Drama as a Digital Learning Space in the Political Science Classroom

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Abstract

The richness and complexity of the study of conflict can easily overwhelm students and impact their retention of knowledge, especially amidst the difficult period -the COVID-19 pandemic-and challenging instructional modes. Remote communication tools can offer a number of advantages in promoting learning, enhancing pedagogy and fostering student community. Employing innovative peer-to-peer, experiential techniques, like asking students to use remote learning platforms to read parts of an ancient tragedy in a performative way and connect it to their written assignments, can increase engagement with the material, foster student cooperation and mutual learning, and provide a memorable learning experience. This paper illustrates this application to a remotely-taught 3rd year undergraduate Political Science course 'On War' at the University of Toronto Mississauga via a collaborative exercise co-designed with the Department of Classics and Theater Studies, and an award-winning Scottish director and her associate towards a student-led virtual performative reading of an adaptation of Euripides' The Women of Troy to the modern conflict in Syria.

The Challenge: Engaged Learning at the time of the Pandemic

The serious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning is well documented. According to a recent (April 2022) education report by McKinsey & Co., "the pandemic has taken a substantial toll on students' academic progress as well as on their mental health.: Moreover, "of all the elements of higher education that have been disrupted by the pandemic, the student experience has perhaps suffered the most" (Supiano). Learning about conflict and many of its depressing facets about loss of life, displacement, atrocities, and devastation can be sobering enough on its own. Having to do so amidst a global pandemic via a remote, isolated and often alienating mode can make it even more challenging for the students. Hence, the question: how to teach a 3rd year undergraduate class on Conflict and War online, while keeping the students interested and engaged - despite the difficulties both of the subject and the mode of such a course? Could remote teaching and related online digital communication tools actually be turned into an advantage?

The Inspiration: Virtual Solutions to Pandemic-created Problems

Necessity, as the adage goes, is the mother of invention, and during the pandemic, remote learning and related digital tools, like Zoom-which the class used-became the mode of teaching. Gone was the in-person classroom where learning traditionally took place, where students and instructor interacted, and where a learning community was fostered. Yet, despite its many social and technical shortcomings (Guillaume et al.), remote learning and "the digital platform [...] can also be used to bridge the gap and effectively engage our students" (Nnoromele). Its connectivity of class members irrespective of location, convenience of accessibility of

recordings, and 'digital proximity' that could permit interaction with guests from across the Atlantic could become useful tools in a collaborative online exercise aiming to foster student engagement, teamwork, self-learning and to increase interest, excitement and enthusiasm about the course.

The inspiration behind the idea for this virtual project came from multiple sources: a personal early exposure to classical education while growing up in my native Greece, and a good familiarity with ancient Greek tragedies, including Euripides' quintessential anti-war play The Trojan Women. Then, Dan'el Padilla Peralta's in-class experimental role play as a way to teach Roman history at Princeton. Further, the move of The Theater of War productions – which, since 2009 has been staging ancient Greek tragedies for modern audiences and linking them to contemporary subjects – to performances online during the pandemic—a prime example of how digital tools can still deliver powerful results in virtual theatrical performances. Finally, the recent (2019) innovative adaptation of Euripides' The Trojan Women in Scotland with Syrian refugees as the non-professional protagonists of the play.

The Concept: a Composite Exercise Utilizing Remote Communication Platforms

To answer how the remote 3rd year International Relations POL305Y (year-long) course on *War: Causes, Characteristics and Consequences* at the University of Toronto Mississauga, a composite exercise that could take place online was devised. The course sought to engage the students in the study of some of the consequences of conflict via a remote collaborative project involving a short paper on a conflict chosen by each student, and its link to an online class real-time performative reading of an ancient Greek tragedy touching on the impact of war. Supported by a University of Toronto's Global Classroom grant, this turned into a pilot project that specifically aspired to achieve five goals for the class – to render it more,

(i)   Educational: to provide another, novel mode of exploring and understanding the consequences of war, and to encourage mutual learning;

(ii) Engaging: to animate and invigorate an otherwise heavy and bleak-themed remote learning course during the challenging times of the pandemic;

(iii) Resourceful: to introduce and/or sharpen a variety of collaborative, presentation and technical skills for students through the use of remote communication platforms;

(iv) Synergistic: to foster collaboration between students and Departments; and, finally,

(v)   Impactful: to create a memorable educational experience.

