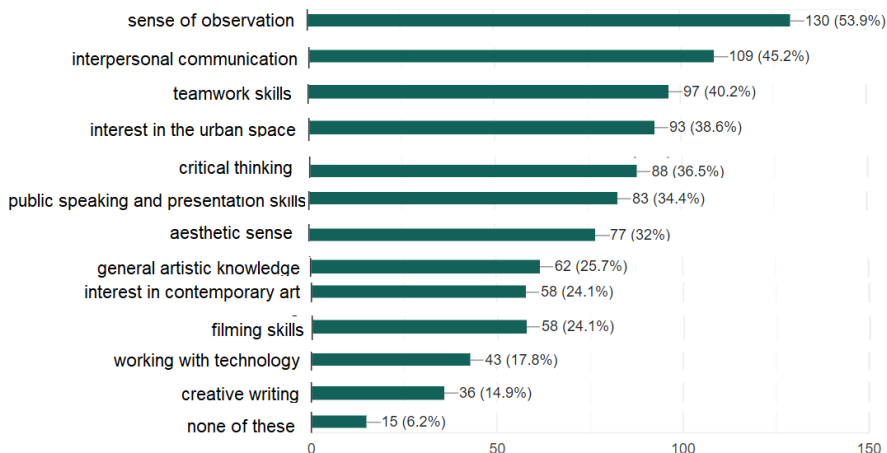


Figure 6

As an audience member, how did you choose to participate in the performance?

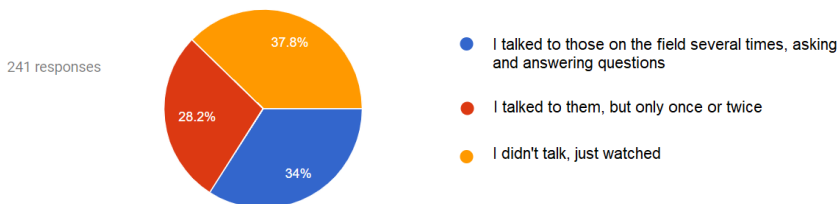
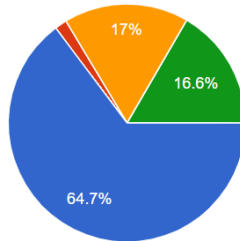


Figure 7

Why did you choose to participate like this?

241 responses



- I felt relaxed, free, amongst friends, so I entered the conversation
- I'm shy and I felt intimidated, so I didn't enter the conversation
- I didn't enter the conversation for other reasons
- I felt obligated to enter the conversation

Figure 8

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