

Devising Resilience

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I’m sitting in the green room with a group of second-year dramaturgy students, debriefing a performance project they have just presented. I invite them to start, but no one speaks; perhaps they want me to validate their work first. So I do, and they drink up my positive feedback like it was free beer. But the moment I raise the possibility that their work was not flawless – “So, what do you think maybe didn’t work the way you hoped? Was there anything you might do differently if you had another shot?” – they become tense and defensive. I see arms crossing, knuckles whitening, and tears welling up. They are terrified of criticism and its implications, and their impulsive response is to either clam up resentfully or try to rationalize it away. For example, by pretending that performing in street clothes was not a concession to expedience but a deliberate commentary on the stale, outmoded convention of ‘costume’ in theatre. They do not hear “Your work could be even better”; they hear, “You are a failure.” In other words, they lack resilience.

This anecdote is not to suggest that I delight in humiliating people, but to illustrate a critical challenge in creative arts education. If people study theatre to develop creativity, then formal training programs need to equip them with a tolerance for uncertainty, adversity, and failure.

When we make or do something new (however creativity is defined, it implies this much), it rarely works out exactly as we imagined. Resilience determines how we respond when our messy ideas fail to translate effortlessly and seamlessly into the form we imagined, or when our first audiences and readers do not respond the way we hoped. Resilience is vital to creative success, and Raw and Gurr¹ identify it more broadly as a vital “element of 21st century learning culture,” the “driving force that stimulates individuals to learn [...] secure in the knowledge that failure will always produce a learning experience.” Resilient people embrace adversity as a step towards success: discovering what *does not* work helps us to figure out what does. For the rest of us, a flop represents a dead end, a catastrophe, a *failure*: a public exposure of our horrible, shameful ignorance and lack of talent. One senior academic I met trash-canned an entire book because she could not face the minor revisions requested by the publisher, illustrating how our aversion to the mere threat of failure actually guarantees it.

This paper suggests how devised performance can help build resilience and creative agency, by exploring student experiences of a devising project that took place between March and May 2015, in a course called THEA 323: Rebooting Futurism. I focus on data provided by the students in a series of group interviews, conducted in the middle of the course and a month after its conclusion; and individual written reflections which students made at regular intervals during the creative process. The data shows them grappling with fear and resistance, becoming tolerant to adversity, and gradually achieving creative autonomy. In addition, the data suggests that their fear and risk aversion is rooted in their previous experience as students, suggesting that if theatre educators want to build resilience, they need to understand how the normative structuring practices of our discipline undermine resilience and produce anxiety, fear, and dependency. My analysis of the data identifies three factors that distinguished devising from the student’s prior experiences of formal education, and contributed to their enhanced resilience: constant collaboration, constant production, and constant performance. In the remainder of this essay, I will first draw on theory borrowed from critical pedagogy and sociology to illustrate how dominant practices sap resilience, and then explain how devising introduced alternative practices that helped the participants develop resilience.

My critical framework borrows from Paolo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu. Freire² famously illustrates how models of teaching based on the transmission of information from the master to the student foster dependency, by reducing the students to passive recipients of the master's knowledge. Bourdieu's³ concept of *habitus* explains how such culturally determined behaviours become second nature, so that by the time one becomes a university student, one has unconsciously adopted a tacit model of "learning" that consists of "sitting quietly and listening to the teacher," and re-producing the teacher's knowledge when called upon, in formats and conditions specified by the teacher. One quality of habitus important to this discussion is that it becomes our second nature, or "comfort zone," and our comfort zone – a term often used by our participants – by definition also determines our *discomfort zone*. Students who have succeeded thus far in this manner you may see little to gain and much to lose by trying something new. In addition, what Bourdieu would call the structuring practices of both academia and theatre often reinforce dependency rather than resilience. For example, auditions encourage student actors to focus their energy not on learning, but on seeking the teacher's approval. Other common assessment tasks, like essays and exams, similarly compel students to perform for an audience of one, on whose feedback they become dependent. They rarely have opportunities to see what their peers are doing, or if they do (as in a theatre class) they do not know how the teacher is grading everyone and thus lack the insight needed to make meaningful contrasts with their own work. Even teachers who strive to be supportive can undermine resilience. Praise simply feeds a craving for praise, conditioning the recipient to keep doing whatever it takes to keep the praise flowing. If the teacher stops telling you you're bright, you must be dim; and since most people tacitly believe that traits like intelligence and creativity are innate and fixed, we all dread the day when our fundamental and irreparable lack of intelligence and talent is finally exposed.