Towards the above, the project was framed through a composite assignment for the students. It asked of them to complete three interrelated tasks. First, to write a short paper on a modern conflict and exploring one of its causes, one of its characteristics and one of its consequences. Students were given a list of 62 inter- and intra-state conflicts from 1945 onwards to choose

from, but upon approval of the instructor could also propose one of their own. Second, to prepare in groups and conduct a virtual class performative reading in real time of a tragedy by Euripides, followed by a roundtable discussion and class Q&A. Finally, to connect their experience from encountering Euripides' tragedy The Trojan Women to the consequences part of their short paper, engaging with, comparing and contrasting it to the case they had to analyze.

Why Virtual Performative Reading?

According to the literature, 'role play is a pedagogical method that enables students to engage in active learning through taking on new roles and thus experience, act and reflect from new perspectives' (Williams). Performative reading would allow for imagining and sympathizing with the lives, circumstances and predicaments of those in a novel, a poem, a play - without having to become fully immersed, or incarnate a role like in an actual play, but more than by simply reading a text. During a difficult academic year with the pandemic in full swing, this was an ideal middle between a time-consuming and taxing (or triggering) drama performance (after all this was an International Relations class, not a Theatre one) and a simple, forgettable plain reading of an ancient text. As Shapiro and Leopold note, it serves as an important 'middle ground between creative thought and real-world interaction.' Finally, as the successful migration online of theatrical rehearsals and performances –e.g., NYU Tisch School's (Fierberg) and The Theatre of War's--demonstrated, performative reading could be done very effectively, attracting large online audiences and engaging actors.

Why Tragedy?

There has been a lot of recent debate about the impact of classical texts and Classical studies in general[1], including ancient tragedies. While some scholars still adhere to the view that, since exalted in the 18th and 19th c. Western Europe and North America, the classics constitute foundational sources for concepts of liberty, equality and democracy, and others point that they can help teach about inclusion and diversity (Montás) others importantly argue that they promoted an exclusionist, superior vs. inferior culture view (Kosmin, Kondo), served as a Euro-American foundation myth (Morris), and have been complicit in systemic injustice (Padilla Peralta). Amidst this - literally and figuratively - critical reappraisal, is there still anything left of value to them? Or, as author and founder of The Theater of War, Doerries asks, "What do Greek tragedies have to say to us now?" His own answer, coming from the experience of having staged scores of ancient (and modern) plays for U.S. audiences followed by town-hall style discussions[2] '…to confront social issues, help to break down stigmas and foster empathy and compassion…' (Theatre of War website), is that "they show us what it means to be human"

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[1] The New York Times, Feb. 2, 2021.

[2] For example, Sophocles' *Antigone in Ferguson* (2016) and Aeschylus' *Prometheus in Prison* (2018).

(Doerries). In *Poetics*, Aristotle challenges Plato by equating tragedy with the representation and expression of action and living. More broadly, the medium of "tragedy provides commentary, perspective and coping mechanisms of various sorts for human audiences […as well] exposure and a novel focus […] to the true causes of human misery […and is] an artistic tool for enlightenment." And, more poignantly, "the experience of tragic art is to be part of the cure, an element of the healing process […] create an energizing awareness, an incentive for reflection and an impetus for change" (Revermann). For the above reasons, an ancient Greek tragedy was selected to help the course's students reflect on some of the more devastating consequences of war.

