

**CASE STUDY:** YVON BONENFANT, PHD

**DEPARTMENT:** DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE, SCHOOL OF FILM, MUSIC AND THEATRE

**MODULE:** DR6001 COLLABORATIVE THEATRE AND PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES

**IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PROGRAMME:** MA THEATRE AND PERFORMATIVE PRACTICES, THEMED YEAR: PERFORMANCE AND ACTIVISM

**The MA Theatre and Performative Practices** is a Magister level degree that integrates theory, practice and artistic thinking to ask advanced students of theatre to find ways to challenge and extend established aesthetic, sociocultural and political values in theatre and performance in order to allow what we call 'outsider knowledges' to teach us how challenging performance can influence, transform, and ultimately question, problematise and challenge culture.

Within this framework, **DR6001** is an unusual module. It is a very large, integrated, 15-credit module that integrates the refinement of creative, affective, technical-performative and intellectual skills so that students begin to think about how they can better compose, perform and realise new performance work, and ideas, that challenge culture.

While there is already a strong emphasis on bringing queered and/or outsider knowledges into the learning framework of the module, and on helping students link the interiority of personal values, feelings, and impulses to enact social change with external physical projects, there has, in the past, been no explicit effort to help students link these impulses with the goals or reflexive frameworks of GCDE. Our degree has attracted students from a number of countries that are non-EU and non-post-industrial this year, and the lacuna caused by ignoring the GCDE agenda could position those students as outsiders in a deeply unconstructive way if not addressed.

In 2021-22, therefore, we draw from the work of Dr Cotter and the wider Praxis Project to prototype ways to link the students' activist creative and intellectual practice with questions related to GCDE.

### **Our 'usual' model**

In the module DR6001, the students undertake 72h of mixed-mode learning activities. These integrate sensory, artistic/creative, reflexive and intellectual-critical-analytic approaches to the topics we explore. They also undertake a kind of micro-apprenticeship in a role that we call 'artistic enabler' - usually exploring new ways of helping under-served arts communities access heightened expressive capacity in community

contexts. For example, in 2020-21, the students enabled the artistic work of a group of young adults with mild to moderate learning disAbility.

The list of topics we will explore during 'performance and activism' year include:

- Theatre and change for children
- Theatre and disability
- Theatre, migration, racialisation, and othering
- Theatre, performance and feminisms
- Theatre, popular making practices and disenfranchised macro-communities (using the Cork's Dragon of Shandon events, and the history and current incarnation of Shandon, Cork as a community case study)
- Theatre and super-diversity (this year exceptionally, as a critical engagement with UNIC's first city-lab in Liege, Belgium)
- Theatre and the notion of the queered outsider
- Theatre and marginalised languages: using Irish as a case study
- Theatre and alternative mechanisms of production and dissemination
- Theatre and Feminisms
- Theatre, the human body, somatics, and ecology: eco-theatres

These topics are integrated with practical workshops in:

- Group devising (co-creation)
- Experimental writing
- The influence of experimental theatre, live art, and dance theatre 'stretching' the boundaries of theatre
- Immersive theatre
- Theatre and digital technologies: blended theatre forms
- Collaborative practice: groups and making
- Practices of scoring theatre
- Linking making practices with research practices

And are underpinned by sensory and embodied explorations on the themes:

