

The Performance Lab Conversations with Participants

About This Document

The following is a summary of thoughts and opinions voiced about The Performance Lab at interviews conducted by evaluator Sharon Varosh from August to October, 2002. She interviewed 19 students, teacher/coaches, technicians, administrative staff, board members and founders. Names were suggested to her by Rick Hauser, Co-Founder, and Dannell Dever, Administrative Assistant. She has chosen to pass on comments that were voiced by several people or confirmed by her own experience. She has maintained the anonymity of her respondents to promote the most honest feedback. This compilation is meant to encourage discussion at TPL leading to better outcomes for its programs. Wherever there is a set of closed quotation marks, they enclose exact words said by respondents. The quotes are unattributed to maintain anonymity.

Due to the evaluator's short connection to the project, there may be inaccurate information in this report. Sharon would appreciate your input. But she asks you to differentiate between wrong facts and inaccurate perceptions in the minds of respondents. Because those perceptions arise partly from how TPL does its business, knowing their substance is of immense value to the organization.

Access

Increased access to arts learning excited most respondents more than any other potential benefit of interactive technology. They lauded many different kinds of access:

- ◆ a nationally recognized teacher of the Limón dance technique is able to set a performance piece on a college dance ensemble, return to New York, and through interactive technology, revisit the students immediately before the performance to clean the choreography, answer questions and build students' self confidence;
- ◆ a group of disabled elementary students from greater Minnesota partners with a Twin Cities disabled class to learn their mutual potential for movement. Several students have never seen their own bodies full length before, and none of them has before interacted creatively with other kids like themselves. Even their relationships with their caregivers change as they become dance partners rather than caretaker and patient;
- ◆ a group of disadvantaged inner city high school kids pairs with a college group from Ohio to develop and teach each other original choreography. The high schoolers discover that their barre and warm-up are not a devilish plot by their teacher to torture them, but part of a respected tradition that links them to the history and practice of dance. They gain perspective about their place in the world, and confidence from knowing they have something they can teach to college kids
- ◆ A dance teacher who is skeptical about technology's appropriateness to the arts is drawn in by the possibilities of teaching space concepts interactively in a way that sheds a different light from what he could do in a regular classroom.

“People in the furthest reaches of the state could be connected and have access to the experience of being with artists.” “It’s a way to extend resources in an art-rich area like the Twin Cities to areas that don’t have it.” Interactive technology has the potential to equalize resources, to break down barriers between city and countryside, between different art disciplines, among different ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Teachers gain access to each other’s teaching in a non-threatening environment, sharing teaching methods and our country’s cultural legacy.

Interactive technology can solve some of the cost and time barriers that prevent arts access. In many cases, the cost of bringing a master teacher to a school, the fee, airfare, room and board and incidentals, is far greater than the cost of an interactive session. And a famous teacher may not have time to put her life on hold to teach one workshop in Minnesota. But with interactive technology, that class is accessed minutes from her home at time mutually convenient to both parties and she can still be home for dinner.

That said, the costs of interactive technology are also an issue. Many respondents, even as they professed a desire to take part in more sessions, were concerned that the cost would be greater than the learning return could justify. As one teacher put it, if she compared TPL’s cost to other programs she could offer her kids, she worried that there “are not enough good outcomes to justify the dollars involved.”

And what are the dollars involved? TPL has been unclear. Some respondents were so excited about their experience that they wanted to be advocates for TPL in the education community. But they were not able to pin TPL down about costs and so felt they were unable to advocate effectively for the program among their peers.

Attitudes

People came to TPL with many different attitudes, from curious to excited to skeptical. One of the biggest attitude barriers was the notion that the aims of the arts and technology are so opposed to each other that they can never coexist. Many felt that certain creative, techno-savvy people will gravitate toward TPL, but for it to receive general use, “the technology has to be seamless.” In spite of this, every single person could see potential for interactive technology once they had been through a session, and many were wildly enthusiastic.

Some wondered whether “TPL is creating larger expectations than it can deliver. After 3 sessions, you will just begin to see the possibilities.”

Technical Concerns

The physical requirements and limitations of space and equipment are of ongoing concern to the project. TPL has been experimenting with improvements at its own Twin Cities space. Studio 5B has been retrofitted for ongoing use as an interactive site, and gradual improvements to that space include: using more and better quality monitors and audio equipment; experimenting with different monitor locations and the use of a free-moving camera; using curtains and window coverings to lower visual ‘noise’; and implementing space markers to orient participants toward front.