Rebooting Futurism deployed devised performance to challenge these habituated practices. Devising literature often portrays it as a democratic process that challenges the hierarchical practices of director-centred, scripted drama. Devising scholarship tends to portray devising as representing "artistic democracy" and offering "freedom"⁴ from the "hierarchical structures of power linked to text-based theatre," which place "the playwright and then the director at the forefront with the general objective of 'serving the play'".⁵ As a democratic process, devising is seen to promote collaborative skills, "build community, and counter

individualism”.⁶ Moreover, insofar as autocracy and textocentricity are as much features of traditional classrooms as of traditional theatre, Perry and others regard devising as consonant with the ideals of critical, post-critical, and feminist pedagogies.⁷ As a liberatory model, devising offers students opportunities to: “engage in ... cultural production” rather than passively consuming cultural products;⁸ to dispel the assumption that the teacher-director has all the answers;⁹ and to experience an “increased sense of ownership” and an “awakening of their ... social consciousness.”¹⁰ John Schmor¹¹ connects devising to building resilience through confronting “the special possibilities and terrors in originating a piece of theatre.” Thus I hypothesized that devising would stimulate resilience and autonomy by exposing the students to risk by allowing – or even *compelling* – the students to make creative and executive decisions that are most often made by the teacher-director. To this end, I made very few decisions without their consent, except those required of university or program administrative practices (such as a title and basic course description, and performance dates). I chose the *oeuvre* of Italian Futurist plays and manifestos as raw material, but what we did with those materials, and how, was up to the participants. My primary objective was explicitly *not* to “direct” them toward my own vision, but to create and sustain a collaborative environment in which they could create and perform an original work acting as a relatively autonomous creative ensemble. These objectives were communicated explicitly to applicants well before the course began, and discussed in class with the rationale presented here. Although the concept of resilience was not explicitly mentioned; rather, it emerged as a theme in the data.

Participants consented to participate in group interviews conducted at mid-term and after the course, and to their journals being used as data. The interviews were conducted by a research assistant who gave the participants pseudonyms in the transcripts to ensure confidentiality. The students kept reflective journals as a means to demystify assessment and help them take control of their learning. Their initial journal entries, in which they each articulated a personal learning objective for the course and a plan for reaching it, convey a mixture of hope and apprehension. They reveal that many students were already aware of how their fear of risk and failure inhibited their learning.

My personal objective for this course, is to not let the fear of failure stop me from doing things. In order to achieve this, I can choose to put myself into situations that will force me to do something new. (Student 6, 8 March 2015)

This fear of failure reflects a “student habitus” produced by years of submitting one’s work for the judgment of an expert whose authority is absolute (but whose criteria are often obscure). This process contributes to a feeling that students are not in control of their learning: teachers, not students, define success and failure. One common symptom of this feeling of helplessness is a rhetoric of hope that implies academic success is beyond one’s control (as in, “I hope I pass the exam”), signalling the student’s tacit “recognition that the system [positions students] as having little control of their education”.¹² In addition, as students, the participants were accustomed to studying “perfect” finished products of writing, which yields little insight into the process by which messy ideas become masterpieces, and instead fuels the assumption that creative genius manifests in bursts of spontaneous inspiration.¹³ When the inspiration fairy did not appear, or their first efforts did not produce masterpieces, they took it as a discouraging sign that they lacked talent. Some acknowledged feeling so traumatized by the implications of producing imperfect work, that they had trouble producing anything at all.

I often struggle to start writing as I am worried that my work will not live up to the standard that I believe I am capable of. I [...] never believe that what I produce is good enough. (Student 7, 12 March 2015)

Early on, with the possibility of failure safely distant, the participants embraced the idea that devising and performing their own work would require them to take bigger risks and face bigger challenges than they were used to, and that this would be difficult but, for that very reason, rewarding. As senior university students, they felt keen to face a challenging task.

