

Teaching Performance in the Digital Age: Computerized Technologies, Improvisational Play Techniques and Interactive Learning Processes

By Kathryn Farley



Figure 1: *The Dusable Project* (a case study in my dissertation).

(Photo courtesy of Kathryn Farley)

1. Introduction

This paper provides an abstract of my dissertation research project that examines the use of various digital tools and techniques as instructional tools. The research is based, in part, on my own teaching experiences and production activities over the past five years. In compiling and analyzing the data for the project, I have been guided by my department's sustained support for discovering new ways to theorize contemporary performance practices. This singular focus on practice as a mode of inquiry distinguishes Northwestern University's Department of Performance Studies from other programs and areas of study worldwide.

2. Parameters of Study

My study examines four interactive learning environments in which computer-based tools and improvisational techniques comprise innovative approaches to teaching that seek to connect with and expand upon a young person's everyday treatment of media. Issues relating to portability, adaptability, accessibility and participation are explored in each educational setting, as the building blocks of instructional strategies specifically designed to engage undergraduates in the study of contemporary performance. Such strategies aim to bridge the gap between academic knowledge and lived experience.

For my analysis, I have selected a traditional classroom, a production environment, an on-line performance course and a computer-simulated theatre event, involving animated actors and digitally-rendered scenery, sound and light. I contend that performance, an interdisciplinary and collaborative art form, is best taught by using a variety of media apparatuses, and that hands-on experimentation with these technologies allows students to embody multiple points of view, discover alternative approaches to character development and text analysis, as well as experience heightened levels of immersion, agency and imagination. By arguing that technological tools stimulate intellectual and creative growth and foster positive group relations, the work challenges "effects" paradigm modes of inquiry that tend to characterize media usage as a passive, harmful and solitary pursuit.



**Figure 2: *Multimedia Improv Class* (another dissertation case study).
(Photo courtesy of Kathryn Farley)**

3. Methods of Study

My methodology includes archival research, personal interviews, textual readings and participant observation. In each interactive learning environment, I examine the digital tools and techniques employed by the instructor, determine how students “played” with the instruments, assess the effectiveness of such play in honing specific performance skills and trace the connection between the teaching methods under investigation and everyday media consumption practices.

4. Potential Usefulness of Research

Fundamentally, the dissertation is meant to give its readers new perspectives when considering the intersection between computers and the performing arts. Because the work presents case study analyses of the functional application of technology, it will hopefully lead to scholarship about contemporary performance instruction that is more comprehensible, useful and engaging. Ultimately, the tools, techniques and methods evaluated in this work may help to create a new vision of what educators can accomplish

with digital technologies in a variety of academic settings, as well as provide new options for developing multidisciplinary teaching pedagogies, generating cross-school art making opportunities and initiating curriculum reform.

About the Author



Figure 3: Kathryn presenting her dissertation research at a forum funded by the Andrew Mellon Foundation and hosted by Northwestern University's Humanities Center. (Image courtesy of Kathryn Farley)

Kathryn Farley is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at Northwestern University where she has taught undergraduate courses that explored the performance of contemporary drama, the adaptation of fiction and the integration of technology into live theatre practices. Kathryn is the 2004-2005 recipient of the *Northwestern Alumnae Association Dissertation Recognition Award*. Her work has been published in such interdisciplinary periodicals as *Body, Space and Technology* and *Crossings: Electronic Journal of Art and Technology*. A digital portfolio of Kathryn's artistic and academic work can be found at <http://www.kathrynfarley.org>.