The far site situation is more problematic. Spaces are almost always too small, and often have unacceptable physical limitations, from carpeted floors to immovable desks. However, the media equipment can often be better than what is available in the Twin Cities. “Transmission speed of the lowest end limits the success of the total technology; right now many places TPL connects to are capable of higher speed transmission than we are.”

Two participants cited the need for TPL-like entities in other parts of the country as the only way to achieve quality control at both ends of the exchange.

Physical problems arising from the nature of interactive exchanges include **the often-mentioned lag time between what happens on one end and what happens at the other, the difficulties of orienting bodies to front, and right/left confusion, particularly for movements with complex spatial relationships or turning; teacher focus, the skills required to speak to two different groups of people and make them both feel part of the class.** Individual teachers felt they had solved elements of each of these issues, but there is no systematic way to communicate their discoveries. **Teachers must often rediscover solutions for themselves,** or are given admonitions during a session when it is difficult to absorb directions given amid the other things going on. A better solution may be to compile a handbook of problem-solving techniques that teachers can rely on before a session to build realistic expectations for what they will face. They can then choose from a panoply of tools and skills those most effective for what they are teaching and most compatible with their own teaching style.

The most insurmountable problem seemed to be the quality and lag time of the audio. "Technology difficulties can change the flow of a class and make it different from a live class – less arc, more stutter;" This applied not only to music exchanges, but to dance as well. Even when teachers and students coped with the problem of lag time, poor sound quality kept the experience from being transformational. Comments included: "the sound would break up; it was never more than synthetic;" "the poor quality of the music meant we couldn't deal with musicality at all."

Students said that **this created a class that was more basic, delved less into subtlety than an analog class would have.** When music itself was the subject, as in a voice-coaching session, problems became even more acute. The timbre of voices was not accurately transmitted, so coaches had a difficult time even judging the quality of the student's singing. "Sound for the vocal coaching was problematic – it was a whole other expertise area - TPL just didn't have the knowledge."

Logistics

The most often cited problems with logistics have to do with the lead time between the first contacts with TPL and the actual accomplishment of an interactive session. Several respondents said they were initially very excited but, after many false starts and schedule changes, by the time of the session they had given up trying to prepare their class because they didn't expect it to happen. Even given those experiences, once these people got into a session they were truly excited by what transpired.

The lead time problem is due to the experimental nature of the project. TPL has to search out each participant, convince them of the value of the project and then invent their participation from the ground up. If TPL can develop a timeline from first contact to completion of a session, it will tell new participants what to expect and form a framework within which the staff can operate.

The number of sessions made a big difference to people. One or two sessions almost always seemed too few. People started to develop comfort levels at three sessions that could lead to real learning, but, in almost every case, more would have been better – at least nine or ten sessions. Responding to these concerns, TPL has been developing more in-depth blocks of sessions, most recently with the New Jersey site.

The timing of the sessions also makes a difference. Several people described an ideal process with several sessions planned over a two to three month period, with time in between to reflect on what was taught and prepare students for the next session. In fact, introducing time for reflection became a major theme in people's requests.

Most concurred that **having personal contact with the teacher before the interactive session made a big difference** in the amount of intimacy and effectiveness. Teachers felt this way as much as students and observers. This may relate to equipment quality; one teacher cited an example where the image on the video monitors was so fuzzy that he couldn't really see students' faces. He relied on his earlier memories of teaching the students at their site to 'fill in the blanks' about their personalities.

Having an active coach at the far site was extremely valuable, if not crucial. That person, familiar with their own students and their training, and in touch with the far space, acted as a translator, enforced discipline, became the coach's "hands," and brokered discussions and misunderstandings.

Pre/Post Session Concerns

Coaches often commented that they **didn't know enough about the participants at the other site**. One remembered the shock her disabled kids felt at being paired up with little ballet dancers, all girls, in pink skirts and pulled-back hair. "Teachers need to know as much as possible about the other group coming in, their skill levels and preparation," said one. "I didn't know who I was getting," one modern teacher remembered, finding herself unexpectedly on the other end of a group of ballet kids with no knowledge of basic modern dance technique.

One coach explained that **the interactive situation makes it more difficult to be respectful of the other teacher's priorities and coach in a way that will reinforce that teacher's goals**. When you are in physical residency, you get all kinds of environmental cues about what is going on in a classroom and what the teaching priorities are, from the way the classroom is set up to how the teacher interacts with students before and after class. It is much harder to understand that from long-distance unless time for communicating with the other teacher before the session is built into the process.