I am very excited but also scared to work on a performance piece like [this], especially because James said it’s up to us to do everything. He is there to watch us and give guidance, but we have to do it. We direct, perform and produce the show ourselves which I feel will be difficult but at the same time, the sky is our view not our limit [...]. (Student 1, 8 March 2015)

The phrasing “James said it’s up to us” ironically sums up the effect of habitus, implicitly acknowledging that even adult students exercise freedom only at the pleasure of the teacher. Nevertheless, they faced the (still hypothetical) challenges of devising with enthusiasm, and many deliberately chose objectives or creative roles that would take them out of their “comfort zones.”

I initially thought that I would stick solely to something that I know I can do such as stage manager [...]. However, upon more reflection [...] I decided that this course would be more beneficial to me if I took on a performance role, as it is what I struggle with the most, especially in terms of confidence. (Student 16, 5 March 2015)

At the cognitive level, the participants understood the need to confront risk. But cognition alone is insufficient, because habitus is rooted in the body.¹⁴ If habitus is the accumulation of our habitual actions and attitudes, then habitus transformation entails the displacement of existing practices by new ones. Devising promoted the displacement of old habits with new ones in three key ways. Firstly, in the absence of instructions and directions from a teacher, the participants had to figure out how they would govern themselves, which made them aware of the extent to which they have previously depended on others to govern them. Secondly, devising positioned them as active producers, rather than passive consumers of knowledge. Thirdly, constantly performing for, and exchanging feedback with, each other exposed them to constant but bearable risk, which gradually increased their tolerance.

1. Constant Collaboration – working without a teacher/director.

In most classrooms and rehearsal halls, students and actors follow the instructions of a teacher or director, and thus become dependent on her for motivation and validation. In Rebooting Futurism, this authority was dispersed across a range of devising mentors, including but not limited to me, none of whom exercised authority over the organization of activities or the creative vision. Nor were we always present in the room. By midterm, my insistence on taking a “back seat”, a metaphor used by the participants, had provoked students to reflect on their dependency.

FILLIPO: Yeah, it's been a bit weird I think. I mean we haven't done anything like this before, James said he would take quite a back seat.

GIGI: Yeah, like we almost keep wanting to be like, "Is this ok James? Is this where we are supposed to be going?"

CARLA: Yeah.

GIGI: We keep going back to him, to having somebody who is going to be like "Yes, no" and make the decisions for us. But then we have to do that on our own.

FILLIPO: Yeah it's hard.

GIGI: We don't have one person in charge and it's hard because we are all in charge. [...] nobody is going to make the final calls.

CARLA: [...] So we kind of had to think about our structure of workshops and what was useful for us. Which was weird to think about because usually you're just on auto pilot and waiting for directions. (Midterm Group A)

During this excerpt, the focus shifts from the teacher in the back to the student (or students) in the driver's seat – an uncomfortable position for someone used to being "on autopilot". Because the participants are focused on "constantly seeking approval" (Brenda, Midterm Group B), they find it "hard" at first to organize and initiate their own activities. Ultimately, they come to realize that a group does not need one person to be "in charge". Leadership is not an innate, essential personality trait but a set of responsibilities that can be shared and exchanged. Instead of acting as the creative expert, I recruited mentors to teach the participants a series of devising and improvisation techniques. Subsequently, when I resisted the impulse to take over every time the momentum stalled, the participants figured out how to use their new skills to initiate and sustain productive action on their own. As they gained confidence in their creative process, they became more resilient and less dependent on me to organize their work. By dress rehearsal, I was really only needed to unlock doors and print off running lists; they knew they could rely on each other to do everything else.

2. Constant Production – constantly making

In contrast with their experience in lecture-based classes, where they spent most of their time in passive receptive modes, and only producing work two or three times a term in short bursts, the THEA 323 participants spent most of their time together actively producing. They began generating material in the first week of classes, and keeping their scripts, scenes, and ideas in a growing digital archive. This repertoire constituted tangible evidence that their creative process was working, which engendered confidence. Speaking a month after the end of the course, one of the performers identified a ‘game-changing’ moment. After a week of intensive devising, the whole group “...sat down and just like started listing everything we had created. And the thing was we were only looking for stuff from that week and we filled an entire whiteboard with stuff. And at that moment I was kind of like, ‘Oh ok we do have a show.’ And that was quite cool.” (Vladimir, Post-course Group D). When they realized that there was essentially no limit to their capacity to generate new performance material, they became less afraid of failure. If a scene flopped or an idea died, it did not matter because they could *just make another one*. After this stock-take, the participants experienced growing confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of mounting a show.

