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Online community arts participation, a postphenomenological framing

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Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, performing arts activities moved from studios and practice rooms into people's homes with the adoption of video conferencing platforms. Tools such as Zoom are not 'merely functional and instrumental objects, but [...] mediators of human experiences and practices' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 9). In other words, Zoom not only circumnavigates the inability to meet in person but reorganises performing arts delivery and engagement. This chapter examines the lived experience of online community singing and dance participation during the pandemic. Adopting a postphenomenological lens, and triangulating data from participant observation, 'interviewing objects' (Adams and Thompson, 2011), and semi-structured interviews, I explore how digital media transforms experience with particular reference to spatiality, social impact, and group singing. I focus on two community groups: an older adult's voice and movement class and an arts and health singing programme. Each group met in person on a weekly basis prior to the pandemic and now participate online.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003165644-13

Methodological framing

Postphenomenology is an interrelational ontology that examines human-technology relations (Ihde, 2015; Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015). The empirical methodology analyses the roles and implications of technology in constructing experiences and practices (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 31). To examine the impact of shifting to online delivery for community arts, I draw from what Don Ihde refers to as *embodiment relations* which focuses on how technologies 'transform a user's actionable and perceptual engagement with the world' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 14; see Ihde, 1990).

Digital media, which includes digital content, tools, and personal devices are at the front and centre of online engagement. As Robert Rosenberger and Peter-Paul Verbeek suggest, 'When a technology is "embodied," a user's experience is shaped *through* the device, with the device itself in some ways taken into the user's bodily awareness' (2015: 14 [original emphasis]). Subsequently, technologies are not neutral and, according to Ihde, have 'a magnification/reduction structure' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 16). This means that

> through the mediation of a technology, we not only receive the desired change in our abilities, but always also receive other changes, some of them taking on the quality of "tradeoffs," a decrease of a sense, or area of focus, or a layer of context.
>
> (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 16)

The online delivery of community arts during the COVID-19 pandemic made it possible for people to sing and dance together during national lockdowns. Extending participation in this way (a change in ability or magnification) employs different body skills (both desirable and trade-offs) and exerts communicative limitations (reductions) that co-constitute experience. Such magnifications and reductions are the focus of this chapter. I describe how screen orientation, enveloped into the participant's awareness, diminishes the experience of spatiality, while on-screen representations of the self captured by the device's camera can act as a feedback mechanism in movement tasks. Zoom mediates social interaction, yet sound latency (a trade-off) alters the experience of communication by disrupting conversational flow and renders community singing virtually impossible. To mitigate losing the collective sense of togetherness, I explore how accommodations such as *artificial choirs* seek to replicate activities like singing in the round.

In Summer 2020, three community arts groups at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance were invited to reflect upon their experience of remote participation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Evaluation findings from online focus groups and questionnaires were subsequently used to shape online provision. Furthermore, I used emergent themes to inform the development of a research project that examines how online delivery transforms practice and engagement in music and dance.

Participants from two community groups consented to taking part in this research. The first group merges vocal and movement improvisatory techniques and creative expression to explore major themes affecting participants' lives. The second is an arts and health singing programme for individuals with long-term chronic lung conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and pulmonary fibrosis. Adopting a non-medicalised approach, the class is designed to help manage feelings of breathlessness whilst taking part in a fun, social activity. Both groups met in person on a weekly basis prior to the pandemic and now meet online. However, not all group members made the transition to remote delivery because they do not have access to digital media or are resistant to online participation. Newsletters, creative postal packs and phone calls allowed facilitators to stay in touch with those individuals, but such exclusions necessitate further consideration for ongoing and future community arts provision.

In exploring the shift to online delivery, I was involved with the groups as a participant observer on a bi-weekly basis. This ethnographic method (Moustakas, 1994) offered first-hand experience of remote delivery, helped to understand the online setting and learn more about the context of participation. My field notes and reflective accounts generated data about the meaning of participation and were used to contextualise the experiences that participants identified as meaningful.

On alternate weeks, I 'interviewed objects', a method that positions technology as important qualitative research participants and 'attempt[s] to better understand how digital things […] inform but also deform, conform, or transform practice' (Adams and Thompson, 2016: 89). Employing techniques such as 'listening for the invitational quality of things' (Adams and Thompson, 2016), I 'interviewed' the digital media involved in online singing and dance activity to understand how they shape actions, gestures, and perception.