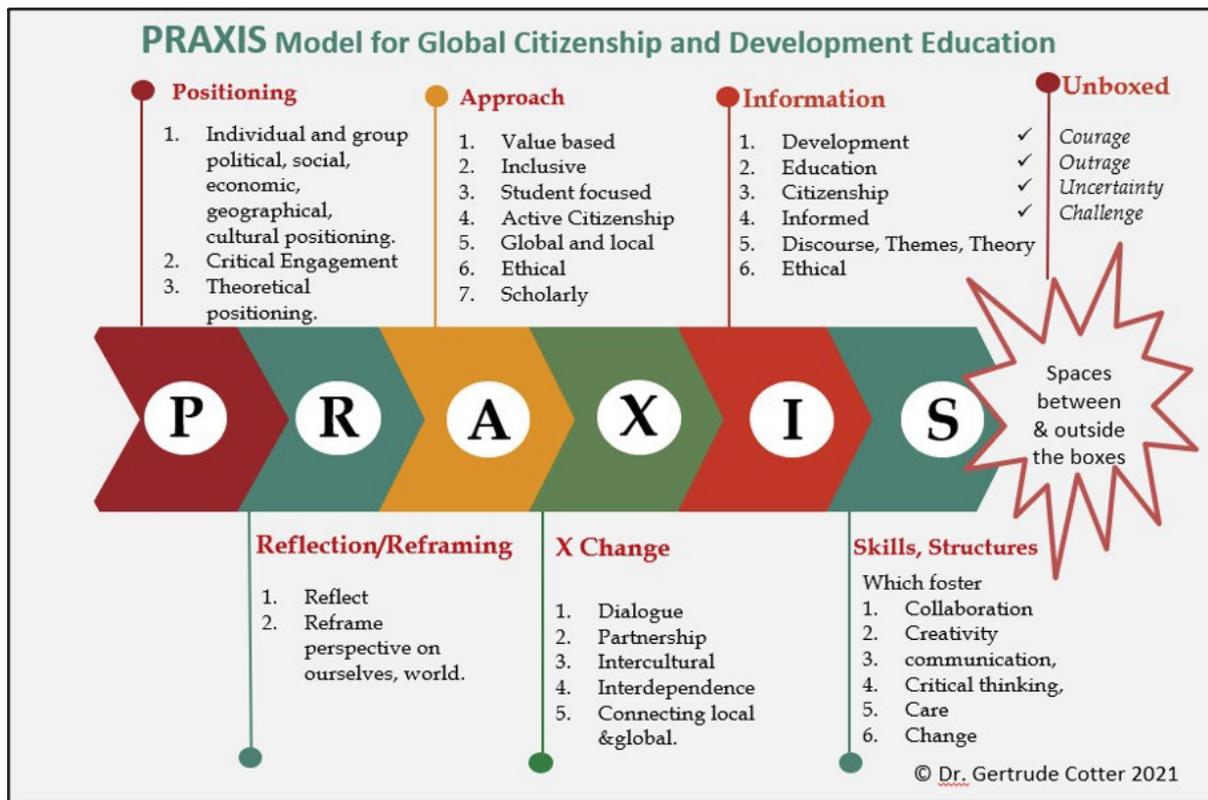
- Embodied critical thinking
- Enhanced sensory practices: enskinning, en-boning, and inhaling theatre
- 'Performatives': practicing performatives
- Gender-bend: gender as a key performative
- Status: class and social status as a felt performative
- Fakery: artificial identities

We also read playtexts, and watch and experience a huge array of live theatre, performance, dance theatre, live art, gallery work and extensive performance documentation.

This curricular planning may, in some ways, seem at once radical, and abstruse and ungrounded. Often, the degree to which this kind of pedagogy, swimming between theory and practice, between critical thinking and the felt sense of inventive theatricality, is actually achieving the goals of engendering reflexive, activist and *grounded* thought about the place of the GCDE themes and goals in its learning spaces and outcomes might be up for debate. There, so far, has been no **explicit** emphasis on questions of interculturality, of post-colonial dynamics, or on the development of what we might call a critical, *global*, perspective, on what it means to use theatre to transformative messages or involve audiences in transformative feelings and actions vis a vis the cultivation of better global empathy, justice, and action.

### **For 2021-22: our prototyping process**

We thus propose that within this curriculum, and the first list of 'topics' we explore in the module, we draw from the praxis model reproduced below to enhance our already reflective and socially critical module with far deepened engagement with intercultural perspectives, world perspectives, and an emphasis on translating aesthetic values into actions that engender active citizenship. This will mean that we will need to find much better ways to link the topic of \*audience behaviour and reception studies\* : a new and burgeoning field in theatre, with issues of community, citizenship, development engagement, and above all world and intercultural perspective, and work much harder to link the personal, and the local, with the global. We foresee that we will have to link engagement with the dynamics of selected case study performative practices around the world and across cultures to \*local actions for change\* and \*transformations in the kinds of messages embodied and sent by our theatre students' creative projects\* to their audiences. We will also attend to the aesthetic challenges posed by GCDE perspectives and how these can help audiences learn other ways that performance can be made manifest and encourage social reflection and sometimes action.



