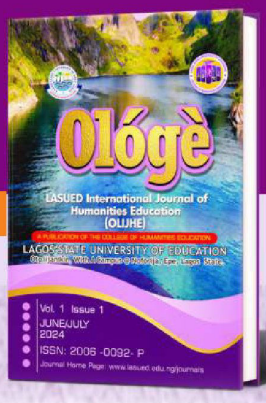
Ológè :
LASUED International Journal of Humanities Education (OLIJHE)
A PUBLICATION OF THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES EDUCATION
Lagos State University Of Education, Oto/Ijanikin with Campus @ Noforija, Epe, Lagos State.

ISSN: 2006 -0092- P
Journal Home Page: https://journals.lasued.edu.ng/index.php/OLIJHE/index Volume 1 | No. 2 | November/December 2024



Relocating Learning Delivery in Acting and Directing from the Traditional Performance Space onto Cyber Space during the Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria.

BABALOLA, Oluyinka Smart, PhD
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria
email: yinkasmart1@gmail.com
telephone: +234 813 602 6396
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1856-7283

Corresponding Author : BABALOLA, Oluyinka Smart, PhD (yinkasmart1@gmail.com)

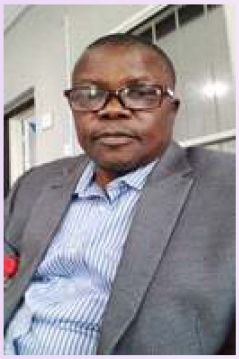
ABSTRACT

The March to October 2020 lockdown, occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, crippled learning delivery totally in acting and directing at the University of Ibadan. Where other courses swiftly adapted and moved online, it was very tough to relocate acting and directing because the traditional methods of facilitating the courses privilege physical contact, sharing and teamwork above all else. Performing arts, theatre, music and dance, which had thrived in in-person engagement, suffered greatly. The Covid 19 pandemic necessitated a total lockdown of the universities, whereby all students were to observe social distancing, so they could not gather in the same space for any of these kinds of interaction. This paper examines the manner in which the transition from actual to virtual spaces was effected and its impact on learning delivery in acting and directing. It gauges the effectiveness of the online substitutes against traditional interactive sessions by examining what is lost and gained in the absence of embodied enactment and instinctive material interactivity central to the performing arts. This study further interrogates the threat the lockdown poses to acting and directing training delivery and examines the practicality of online learning and the breaking of the spatial barrier between acting and directing in classrooms and the digital learning workshop. The study finds that accessibility to online performance spaces, especially in under-served communities, was a major challenge for the students. With poor internet service and high data costs, many students lacked working access to adequate data and digital resources and, as such, received inadequate learning and online support. It is concluded in the paper that whether watching a performance or performing, those who share the space are not just in space; their interrelationship shapes the shared space. This shaping of shared space and associated embodied exchanges are at the heart of the challenge to reimagine the performance space in the context of COVID-19 or any future pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19, pandemic, performing arts, University of Ibadan, learning, online performance

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36349/olijhe.2024.v.01i02.016

AUTHOR'S BIO



BABALOLA, Oluyinka Smart, PhD, is a consummate theatre artiste, filmmaker and scholar. He teaches acting and media arts at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He holds a BA, MA and PhD from the same institution. He has written and published journal articles and book chapters in diverse areas of theatre and media arts. Smart Babalola has also written, produced and directed several Stage plays, TV dramas and films in over 30 years of professional engagement in the theatre and media in Nigeria and the UK. He is married with children.

Citation: BABALOLA, O. S. (2024). Relocating Learning Delivery in Acting and Directing from the Traditional Performance Space onto Cyber Space during the Covid-19 Lockdown in Nigeria. *LASUED International Journal of Humanities Education. 1(2),165-174*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.36349/olijhe.2024.v.01i02.016