Several teachers wished TPL had spent more time at their particular school assessing their situation and artistic needs. They felt TPL was not always sensitive to the difficulties of getting off-site events through the school bureaucracy and wished TPL had someone more familiar with how schools operate on its staff. For instance, one session was set up at the last minute for after school hours. It required the teacher to transport the students to and from the Hennepin Center without school buses, already in use at that hour, feed them a meal (because the kids hadn't eaten since lunch), obtain permission slips from parents, and supervise students until they arrived safely home - difficult to pull together at short notice. During the school day, the cost and difficulty of getting substitutes was a big issue. TPL seemed to be impatient with these needs in some teachers' perceptions.

Again and again, **the importance of prior familiarity and training was stressed**, both for coaches and for their students. What is TPL and why is it conducting these sessions? Who is this teacher who is going to lead the class? What is the students' background? What to wear... What to expect... Teacher/coaches needed not only to be aware of the new techniques available to them, but needed time and practice to accustom themselves to using them so that they could concentrate on carrying out their session plan.

The Internet

TPL is very proud of its website's menu of internet options that supplement actual sessions. The response to these options varied from "didn't know they existed" to "found the internet extremely useful." Internet participation seemed to be most effective when teachers assigned it as part of a creative process preceding the session, or when students used it to get to know each other as two groups of disabled kids did when they were assigned a pre-session buddy at the other location. A chief obstacle is that many kids do not have ongoing internet access at their schools. They may be limited to once-a-week usage, or the session coach is not their regular classroom teacher and does not have regular contact with them.

Students often were not motivated to get into the internet on their own. Either they were too busy or it was too hard to access the site, often requiring teacher oversight and easily-forgotten passwords.

Many people thought that the internet could be a wonderful tool for teacher planning between the two sites, but that this potential had not been tapped. "We need a clear structure agreed upon prior to the session – the teacher at the far site needs briefing." Several teachers suggested that a storyboard approach, like that used in film and video, would clarify the sessions' structure, both for the far site coach and for the technology people.

The internet also has a mixed record as a tool for interesting people in TPL. **People with less than state-of-the-art computers find their systems frozen by the onerous memory requirements of the video clips.** The clips themselves are such brief snippets that they seem to reinforce people's perceptions that the work does not dig very deep.

But the internet also has its big successes. **One teacher with a skeptical principal referred him to the internet site.** The principal was able to see video clips of kids from his own school participating enthusiastically and learning with rigor. The internet turned the vaguely imagined into the concrete and he became an enthusiastic supporter. This teacher and others underlined the need for help in "selling" the program to administrators. While access to appropriate language to describe programs and internet support help, **all agreed that the most powerful advocate for TPL was inviting people to view actual sessions.**

Building Community

While a few participants were skeptical about whether sessions built community, most felt this was a very strong aspect of the sessions. Most people said you had to take part to really understand; the community didn't look as strong from the outside, but felt powerful to the participants, erasing the distance between them. One participant's statement, "It is amazing that in such a short period a bond is formed between two sites," was echoed by many others. Evidence of one community's strength was how devastated the kids in one teacher's special needs class were when she hurt her back. They really felt connected to her.

TPL's contribution to building a peer community of teacher/coaches having conversations across geographic boundaries was also cited by many as pivotal. Teachers are so often alone in the classroom, and the sense of being connected to another teacher by a common goal and experiences can be powerful.

Some speculated that **the size of the video screens had a marked impact on this sense of community.** With small screens, the people in the room with the coach appear so much larger than those at the far site that it is hard for anyone to relate to them as equals. Also, the more detail one can see in faces and expressions, the more real and personal people seem.

The Teacher/Student Interchange

Interactive technology demands different things from teachers than a regular classroom. Many felt comfortable with that – it was just another environment with its own rules and customs. Several teachers suggested that having a booklet with problem solving ideas was preferable to being coached at what to do while in the process of teaching. Learning a range of responses would allow each teacher to pick the ones that fit in most comfortably with their teaching style and personality, and would be more easily absorbed outside of the pressurized sessions themselves.