Euripides' The Trojan Women
The Trojan Women, or Women of Troy by Euripides is a quintessential anti-war play on the aftermath of the sack of Troy by the Greeks and the fate of its citizens, especially the women of the fallen city. The Trojan War was a fictional conflict turned into an 8th c. BCE Homeric epic - the Iliad.[3] According to records, this play was performed at the Dionysia religious festival in Athens in 415 BCE. The tragedy begins following the city's pillaging and burning. With most of the men killed, many Trojans raped and slaughtered with few escaping, the remaining women of Troy and their children are about to be taken captive as slaves and concubines, including the former queen, Hecuba, her daughters and grandson. The protagonists and the chorus reminisce about the former greatness of Troy, and how it fell to the Greeks, and discuss whether there is any hope left for them, before they learn of the horror of the genocidal act of the queen's infant grandson being thrown off the city walls to eradicate the male royal lineage and prevent revenge - which will be, nonetheless, forthcoming, both by angered gods and the victors' relatives themselves. Following the infant's funeral and further lamentations by the surviving women, the play ends as they exit the stage to be led to their respective ships. The play's themes of grief, loss, desolation, displacement, fear and the question of whether any hope remains after such a devastation address many of the devastating consequences of war that, regrettably persist to this day. Given its resonance with many conflicts and their devastating aftermath, it is no accident that there have been multiple translations and adaptations over time, and the play has often been tied and adapted to topical conflicts, with editions, theatre productions and films. These include Gilbert Murray's (*The Trojan Women of Euripides*) and Franz Werfel's (*Die Troerinnen*) in the middle of World War I, Jean-Paul Sartre's adaptation just after World War II, Sergio Véjar's 1963 Mexican film (*Los Troyanas*) following an armed revolt against the government, Michael Kakoyiannis' 1971 movie during the Vietnam War, Femi Osofisan's early 2000 metaphor for Sub-Saharan African conflict, and Yasmin Fedda's 2013 docudrama (*The Queens of Syria*) on the Syrian Conflict. More recently, *The Trojans* was staged

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[3] While long thought a fictional place, in late 19th c. a German archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann located and excavated what are considered Troy's ruins in modern-day Hisarlik, western Turkey.

in Edinburg and Glasgow (2019) under the direction of Victoria Beesley and co-adapted by Sana'a Al-Froukh, starring Syrian refugees to Scotland.

A Hybrid Text Incorporating an Actual Modern Conflict
As a result, this tragedy would be an ideal vehicle towards exploring facets of the consequences of war. At the same time, in order to avoid focusing solely on the aftermath of a fictional ancient conflict, adapting the play to interact with a modern conflict would make it more topical and relevant to the students. One such conflict that dominated the headlines for the last decade has been the Syrian civil war. Following 10 years of war, its casualties have been horrific, regrettably rendering a prime case to illustrate the consequences of war (The Carter Centre). The U.N. reports extensive war crimes and 'the most heinous violations', with Assad's regime also accused of using chemical weapons (2013-14). Since 2011, the conflict produced over 500,000 dead or missing (BBC). The state collapsed, with the economy losing 275 bn$, 30% living in poverty and critical damage to health care, education, infrastructure. At the same time, the war triggered a huge humanitarian crisis, causing the dramatic displacement of the Syrian population: 55% of population has been displaced (6.7 million internally, 5.6 million abroad) and 13. 4 million remain in need of humanitarian assistance (UNHCR). Of those fleeing the country about 45,000 settled in Canada, and about 20,000 in the UK - with over 3,500 in Scotland.

That is why the aforementioned Scottish adaptation of the text (2019) was selected for the exercise. It interjected extracts from the original with passages written by Syrian refugees to Scotland about their lives in Syria during the conflict and in Scotland following their emigration, providing an important additional layer and greater context to the text-and the exercise, as its juxtaposition would make it easier for students to think about consequences of war for their own papers of selected conflict and its analysis. Appendix at the end of this paper presents three examples from the adapted text that juxtapose the experience of the Syrian refugees with that of the Trojan women, vividly illustrating some of the consequences of the Syrian civil war.

The Participants: a Virtual Web of Cast and Crew
The main contributors were the 60 students of the class; after all this exercise was designed for them. Given that the performative reading was divided into seven parts with seven extracts, seven groups were formed to work on each of their passage towards preparing for and conducting the live online performative reading. To assist with the preparation, Ms. Victoria Beesley, playwright, producer, performer, and the award-winning director of the Scottish adaptation of The Trojan Women, and one of her associates, Syrian-born refugee Ms. Sana'a Al-