During the three-month research, I conducted 12 semi-structured interviews on Zoom to gain insight into the older adults' lived

experience of community arts remote delivery. The descriptions that arose in these interviews are triangulated with the data from participant observation and interviewing objects.

The screen and spatiality

Online, participants are united in a virtual world, instead of coming together in a physical space designated for group activity. They are technologically connected, yet spatio-temporally distributed, and the distinction between public and private space is erased as they spill into each other's homes. For some, a loss of *eventness* characterises this altered delivery as the effort to reach in-person sessions is part of their routine, an opportunity to exercise and warm up before class. While, as one participant says, 'in some ways it's a lot easier just to walk downstairs and sit in front of the computer […] I'd much rather be battling the rain and the wind and standing on the station, catching the train'. Remote participation, another explains, means 'we haven't gone anywhere […] we're all spending half our lives slumped over the computer'.

In a postphenomenological case study, Stacey O'Neal Irwin describes the spatial orientation towards our devices:

> I view the screen in a forward stance […] Many technology users say they "sit in front of" the screen […] For me, to be in front of the computer is to face this kind of spatial arrangement and orientation […] Without looking at the screen, I could not view the digital world.
>
> (2016: 51)

Irwin asks, 'Is the front of the digital media where the body stops while the mind is engaged within the computer?' (2016: 51). Encouraged by the positioning of the device, often on a table or desk for access and visibility, the invitation to sit during online activities is compelling, and more so for singing than for movement tasks. Recognising a desire to combat inactivity (a trade-off), interviewees reflected that they were frequently invited to stand and, for the arts and health singing group, there was a greater attention to warming up the body at the start of class.

Irwin suggests that the 'habit of orientation […] through the screen is a constant negotiation of lived space' (2016: 51). At home, participants often move in smaller spaces than is the case for in-person classes, which is reflected in movement content. Instead of 'running around

the room' in improvisation, as one participant describes, movement becomes less expansive on Zoom. One participant likened their spatial experience to Pilates in the sense that its use of general space is restricted, while another suggested that Zoom might be more appropriate for fitness classes than creative movement. When the screen becomes the portal or frame of participation, bringing awareness to one's surroundings and the three-dimensional world becomes important. In both groups, participants are encouraged by class facilitators to bring awareness to the three-dimensionality of the breath and the body, to fully inhabit their lived space. Nevertheless, there is a trade-off: as actions are learned from and oriented towards the screen, the spaciousness of movement is diminished. The screen-lifeworld shapes choices and transforms bodily actions, constructing a perceptual experience that is different to the studio-lifeworld.

Participant observation led me to reflect on the image-body as other: a technological projection of one's body as an onscreen object. 'As phenomenological literature has long shown', Ihde notes, 'one can simultaneously experience one's here-body from its core while having a partial, but only partial, "external" perception. I can see my hands, feet, part of my frontal visible body from the focal point of my vision' (2002: 6). On Zoom, if *hide self-view* is not selected, the here-body is reflected back to the participant as an image-body, one amongst others in a gallery of moving images. Interviewees drew parallels between this and the experience of working with dance studio mirrors, using the image-body as a feedback mechanism to monitor and modify the timing of unison movement phrases, for example. The screen image-body integrates into the here-body experience.

Moving together online necessitates a different kind of seeing to the peripheral vision employed during in-person sessions. Seeing others is reduced to the two-dimensional image-body captured on camera and represented on screen. These representations are often partial owing to the lack of depth in participants' physical spaces, as well as needing to be close to the screen for visibility. Online engagement thus involves negotiating both *seeing* and *being seen*, which encourages diminished spatiality.

Social interaction

While mediating face to face communication, social interaction on Zoom is described by one interviewee as 'much better than nothing [...] but it is a compromise', a consensus shared by others. One participant reflects that:

> the sense of community, the sense of support, it was quite an emotional experience being there [in person], very powerful at the time. You don't quite get that on Zoom, not being in the room. There is a little bit of it, but it's not the same.

