

Performance Studies and inter-disciplinary research

Thank you very much for the Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo for inviting me for this great panel. These are questions that we have been struggling with as researchers in fine arts, performance studies and performing arts studies. So, the research and the justification for research has been always a question in our fields. So here I am going to address three questions. The first is ‘what are the acceptable typical methodologies in your discipline?’ and second, ‘what are accepted research outputs in your field?’ and last, ‘do you see any threats to research in your discipline?’ I am trying to address these three in a very non-coherent way. When I talk about performance, since my orientation is to dance, I will focus more on dance. That is my approach but I will also briefly discuss about performance in general. First of all I want all the audience to engage with me in an activity. I will do a certain kind of performance, so when you see me, I want you to interpret and if you feel like you got the idea of what I’m doing I invite you to put that in the [Zoom] chat box, so you can express yourself at any point. Okay I’m going to begin.

[Dr. Mantillake does a series of movements here: turning his face to the right, bringing his hand to his face, covering his mouth, wrenching his face to the left, then facing the front and bringing his hands palm to palm, raising his right hand and turning his left hand both to the left, then closing his hands into fists and crossing his arms across his chest while bowing his head; releasing his fists while raising his head with a smile and then looking at the camera. A few members in the audience put their interpretations to the zoom chat].



Figure 1

Okay, And now I'm going to do something different, but this time also, you can observe me and if you want you can add to the [Zoom] chat box, or you can just observe.

[Dr. Mantillake lifts his left arm up and while holding his arm up, writes on his arm with a pen, varying the pace and movements. He continues this for about half a minute and then slowly leaves the pen on a nearby surface.]



Figure 2

I hope you got two different experiences, two different expressions, doing this. What I want to briefly mention is that historically, we had a different way of understanding performance. For example, from anthropology and theater studies, traditionally we look at performance as something to observe, to objectify. You look at a performance and interpret it. That's what you did in the first activity. And then with the development of performance studies, especially after the 1970s, we see a different approach to study performance. Instead of studying performance as an object of study, the performance studies proposed to approach performance as a mode or method of inquiry. This is what I tried to demonstrate in a way ironically in the second activity. Because the second activity for me is an experience, when the pen moved on my hand, it's an experience for me. You can maybe interpret that but it's an experience for me.

So as researchers, we can see at least two different approaches here. One is that you are looking at something and trying to interpret it. And the second is, as a researcher I am experiencing this. So how can I express that experience and

how can I take that experience as a mode of inquiry in my research in performance research or in dance research? That is a major methodological input that I want to place in front of this audience. And the development of performance studies in a way democratized performance research. It came from influences of the civil right movements, social justice, critique of colonialism, post-colonial theories, critiques of Eurocentrism and decolonial methodology. For example, the American anthropologist Joann Kealiinohomoku in 1969/70 wrote a very famous article, “An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance”. There, she was critiquing the ethnocentrism of the discipline of performance and dance. She’s critiquing the eurocentrism that comes with the discipline. And so performance studies research started to question the hierarchies and authorities in research; as well as dominance of quantitative research over qualitative research. They were interested in finding ways to express the experience of a performer. Therefore artists took this approach, especially performance artists, dancers, theater artists, activists who felt like they had to acknowledge the experience and find a way to express that experience. So therefore, there are various fields that developed such as “performance as research”. Instead of looking at a performance as something to interpret, it became how to do performance as research and practice as research and practice-led research.

In terms of research output, in our field there is an increase of performance-based scholars rather than text-based scholars. So therefore, there is a kind of pushback on the textual base of research, to try to analyze things as text. This is logocentrism and to challenge that, performance-based scholarly research was also promoted in the field. For example, a scholar like Dwight Conquergood used performance as a mode of radical research. Based on Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogue” where the text mutually informs each other, Conquergood developed a model called dialogic performance, where body is considered a site of meaning, giving legitimacy to the body and embodiment. Rather than the researcher placing himself or herself or themselves in a hierarchically higher position and looking at research or describing the research or the subject matter, he proposes a kind of dialogic model. It’s not hierarchical. What the performance allows us is to have a dialogue with the community, with people. Rather than this dichotomy – the informant vs the researcher, which creates a hierarchy – the dialogic model allows a democratic space for researchers.

So, in terms of output I want to share this example. Two days ago, I received a mail from the Dance Studies Association, which I am a part of, about their 2022 call for proposals on the “Conversations across the field of dance studies”. And I caught this paragraph: “Issues may feature a combination of text, photo and video materials, and include think pieces, scholarly dialogues, practitioner critical reflections, photo or video essays, poetic reveries, reports from the field...”. You can see here the kinds

of output the field accepts. It is not just literary text, but other modes of expression as well.

In terms of threats, I want to mark this. There is this urge to quantify things, instead of accepting qualitative research. It has been there for a long time. Even within humanities there is logocentrism and, as Dwight Conquergood calls it, 'domination of scriptocentrism', which is the urge to textualize ideas – converting to papers - rather than performance. I am not denying the importance of text but I want to argue that there are also other modes of expression as well. Another threat is also the subjugation of bodily knowledge: as dancers, our knowledge is in our bodies. Bodily knowledge has been subjugated and I feel like this is also a threat. Embodied knowledge also needs to be acknowledged.

And also, finally I want to mention emotion and affect. In the field of humanities and cultural studies and performance, as Professor Neloufer de Mel mentioned, it is becoming more interdisciplinary. Affect and emotion have become foci of performance research. So how can we express affects and emotions? In order to do that we have to find new methodologies, new ways of expression. If we are threatened by logocentrism and the traditional ways of expressing, that is limiting ourselves as performance researchers. So that is what I want to say here. Thank you!

Sudesh Mantillake, PhD

Senior Lecturer, Department of Fine Arts, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Reference

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