Froukh were contacted and invited to join the project and help the students with remote coaching sessions. In particular, Ms. Al-Froukh's contribution was multiple; not only had she participated in the Scottish production, also assisting with the text, but as a trained clinical psychologist could provide important commentary regarding the trauma from this experience and how to cope with it. The easiness of using a remote communication platform made an invitation that was physically prohibitive, virtually feasible and attainable; being able to participate to a Canadian university class project from the comfort of their homes in Scotland, they both accepted. In addition, for expert advice on the original classic, the expert assistance of Dr. Martin Revermann from the University of Toronto Mississauga's Department of Classics and Theater Studies was also sought. For techniques on how to work in collaborative fashion and acquire related skills, Dr. Jonathan Vroom, a learning expert from the university's academic skills center also joined the project. Finally, the team was completed by research assistants both from the Dept. of Political Science and Classics and Theater Studies (Roberta Gerevasi and Lillie Nadeau) that helped with disseminating texts, supporting information and logistics.

A Collaborative Learning Experience
The project unfolded in several stages. During the first semester of the class, seven excerpts selected by director Beesley to be used were posted on the course's Canvas webpage; they included four from Euripides' original and three from the Syrian adaptation that replaces Hecuba, her daughters and the chorus with the voices of Syrians before and during the conflict and following their emigration. Students were invited to submit their three preferences, and on a first-come basis were placed in one of seven groups. Each group was then notified via a common email, inviting students to begin communicating with each other towards dividing the roles and beginning to discuss their extract. Class members could forego reading themselves but had to work collaboratively to prepare their team for the presentation of their selected excerpt. Resources, including the original play and its Scottish adaptation, as well as links to videos about the play, the Scottish production, and The Theater of War were also provided to the students ahead of the Winter break in order to begin their preparation. Group members were again invited to contact each other and self-organize through social media platforms of their choice; in addition, those who wished, also met in-person. At the beginning of the second term, a learning expert from the university's Gillespie Academic Skills Centre was invited to give a virtual workshop on collaborative work techniques (Soetanto and MacDonald). Additional preliminary information (both substantive about how to begin approach the play, and technical on how to use specific features of zoom for the forthcoming meetings) was provided by Ms. Beesley, who then set up three 100 minutes-each coaching sessions to be held in successive Saturday afternoons on Jan. 29, Feb. 5 and Feb. 12, 2022. Besides instructions on how to approach the text and the protagonists of the play, she also spent time relating to the students her experience of working with Syrian refugees during the Scottish performances and how they,

themselves made sense of the conflict-and coped with it-through the theater play. For two of them she was joined by Ms. Al-Froukh, who not only helped guide students through the Syrian passages, but most importantly related them to the ways she experienced the war, fleeing, displacement, temporary settlement in Jordanian refugee camps and eventual emigration to Scotland. Students were keen to interact with her, asking many questions and learning about the Syrian conflict and its human toll from an eyewitness. Finally, the instructor of the course was present in all rehearsals and acted as facilitator of the sessions when needed. All three rehearsals were recorded and posted on the courses' websites for viewing by students who were unable to attend. Student groups, themselves, continued to meet in tandem with these rehearsals to discuss and work on their extracts towards the virtual performative reading event, which was scheduled to take place in mid-February, just before the Winter reading break.

The Performative Reading Event
The event took place during scheduled class time on February 16, 2022, and was well attended both by class members (only five were absent) and others beyond the class, including students, colleagues and administrators from the two Departments. It began by a short introduction that also contextualized the play through summaries of the Syrian Conflict and the Trojan War, and then students began reading their parts. The virtual performative reading lasted for about 55 minutes, with some students even selecting related virtual backgrounds (e.g., one displayed ancient amphoras behind them). Following a short break, the event continued with a virtual roundtable discussion between Ms. Beesley, Ms. Al-Froukh and Professors Revermann and Kotsovilis before a final session of Q&A from the student audience via text message. The event was recorded and posted on the course's website for students to view. Then, class members had the Winter reading break to incorporate their experiences from the performative reading into the consequences' section of their short papers on the analysis of the conflict of their choice. The paper was due on the week following the break, providing adequate time for students to complete it.