Introduction

Traditionally, a theatrical performance is a particular kind of interaction between performers and observers (actors and audience members) in a shared physical space. Live performance takes place in a three-dimensional space. The study of any period in theatre history will reveal that there has always been an evolution of constructed theatre space, "both formal and informal, in which the audience member, the spectator, becomes part of the performance, and is, therefore, an integral part of the space itself" (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002). In theatre arts training, acting and directing are core practical courses. The classes in the University of Ibadan are usually held in designated performance spaces inside the Wole Soyinka Theatre or the Geoffrey Axworthy Studio. The reasons are obvious: these spaces are specifically built for the works of the actors, directors and designers. From practical acting and directing sessions through rehearsals to actual performances, theatres are designed for the specific needs and growth of these artists. However, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a total lockdown in Nigeria from March to October 2020. This lockdown occasioned by the pandemic crippled learning delivery totally in acting and directing at the University of Ibadan. Where other courses swiftly adapted and moved online, it was very tough for us to relocate acting and directing because the traditional methods of facilitating the courses privilege physical contact, sharing and teamwork above all else. Performing arts, theatre, music and dance, which had thrived in in-person engagement, suffered greatly. Students had to isolate themselves from performance spaces. They were left to develop their creative abilities without the physical support of teachers and coaches (Stuckey et al., 2021). Although the transition from traditional performance spaces to home spaces seemed difficult, technology presented a way out for performing artists, and digital performance became an essential mode for performing artists. There was a shift to online using a combination of Zoom Meeting, Google Classroom, Telegram and WhatsApp to deliver training and provide artistic, psychological and emotional support to our students.

This paper assesses the necessity of relocating acting and directing classes from the physical performance space to cyberspace as a means to sustain learning during the social distancing effect of the pandemic. The paper is based on the coursework of the thirty 300 and 400 levels Theatre Arts students taking acting courses THA 311 and THA 411 (Acting, Mime and Movement) and twelve third-year students offering THA 310 (Directing and Stage Management: Basic Principles). One of the most germane aspects of the theatre and theatre training affected by this phenomenon is space. Just like most public spaces - the primary spaces for training and performance at the University of Ibadan, which are the Geoffrey Axworthy Studio and Wole Soyinka Theatre, were temporarily closed. Eventually, the school session resumed, and teaching had to continue online. The combination of physical space with digital space was not only germane in the digital performances during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, but has also become inevitable in the training of actors and directors.

Literature Review on Space, Performance and E-Learning

The process of learning is parallel to a pivotal shift in performance and space vis-à-vis digital performance. The antecedent influences of Peter Brook's Theory of the Empty Space (1968), Schechner's Theories of the Environmental Theatre (1973) and Performance Study (2002) greatly influenced the treatment of space in postmodern theatrical practices, in consonance with Benyon's typology of space (2014) including the physical space; digital space; information space; conceptual space; and the social space, which captures the fluidity and specificity of space, are the theoretical bedrock

of this study. Mostly germane, however, is the relationship between the physical and digital space in which, "in addition to the objects in the space (the ontology) and the topology, we need to consider the dynamics of the space, since space change over time and objects move (volatility) and the people in space along with their cultural and social setting, the meaning they make and the activities they undertake (agency)" (Benyon, 2014, p. 36). Schechner has muted a special conflation of this type when he opined that, 'The new aesthetics is built on a system of interaction and transformation, on the ability of coherent wholes to include contradictory parts" (1968, p. 41). We can employ this idea to describe the contradictory relationship between physical and virtual (cyber) space as it bears on the aesthetics of digital theatre. The third axiom Schechner prescribes for the environmental theatre has become a very inclusive, extensive and interactive treatment of the theatrical space: "The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in 'found space.'" The teaching of acting and directing can be classified as a theatrical event under the elastic interpretation of performance studies as outlined by Schechner himself. In this third axiom, he maintains that a found space should be explored, not disguised (1968, p. 50). To localise this interpretation to the use of the found digital space it would mean that there should be no attempt to disguise or ignore the nuances of the digital space due to a certain dominance of the physical space. The digital space should be explored for its strengths and even its limitations. Schechner's fourth axiom of environmental theatre, "focus is flexible and variable," is germane to the analysis of the strengths and limitations that come with expanding the performance space in the context of this paper through digital means. Schechner maintains that "Single-focus is the trademark of traditional theatre… Even when action is spontaneous and spread across a variety of events" (1968, p. 56). The use of digital means to extend the space in which theatre is performed or taught tasks the focus of the performer/students/audience.