Among the skills teachers found useful were:

- Focus tightly on a few learning goals for the session; a broad or scattershot approach doesn't work -there are already too many things to think about at the same time;
- Take charge – ask the camera people for the angles you need, request clarifications, direct the teacher and technical people at the far site;
- Be aware where you are directing your focus – it is less obvious than in a normal class and must be clear to the students;
- Choose your words carefully. Teaching interactively requires a lot of words. A teacher must spend time developing a vocabulary for how to talk about what s/he is going to teach;
- Use your hands on the monitor to direct muscles; use your fingers to trace energy flow through space;
- Realize that this kind of teaching relies on the skills of a lot of people. Advanced planning, a clear concept and communication with your technical team beforehand helps everyone to understand and work toward the same goal for the session;
- Know that being on the spot as the teacher is higher stress than you might expect from watching others – take advantage of any training and preparation time that you can get;
- Think like a camera – try to see what you are teaching from the students' point of view.

Students were quite adaptable. They jumped right into the unusual surroundings and challenges and, for the most part, showed a surprising amount of patience for technical glitches. However, they did not expect as much from the classes as teachers did (though expectations increased with age), and the novelty of sharing with another site was usually enough to hold their concentration. How students would fare in longer-term interchanges, after the novelty wore off, was the subject of much teacher speculation.

Students did complain that they were often given no information about the teacher leading the interactive session. They had no idea that they were studying with a great master teacher and were not capable of fully appreciating or taking advantage of the incredible and unique opportunity to tap this person's knowledge.

Teachers credited TPL sessions with several advantages over classroom learning.

The sessions:

- bring artists into the technological age;
- help teachers to become more articulate about what they are teaching;
- allow teachers to introduce new perspectives on space, choreography, technique because of looking at things from the camera's-eye view;
- make students more objective about their own learning, because they can see themselves operate 'from outside themselves;'
- encourage students to be interactive, less passive, than an everyday class;
- "are very strong at promulgating styles and points of view;"
- "gave me a new perspective about what my students could do. They really rose to the occasion;" and
- changed the relationship between teachers and students to a more peer-to- peer and less parent-to-child dynamic.

Teachers felt sessions were less successful at:

- teaching complicated concepts – simple was better;
- dealing with large groups of students – you just can't see everyone on a small-screen monitor;
- incorporating music (see technical concerns).

Teachers also cited the unique way the camera looks at things as something to get used to. They felt self-conscious seeing all their own mannerisms as they taught, and felt that it was difficult to imagine what the students were really seeing. As one coach put it, "the teacher has to think like a camera and see from the student's point of view," and that takes practice.

Planning

Several teachers stressed the importance of preplanning. They were often blind-sided by not knowing who would be in their class - the students' prior experience with their art form and its conventions. A kind of culture shock can result: "My students were in shock - the other class was all girls, and they were all dressed in little skirts and pink tights." Students also wondered - What should they wear? What kind of class would it be?

Thorough planning, clearly communicated, keeps things running smoothly and helps all the players work toward the same goal. This includes discussions about who the students are, who the coach is and what the coach has to offer to the far site teacher. It includes discussions of logistics, the when, where and how. It includes an assessment of the technology available and how it will be used. It may also include practice sessions before the main event. The vast majority of respondents wanted more preparation than they got.

Training is crucial to good preparation. TPL has tried training technicians and teachers. Teachers need time in the real situation with its competing demands. Camera people want more systematic development of their skills, one skill at a time. Switcher training has been primarily by apprenticeship. The teaching of these roles is, in itself, a major program. In some cases, it may be more efficient for TPL to partner with other organizations whose primary role is to teach these skills rather than spend resources to develop an effective academy for participants.

Perceptions of TPL, the Organization

People were favorably impressed by TPL. They felt that the staff was competent, friendly and well-prepared and that the organization's projects came out of a sense of passion and innovative thinking. But many people said that the mission was not clear, and that the organization was trying to do too much too fast, preventing it from developing a strong, reproducible model. When participants, funders and staff know what you are about, why you are there, they can be more committed to your goals. Even students felt this lack.

TPL has explored interactive learning's breadth - its benefits for different demographic groups, art forms and purposes related to performing. This goal is laudable, but in achieving it, TPL has limited its ability to dig deeply enough into any one area. Deeper concentration is needed to solve the problems that would take the programs to a new level of development. The elements that go into a session are complex and interrelated. The teaching/coaching itself, the operation of the technical equipment, the quality of the equipment, the readiness of the students and the appropriateness of the facility all offer many problems to be solved. The current scattershot approach does not allow time for staff to solve problems they know about before more problems arise from attempting new goals.