Learning Outcomes
As this was a pilot project, the effects of the performative reading and overall exercise were assessed both indirectly and directly – by examining how well students related what they learned from the performative reading project to the consequences part of their short paper on a conflict of their choice, by comments on the experience from this collaborative exercise and the overall evaluation scores for the course at the end of the academic year.
Overall, it can be argued that the collaborative exercise did manage to meet its five objectives. Educationally, it was able to provide another, novel mode of exploring and understanding the consequences of war, and to encourage students to discuss the material and learn from each other. Moreover, this seems to have helped students navigate difficult topics, like loss, grief and

displacement, echoing the research which suggests that collaborative work can be not only an educational but also as a healing experience (Zartner). The engaging aspect of the collaborative exercise during a difficult period and the opportunity to meet remotely were also appreciated. Further, the exercise was able to help develop and improve a variety of skills, including presentation, inter-personal and technical ones-the latter, often in response to challenges encountered while self-organizing. In addition, the project enabled the collaboration between Departments and provided opportunities both to students (undergraduates and graduate research assistants) and instructors for exploring similar themes from diverse, or new angles via the vehicle of an ancient drama weaving together a common mosaic towards the better understanding of war and its consequences. This became evident also in the virtual roundtable discussion where all presenters aptly drew connecting lines between Theatre studies, Clinical Psychology, Classical Studies and International Relations. In discussing her experience of working with Syrian refugees in the staging of The Trojans in Edinburg and Glasgow, Ms. Beesley spoke about how theatre can be a healing process for the displaced and traumatized. Ms. Al-Froukh discussed both physiological and cognitive aspects of war-related trauma and treatment therapies. Dr. Revermann highlighted the educational importance of performative reading linking it to classical drama as an 'ongoing organic history of revisiting, rediscovering […] and reflecting', arguing that this collaborative exercise mimicked an emotional laboratory for processing trauma [of war], precisely as intended in ancient Greek theater. Dr. Kotsovilis drew the roundtable discussion to a close by inviting the audience to explore some the similarities (e.g., atrocities, norms of war, differential impact on gender) and differences (e.g., the evolution of international humanitarian law, the role of peace-keeping operations and NGOs) between ancient (albeit fictional in the case of the Trojan War) and modern warfare. Finally, the exercise was able to provide the students of the course with a memorable educational experience. Students described the whole experience in positive and praising terms.

Conclusion

The literature suggests that engagement is critical for student attention, participation and learning (Bradbury and De Maio), with experiential learning also being a crucial component in generating knowledge (Kolb et al., Morris). And, embedding innovations in the classroom can further positively affect learning outcomes (McKenzie et al.). This grant-supported project invited students to use a remote communication platform to work together for one month towards an in-class performative reading of Euripides' quintessential anti-war ancient Greek tragedy—*Trojan Women*. Inspired by drama projects that use ancient plays to address contemporary-yet universal themes, this exercise also invited an award-winning Scottish theater director and her associate, a Scottish-Syrian refugee who adapted the ancient play to the Syrian conflict, to work remotely with students towards exploring the play and its modern-

day implications vis-à-vis some of the consequences of modern conflict. The remote meeting platform allowed for this to take place seamlessly, greatly enriching the educational experience. Students formed teams and rehearsed towards a special event where they read out selected excerpts from the original and its modern Syrian war adaptation. This process involved expert coaching and critical exposure to first-hand accounts of the devastating conflict in Syria. In addition, it induced students to work together towards common learning objectives, as they frequently met online to explore the characters of the play and their present-day resonance both for the performative reading and their own final papers. The special virtual class performative reading event, which was also open to the wider university community via zoom, was followed by a roundtable live discussion with the Director, their associate, and instructors from the Departments of Political Science, Classics and Theater Studies, and Psychology, who reflected on the play, the nature of war and its traumatic consequences for individuals and societies. This performative reading exercise sought to engage and invigorate student participation in a collaborative fashion to offset the challenging distant learning circumstances during the pandemic, by using digital remote communication tools to its advantage, towards providing an additional layer of understanding of some of the facets of war. Important in this project was the goal of inducing students to become active learners and learn from each other. In the process, they were expected to also acquire or sharpen interpersonal, presentation as well as technical skills that are transferable and will be useful beyond their academic careers (Biswas and Haufler, Lenoir, Tsang). The hope was that this would be a rewarding experience that would encourage them to mutually explore and exchange ideas via their frequent self-organized virtual meetings not only about the play and the characters whose lines they read, but also the course material and their own assignments (Bean, Cohen and Cohen, Laal and Ghodsi).[4] In their feedback, students concurred. Overall, the results as indicated by direct (survey responses) and indirect (quality of assignments, student evaluations) evidence point that collaborative exercises even if taking place remotely can improve student participation and learning of the material by inviting the students to become active learners, absorbing participants and invested stakeholders of the class in ways that can be both educational and fun. Further, at a time when the value of Humanities and Social Science disciplines are questioned, as Revermann points out, employing tragedy for educative purposes can provide not only commentary, and perspective but also 'a novel focus to the true causes of human misery and a tool for enlightenment'. The hope is that students emerged from this immersive experience with an additional special layer of knowledge about the consequences of war, new friendships and collaborations with classmates, and greater synergy was fostered between university Departments and participating collaborators across the world.