Interviewees speak about having glimpses of prior experience, fleeting moments where they recall the emotional and energetic connection of the group, of 'what it was like […], how it used to be to work together'. This group dynamic established prior to the pandemic is attributed, in part, to the success of online classes, but also engenders a sense of loss. Personally, having worked extensively with one of the groups, I miss a participant's gentle teasing when catching me yawn as an effect of exercising my lungs, the group's triumph of mastering a new song, and the laughter erupting from a new comical warm-up. Nevertheless, the online substitute is important for maintaining group interaction. For individuals that live alone, the class is the first time they have spoken to someone that day, or even for several days. Participation, one person explains, is 'not just about the breathing exercises […] there are other stuff that attaches to that session':

> it's good to see familiar faces in the breakout rooms, which are of course chatty. I mean, everyone is saying "good to see you," "it's nice to see you," and it's a little chat about what they've been up to and what we're all experiencing.

Remote delivery also offers structure at a time when many participants are retired, or shielding:

> we lack structure and routine […] there is now absolutely no difference between a weekday and weekend. So, you know, every day is the same and most of us […] can't remember, haven't got a clue how we account for our time. We just get so slow, and we sort of drift from one time to the next […] It's a strange situation.

Acknowledging the social impact of the sessions, time to catch up with others is integrated into the class structure. Breakout rooms at the start of each session are, one participant says, 'brilliant as a substitute for the getting there early and chatting before the class begins'. Described as 'democratic' and 'levelling' where everyone is welcome, this space 'helps maintain the group interaction […] they're not a throw away, they are an important part of the session'.

However, being ‘thrown together in a random selection of people’ when breakout rooms are assigned met with mixed reactions. One interviewee recalls their in-person experience:

> I’m casting my mind back to this time last year [February 2020], when we were actually going to the [venue…] You could chat in little groups or you could chat with one other person. You were able to not necessarily *choose* who you spoke to, but it was much more spontaneous and much more organic, the conversations.

The same participant notes that, ‘For the first two terms [online], I did not get to speak to several people who I would have loved to have spoken [with]’. For others, breakout rooms are ‘in some ways, even better [than the in-person equivalent] because you’re just thrown together’. One participant described being in a breakout room with ‘somebody who joined the class in person just before lockdown’ who has since

> become a really, really good friend, which just wouldn’t have happened if we hadn’t had breakout rooms […] There’s a kind of intimacy about it, which probably wouldn’t have happened if we’d been in person. It would have seemed too soon to contact each other and say, “let’s do something”.

Zoom disrupts habits of social interaction by restructuring the group dynamic. Eliminating choice in who to socialise with means that participants are encouraged to speak to different people. This change results in an inclusivity that is valuable for newer group members, although maintaining established relationships may be conceded.

Scheduled social spaces brings participants together for meaningful conversations, but also helps to mitigate the challenges that come about through the disruption to conversational flow. Anne Friedberg (2006: 93 cited in Irwin, 2016: 55) who explores metaphors of the screen explains that ‘The moving image (of frames) produces a complex and fractured representation of space and time. And once two or more moving images are included within a single frame […] an even more fractured spatiotemporal representational system emerges’. Zoom’s latency combined with simultaneous conversation results in fragmented and clashing sounds, and the bigger the group, the greater the challenge. Becoming accustomed to new technology and this fractured experience is part of Zoom engagement. In the beginning, when classes first moved online, one participant observed,

> There were quite a lot of technical hitches […], understandably. It was new to everyone. The issue with people over-talking… it's very difficult to say your piece sometimes. Then, if you start talking at the same time as someone else… You both back down and then… You lose the thread of the conversation, it becomes a bit disjointed.

Disruptions to natural conversational flow have been keenly felt yet accepted as part of the experience. To minimise disruption, participants modify their behaviour. For example, one interviewee describes looking for 'which square is going to light up [on Zoom to highlight the speaker… so] you don't get the conflict between who's speaking'. Further developments in Zoom etiquette include monitoring one's contribution to the group. A participant reports 'mak[ing] a deliberate effort […] to shut up and let other people get a word in edgeways' while another comes to the session prepared with conversation starters. Exaggerated forms of non-verbal communication have also been adopted, such as vigorous head-nodding or enthusiastic thumbs up to signify agreement.

While some are liberated by what they experience to be a 'less inhibiting' space making them 'a bigger personality online than I am [in person]', others are conscious of contributing less than before:

> I don't participate verbally as much as I would have done in the room. It's not so easy to do that […] It's difficult. When you're in a room, it is possible for more than one person to speak, isn't it?