We thus reframe our 'topics' list in the following way:

- Theatre and change for children: activist children's theatre - from local to global models.
- Theatre and disability: to include the representation of disAbility in cross-cultural and global contexts.
- Theatre, migration, racialisation, and othering: to include far more emphasis on exploring the ethno-centric and racist-imperialist aesthetic values embedded in the post-Industrial/Western performance systems - who gets silenced by our aesthetics around the world?
- Theatre, performance and feminisms: to include both local and global feminisms
- Theatre, popular making practices and disenfranchised macro-communities (using the Cork's Dragon of Shandon events, and the history and current incarnation of Shandon, Cork as a community case study): to include a case study on migration to Shandon, and the Nigerian diaspora's engagement with the Shandon projects
- Theatre and super-diversity (this year exceptionally, as a critical engagement with UNIC's first city-lab in Liege, Belgium: to include case studies that try to evaluate the problems and degree of 'success' of this particular intercultural experiment, embedded in the EU's debatable and often cosmetic commitment to financing and fostering intercultural understanding in Education (we will link this to an examination of the European Commission's current New European Bauhaus programmes and emphasis on 'cultural heritage')

to the exclusion of migrant territories and marginalised and racialised histories.

- Theatre and the notion of the queered outsider: to include surveys of queer performance activism in three case study non-Western environments
- Theatre and marginalised languages: using Irish as a case study and then moving on to select two to three other marginalised languages and reflect on their performance histories (we will especially use Virginie Magnat's 'Performative Power of Vocality' and its intercultural emphasis here.
- Theatre and alternative mechanisms of production and dissemination: we will look at a sample Irish and another 'global south' festival in case studies
- Theatre, the human body, somatics, and ecology: eco-theatres to focus on our involvement in the Global Water Dances project and its successes and failures

How we will do it:

- In part, of course, lecturers will do the work of re-designing their theoretical, practical and teaching delivery to integrate scholarly writings, exercises, and online samples of performance from a much wider array of cultural frameworks and global perspectives. We know that much scholarship has emerged that can help us (such as the work of Rustom Bharucha and the extensive dialogue of the Hemispheric Institute, etc.) - we will make the time to do this. Many exemplar documentations of an anthropological nature regarding world theatres are available - however 'intercultural surfing' of aesthetics is not the goal and rather, in depth engagement with one or two in-depth case studies per topic will be highlighted.
- Each student will be asked to design and teach a 45 minute theory-practice integrated workshop linking GCDE values and knowledge with one element our list of topics above, by doing independent research to take us inside a performative exploration of the *questions they have and problems they have uncovered about their theme*. This will take place within the six-hour teaching day and will form part of our reflexive practice.
- We will use Vida Midgelow's 'embodied research reflection' method, developed within a Dance Studies framework but now used throughout performance studies, to chart and track the sense and meaning that students distil from our workshop processes, We will use the materials produced: drawings, still images, videos, essay fragments, arguments, and creative work to form a 'research exhibition' in the free-to-user, and open access Research Catalogue of the Society for Artistic Research. This inter-media document will map their reflections and learning, ask them to link these to one another, and will form one of the collaborative elements in their portfolio assessment. It will be shared with the Praxis project group.

Through this process of piloting, prototyping and reflection, we hope to begin to learn how best to bring students inside the themes of GCDE and make them as meaningful as possible inside a GCDE context. We also hope to begin to learn how best to help students link the creative freedom and critical thinking an artist needs with questions of global, intercultural and ethical action.

We will chart later in the year to what degree questions of GCDE end up informing the students' summative research projects.

#### Biography:

Yvon Bonenfant, PhD, programme leader of the MA Theatre and Performative Practices, is a practitioner-researcher recognised as a pioneer in voice-based artistic research. He has a strong interest in progressive teaching of avant-garde practices. His own most recent work, integrating the installation *Resonant Tails*, focuses on the inclusion of young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities in the making of refined inter-sensory art where these young people lead the production experience.

He has held research-creation funding from: the IRC, the Wellcome Trust Large Arts Awards, Arts Council England, Postcode Community Trust, Youth Music, the UK's AHRC, the British Academy, and co-held two grants from the ERASMUS+ to develop innovative pedagogy across theatre, music and landscape architecture. He has been artist in residence at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Centre, ENSA Limoges-Aubusson and elsewhere. His performances, artworks and media work, often made in collaboration, have shown in 13 countries. He has published and presented widely.

See: <http://bit.ly/YvonResearch/> [www.tractandtouch.com](http://www.tractandtouch.com) and [www.yourvivaciousvoice.com](http://www.yourvivaciousvoice.com).