Several people questioned whether TPL is offering arts programs or a service to facilitate arts programming. This confusion comes partly from the fact that the carriers of meaning, those actually bringing the substance of the sessions (the coaches) are independent contractors bringing their own agendas to TPL. It also relates to the way TPL presents itself, articulating its primary focus as the developing of networks (a service), rather than the disseminating of certain types of information that can best be exchanged through interactive technology learning.

Many people said the methods of communication, primarily e-mails and memos, were ineffective. Important information was missed, or communicated at a time when the participant did not yet know how to use it. A system for communicating information is needed that designates:

- what information is necessary;
- the best form for its dissemination; and
- who is responsible for communicating it.

Evaluation

Evaluations thus far have been conducted directly after each session. They have been oral and videotaped by that session's technical staff, with all those connected to the session taking part and answering the same questions. Questions have been primarily of the 'what worked/what didn't?' variety with a request for a metaphor to describe the session as a way to get to a more intuitive level. While the questions have been similar for each session, little attempt has been made to maintain consistent wording. **In many cases, the non-Twin Cities site either went through no evaluation process or went through its own, which was different from TPL's. The evaluations have not been available to teachers, and many times were not even looked at by staff.**

Many respondents thought the questions themselves were very good. Three mentioned that they need to be more age-appropriate for young children and others suggested that, to keep extra work to a minimum, separate questions should be developed for teachers, students, technical people and possibly observers. Teachers of younger children felt that questions were too open-ended, not specific enough and that it might help to replay parts of the session to jog people's memories. However, the staff of TPL is mindful that with such an experimental project, it is important not to limit people's imaginations, to leave room for unexpected answers and the expression of new ideas beyond what the evaluators might have imagined.

Baseline data is essential to put the answers of individuals into a context. For example, when TPL asks whether the teacher had trouble adjusting to the technology, it has no information linked to that answer about how many experiences with interactive technology that teacher has already had. Attitude and prior experience seem to make a big difference in how easily the teacher adjusts. By collecting baseline data, TPL will be able to track growing competency and assess how long it takes for teachers and students to be effective. It will begin to see what is still needed to bring all players to a common level of competency. And TPL will be able to communicate realistic expectations to new participants.

The request for a metaphor generally brought silence. Several interviewees suggested that it would be difficult to get a thoughtful answer without building some time for reflection into the evaluation process. Several suggested journal-writing as a way to get to deeper, non-quantitative feedback.

Evaluations walk a fine line between the massive amount of information that TPL would like to collect, the necessity not to overburden participants, and the need to make this information available without unduly taxing TPL's staff. It is important for the staff to be committed to obtaining this information so they will do it right and consistently. Not only do evaluations need to be regularly and consistently conducted, but they need to be tallied and analyzed on a regular basis or the information is worthless.

One of the most often repeated remarks was the admonition to keep involved staff out of the evaluation process. Staff members are passionate about this project and can unwittingly change the tenor of the conversation or just inhibit people from speaking up. Most people are sensitive to hurting others' feelings and will say what they think others want to hear. This is an especially sensitive issue with children and underprivileged groups who have a strong sense of where the power lies in the room. Complete anonymity would be ideal for at least some part of the response. **At the very least, someone uninvolved in the session should administer the evaluation, and the video, if used, should be turned on and left running without staff.**

Several teachers reported that their students said very different things about the session once they were back in their own safe space. A method for capturing these longer-term, more considered responses is important. A follow-up assessment form could provide for this kind of feedback, generating valuable discussion and reflection among teachers and students that could be captured by TPL.

Conclusion

Given the litany of challenges to overcome in exploring this highly experimental new form of teaching and learning, it is nothing short of amazing that every single person interviewed was excited and optimistic about the long-term applications of interactive technology to teaching and learning in the arts. The fact that many of the problems have been only partially solved is due in part to dollar constraints, which limit the quality of the technology and the amount of staff time that can be devoted to a problem. This will improve with time as higher quality equipment becomes available for less and as use of technology becomes more widespread. One respondent made the point that "availability of appropriate [technological] space is a two-way street; schools will realize they need more flexible spaces [as a result of their experiences with TPL]."

TPL has accomplished a great deal in a short period. It has a talented, committed staff and visionary leaders. There is potential for growth in the quality of the technology, the effectiveness of training and the communication among the players. Systemizing and prioritizing its actions and clearly defining its mission can help TPL achieve its marvelous potential.