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[4] This was especially important, given there were no regular tutorials available for the course.

In conclusion, the outcome of this project demonstrates the possibilities of remote communications platforms for pedagogically innovative projects benefiting from 'digital proximity', and concurs with the perspective that "technology [is] not a novelty or an enemy of 'authentic drama practice' but as a part of the landscape of [...] schools and communities that warrants critical attention (Anderson et al.). The pandemic may-hopefully-be ending, but remote digital communication platforms and related collaborative exercises that can complement and augment learning pedagogies are undoubtedly innovations to keep.

Appendix

The following are examples from the adapted text that juxtapose the experience of the Syrian refugees with that of the Trojan women, illustrating some of the consequences of war.

Passage # 3

MW: When we walked the streets… …the smell of jasmine and the voices of Fayrouz and Mayada El Henawi were everywhere…

HF: …but now there is only the smell of gunpowder and shelling.

MJ: There were lots of atrocities and killings. Every day there were murders here and there. Life in Damascus, in Syria, was becoming unbearable. People were frightened. I was living in a dangerous area – there was fighting between several different groups.

HF: One day when I was at school there was a bombing. People told me that the explosion was near my home, and people told my family that the bombing was at my school. I thought that I had lost my family. That I was totally alone. And my family thought that they had lost their only daughter.

Before the war started, we had a peaceful life full of laughter. My father, he likes to look on the bright side of things, so he was always telling us:

Chorus Man: "Everything is going to be ok…"

HF: I wanted to believe him. But there was this constant threat that we could lose each other at any moment.

Passage #5

MM: I do not know who I support and who I oppose. I can only see the damage; the killing; the destruction; the hunger and injustice; the control of people, and the distortion of religion.
[…] The war started in 2012 – just before Ramadan. There were so many tanks…I have never seen so many, not even during my military service. The situation was horrific in my area. I would see corpses every day.[…] The cruellest thing was *(pause)* that the people who were getting killed were innocent; they did not belong to any side. People ran away, but those who had nowhere to go had no choice – they had to stay in their

homes. They thought, they have not been involved in the demonstrations, so the army would protect them. […]
They arrested me […]
They tortured me […]
But they couldn't kill me.

Passage #7

Syrian Chorus (All): What will we do now?
What will happen to us?
Who will we meet?
Will the people here love us?
Will we make new friends?
Will we be able to adapt?
Will this new home be good?
What are their traditions?
Will the neighbors be nice?
Will they love us?

We will start our life from the beginning. Now.

Enter Nidaa.

ND: When I got to Glasgow I felt happy and safe. I felt as if I was dreaming. I couldn't believe what I saw – the beautiful nature, beautiful smiling faces.

Members of Glasgow Council were waiting for us with interpreters. They carried our suitcases, and took us to our new house. Inside we had everything that we needed. They introduced us to other Syrians in the area. They took care of us.
Sometimes I feel lonely though, and I crave my family…my children who are separated from me by European borders.
My oldest son went to Sweden and the youngest followed him, but he got caught in Germany. He has deteriorated…his health…he's alone. He's depressed, and I'm very worried about him. My heart is with him. He has no one. I want to travel to him, but it's so difficult.

Female Chorus: How can I help my son? What can I do? His face is drawn and so so tired.

ND: I've applied twice for my son to come to Scotland and been denied both times. I pray to God he will be ok.

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