Another participant reflected that their in-person persona is no longer possible: 'it's a whole routine that I've been practising for months but I'm unable to do on Zoom'. As participant observer, I have become aware of the extent to which the virtual space encourages different levels of participation. While discrete conversations during in-person classes are possible, an individual's contribution on Zoom is directed to everyone. The exchange is more explicit, and individuals can appear more confident or forthcoming online. This suggests that impressions of identity and selfhood are constructed differently in the virtual space.

Singing together

The difficulties of online communication extend to singing together, an obstacle experienced by both groups. Participants are muted for

much of the group session to minimise distraction from latency and audio feedback. When singing, only the facilitator is unmuted which minimises disruption to sound quality and focuses attention on the activity in hand. One participant was keen to point out that

> there isn't a feeling of they're the teachers and we've got to all be quiet [on Zoom]. And obviously [verbal input from the group has] got to be limited otherwise [the facilitators] can't get the words out […] But occasional bits of banter are acceptable.

The facilitators make space for suggestions and insights from group members who are invited to unmute between songs and tasks, generating exchange characteristic of community arts.

Singing on mute can be a liberating experience as, for some, it gives licence to deviate from the harmony set by the facilitator, sing with more gusto, and worry less about how they sound. But on the whole, being muted is described as a loss, as one participant explains:

> One always felt supported by everybody [when singing in person]. There was a great spirit of support […] I didn't worry about singing out of tune or whatever […] I find that if I'm in a small group singing, then I'm supported by the voices on either side of me, because I'm not a strong singer.

Rather than hearing (and being part of) the ten or fifteen other vocals, participants hear only themselves and the facilitator singing. Muted group singing effectively results in multiple duets performed simultaneously. Yet these duets are unidirectional: participants sing with the facilitator, who in turn performs solo because they are the only ones unmuted in the virtual space. While the in-person experience generates a sense of togetherness, singing alone can heighten self-consciousness, especially if one is singing in earshot of others at home. *Artificial choirs* where layers of vocals are pre-recorded for the group to sing to appear to mitigate the isolation of singing alone. While, as one interviewee explains, 'It will never replace being in the room […] The voice part is quite challenging', vocal layering is a 'good-enough' work around, as a temporary solution.

Conclusion

'Postphenomenology is the practical study of the relations between humans and technologies, from which human subjectivities emerge,

as well as meaningful worlds' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 12). Through this lens, technology is revealed as neither secondary nor epiphenomenal but that it '*non-neutrally* […] transform[s] experience' (Ihde, 2015: xi, xii [emphasis in original]). In describing perceptions of space, social interaction, and singing it becomes possible to see how community arts engagement is shaped through Zoom.

Differences between in-person and online delivery are reflected in the qualities and structures of participants' experience. Ihde suggests that the 'audiovisual has become deeply sedimented in our seeing/hearing and is taken for granted in our experience' (2002: 8), but there are degrees of transparencies in which 'a device (or an aspect of that device) fades into the background of a user's awareness as it is used' (Rosenberger and Verbeek, 2015: 14). My research suggests that transparency in community arts participation depends on the nature of the activity. For instance, while latency disrupts conversational flow, breakout rooms, one participant suggests, makes it feel 'like we're in a sitting room somewhere having a nice chat'. However, digital media are less transparent in vocal work. The limitations of Zoom are reflected in the felt loss of not singing together, which disrupts the collective sense of togetherness. While embracing a new model of practice, many participants are clear that online delivery is a 'make-do' or 'good enough for now' measure before returning to 'the real thing'. But for all the transformations, both desirable and reductive, the experience has been largely positive. Participants marvel at being able to collaborate with those who are overseas and are grateful for the opportunity to continue their creative engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. These groups are not simply biding time but are embracing the challenge to bring creativity into their homes.

National lockdowns, physical distancing requirements, and shielding of vulnerable groups during the pandemic led to the adoption of video conferencing tools for remote delivery at an unprecedented pace. Platforms such as Zoom enable performing arts practice to continue in challenging circumstances. No longer confined to particular physical settings, music and dance activities can extend into private homes. This has potential for widening participation, reaching individuals for whom mobility is difficult and those living in remote locations. Nevertheless, online delivery, as one participant comments, 'in some ways […] narrows participation to people who've got the technology and the willingness to learn'. Digital exclusion or inequality and resistance to online delivery are both factors that warrant further research and consideration because there is great potential for online community arts provision.

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