Resilience also grew as they became increasingly confident that they knew *how* to be successful at doing and making. In workshops led by local devising company My Accomplice, the participants were frequently tasked with generating scenes in very little time. When they floundered, workshop leader Hannah Banks exposed the liabilities of their habitus pointing out that their default response to all challenges was to sit down and talk about what they might do. The participants were amazed by how dramatically the productivity and quality of the work increased after Hannah banned sitting down.

With my other theatre class when we are trying to make up stuff, we just sit down and write, we don’t do stuff. [...] Whereas in devising we’re like “Let’s just get up, think of a word, do something” and we can do more, we create more, we can create a lot of skits in 10-15 minutes. Whereas with the other group we are there for an hour sitting and talking, then get up and go “oh is this right?” “No no, go back to the script.” Way harder. (Antonia, Midterm Group B)

Creative achievement was no longer a mystery or a matter of waiting for inspiration. As each participant developed explicit knowledge about how to create, making and doing together became a new habit, displacing their previous habits. As it became increasingly comfortable – and effective – their aversion decreased, and resilience increased.

3. Constant Performance – constantly responding to an audience

In addition to constantly producing, the participants were constantly *performing*; a modality that contrasts sharply with their accustomed practice of performing rarely and mostly indirectly, by submitting writing for a delayed adjudication. Even in conservatory actor training programs, students are often restricted to classroom exercises and in-house showings until they are deemed “ready” for an audience – often in the third year of learning to be public performers. In THEA 323, however, the students constantly performed for and exchanged feedback with each other, me, their devising mentors, peers, invited audiences, and ultimately the public. This practice had a significant impact, particularly on those who initially expressed aversion to the risks of public performance. The reciprocal process of performing for, and watching, their peers led participants to a surprising revision of their previous beliefs. While they initially feared being the objects of ridicule, they soon realized. Firstly, that far from feeling an inclination to mock others, they themselves wanted their peers to succeed, and the same was likely true of others watching them. Secondly, that their peers might actually share the same fears. One participant who entered the course with a relatively pessimistic assessment of her limitations, experienced an epiphany after an improvisation workshop.

I am rather impressed with myself because I gave offers and joined in activities I wouldn't usually join in on. [...] I was nervous at the start to jump in but after a few skits I got the hang of it and joined in when it was possible. Everyone really impressed me [...]. T. and C. really shined during the improv because they had told us earlier they were not comfortable performing in front of people. When they performed all their nerves had gone and they were both amazing actors. [...] I am realizing from watching the rest of the company and being aware of myself that we are all in the same boat when it comes to acting. We may seem or come off as being confident but on the inside we are all the same

with how scared we are. [...] I haven't told anyone how scared I am to perform but I know I have nerves. This might be the same for the rest of the company.
(Student 1, 15 March 2015)

Taking a risk she would normally avoid because of “nerves” prompted this participant to recognize how her habitus had defined her – but also how she had the ability to redefine herself. Importantly, her sense of achievement stems from acting in an open, collaborative environment, in which the participants constantly perform for and offer feedback to each other. The insight recorded here signalled a sustained and remarkable change in behaviour, as this individual transformed into one of the most prolific members of the group. Another participant, speaking after the process, described the impact of watching her peers achieve things that they had previously considered beyond their reach.

CARLA: There were so many things that you just learnt that you weren't even aware that you were learning until like you look at yourself at the end, and you look at yourself at the beginning and you can see not just your own journey but everyone else's. Sounds a bit cheesy. But a few people were very openly like, “I can't do this, I can't do this.” And then at the end they could do it, because they had the means to do that and to kind of get rid of that fear of performance or whatever it was. So that was cool to see. (Post Group D)

Being able to observe progress in their peers in this way helped the participants recognize progress in themselves, and see themselves as capable of growth and change. This recognition, in turn, engenders resilience, because if we believe we can get better at something, we can tolerate criticism, whereas if we believe our capacity is fixed, criticism reinforces our suspicion that we are not good enough.

From the student's perspective, the emphasis on constant collaboration, constant production, and constant performance made devising as valuable as it was different from their previous experiences. The experience allowed the participants to recognize the lack of resilience that both stemmed from, and triggered, their impulsive dependency on authority figures. Just as importantly, devising provided an opportunity to “break bad habitus,” practice taking risks, and displace these tendencies with new, more productive habits. When their show, named *BRUTUTUM ZUM PUM!*, enjoyed sold out houses and enthusiastic audiences,

the feeling of success was all the more palpable because they had risked so much. While this small-scale study did not make provisions for a long-term follow up, there was some evidence of long-term retention and transfer. One participant who went on to take a directing course the following term confirmed that the devising experience changed his perception of the director: “I tried to make the relationship between me and the actors a collaboration, and not place myself above them with a false sense of authority.” Another participant reported a “hugely eye opening” experience in a subsequent devising course. Compared to their other classmates, she and other alumni of THEA 323 felt more comfortable working independently, and she felt better able to “monitor and critique [her] own systems and creative work,” adding, “We knew that failure and change was all just a part of the process.”

Ultimately, resilience reflects how we respond to adversity, not success. The first public performance of material from *BRUTUTUM ZUM PUM!* took place a week before their public performances, at the interdisciplinary *Rebooting Futurism* symposium. Immediately following this sneak preview, the participants assembled before their audience of about 100 professional scholars and artists for a question and answer session. One spectator immediately challenged the “authenticity” of the material, suggesting that it betrayed the ideals of Futurism as defined by F.T. Marinetti.¹⁵ This blunt critique struck many spectators as a gross breach of etiquette. One could hear stifled gasps, and see knuckles whitening. One contributor leapt heroically to the participants’ defense, apologizing for the other person’s rudeness. The performers themselves, however, were delighted to receive honest feedback and especially pleased to have provoked controversy – what could be more authentically Futurist? To their credit, they responded not as Marinetti would have done, with verbal or vegetable abuse, but with a gracious “Thank you.”

NOTES

¹ Laurence Raw and Tony Gurr, *Adaptation Studies and Learning: New Frontiers* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

² Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30th Anniversary edition. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 57–60.

³ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (SAGE Publications, 1990).

⁴ Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre: a practical and theoretical handbook* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 9, 4.

⁵ Mia Perry, 'Theatre and Knowing: Considering the Pedagogical Spaces in Devised Theatre', *Youth Theatre Journal* 25, no. 1 (May 2, 2011): 65, doi:10.1080/08929092.2011.569461.

⁶ Anne Wessels, 'Devising as Pedagogy', in *Key Concepts in Theatre/Drama Education*, ed. Shifra Schonmann (SensePublishers, 2011), 54, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-94-6091-332-7_21.

⁷ Perry, 'Theatre and Knowing', 64–67.

⁸ Joan Schirle, 'Potholes in the Road to Devising', *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 99, doi:10.1353/tt.2005.0015.

⁹ Leon Ingulsrud, 'Why Devise? Why Now? Twelve Thoughts on Devising with Undergraduates.', *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 88, doi:10.1353/tt.2005.0008.

¹⁰ Crystal Brian, 'Devising Community', *Theatre Topics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 3, 7, doi:10.1353/tt.2005.0003.

¹¹ John Brockway Schmor, 'Devising New Theatre for College Programs', *Theatre Topics* 14, no. 1 (2004): 262, doi:10.1353/tt.2004.0010.

¹² Robyn Jorgensen, Peter Gates, and Vanessa Roper, 'Structural exclusion through school mathematics: using Bourdieu to understand mathematics as a social practice', *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 87, no. 2 (October 2014): 221–239, doi:10.1007/s10649-013-9468-4.

¹³ R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity: The Science of Human Innovation*, 1st ed. (Oxford University Press, USA, 2006): 21.

¹⁴ Eva Österlind, 'Acting out of habits – can Theatre of the Oppressed promote change? Boal's theatre methods in relation to Bourdieu's concept of habitus', *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 13, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 71–82, doi:10.1080/13569780701825328.

¹⁵ F. T. MARINETTI, 'THE FOUNDING AND MANIFESTO OF FUTURISM (1909)', in *Futurism, An Anthology* (Yale University Press, 2009), 49–53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq4q3.6>.