Brook maintains that he could "take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (Brook, 1968, p. 7). In view of Brook's assertion, certain activities will pass for theatre irrespective of the space. In as much as what is needed is an 'empty space', any space can be transformed to allow for the intention of a person performing for the viewing pleasure of others. He explains further how this bears on the relationship of the theatre's fundamental components- "In performance, the relationship is actor/subject/audience. In rehearsal, it is the actor/subject/director" (Brook, 1968, p 123). The latter configuration best describes the collaboration mostly engaged in by the theatre students and teachers on which this study is based. The design for the relocation of the learning delivery in the acting and directing courses under review during COVID-19 was partially based on Benyon's Theories of Topology of Space and Blended Spaces. As explained by Benyon (2012);

> Mixed reality is a blend of a physical space and a digital space. The term 'blend' here is borrowed from blending theory, which is a theory of cognition that highlights the importance of cross-domain mappings and conceptual integration to our thought processes that are grounded in physically-based spatial schemas (p. 219).

This leads to the understanding that our contemporary world now allows for our thoughts of space and presence to be affected by digital possibilities. These thoughts, however, are grounded by the physical. Benyon contends that 'Presence' is "considered as an interaction

between the self and the content of the medium within which the self exists, and the place is this medium. Blended spaces mean people have an extended presence, from their physical location into digital worlds" (2012, p. 219). The role of the medium and the understanding of it cannot be underemphasised in the blending of the physical space with the digital. Even in traditional theatre, there is a need for a spatial agreement between the participants. The whole idea of a blended space becomes possible through a recognition of the physical space and digital space, which can both be described in terms of the "objects and agents" who inhabit the space, the structure of the objects' relationships (the topology of the space) and the changes that take place in the space "(the volatility, or dynamics of the space)" (Benyon, 2012, p 219). The blended space will be more effective if the physical and digital spaces have some recognisable and understandable correspondences and media of interaction.

Hentschel (2007) explains how the specificity of the medium of theatre is grounded in the fact that in it (in contrast to other art forms), "subject, object and the medium of the creation cannot be separated from one another… and that here, the created object (remains) bound to the body of the creating subject" (p. 7). Pinkert also observes that 'the players (and the audience also) are always acting simultaneously on two levels: on the level of symbol and meaning (referential) and on the level of the concrete physicality of the players (performative) (2011, p. 3). Theatre Arts, through a digital dimension, however, ensures the separation of the subject from the medium. And further understanding of this dichotomy is needed by all participants to ensure maximum productivity in communication. According to Hentschel;

> This experience of the dual nature of theatrical communication, identified as the awareness of difference, is 'the central educational experience of theatre acting and viewing'. The awareness of difference creates the conditions for aesthetic competence as an educational target in theatre pedagogy. Aesthetic competence is grounded in the experienced insight (within one's own body) and translated into the construction of realities—be they theatrical, media-based, or social—and the resulting ability to handle different representational forms, media, and intentions (Furthermore, it may be expected that actors, though being required to act consciously within different levels of representation, develop an overall ability for balanced detachment and self-reflection" (as cited in Pinkert, 2011, p. 4).

This excerpt underlines some of the human development that can ensue from actors being able to construct their realities on several levels of representation. Pinkert (2011) observes that "Consciously or unconsciously, in every pedagogical theatre project, worldviews, ideas of human nature, and conceptions of theatre are communicated and, in the best cases, negotiated" (p.1). Therefore, within the practice of educational theatre, especially when various concepts collide with each other, it becomes clear how decisions made during working processes strongly depend upon the perceptions and attitudes of all the participants concerned. The perceptions and attitudes of the participants in these digital performing classes resulted from serious negotiation and understanding of the need to progress within the realities of the pandemic period.

In general, there are various formulas for assessing online learning readiness. Chapnick (2000) defines the e-learning readiness assessment as a process for determining the gap between what the students know and what they need to know. She proposed eight categories to measure e-learning readiness. These are psychological, sociological, environmental, human resources, financial, technological skills, equipment, and content readiness. E-learning readiness provides key information to organisations to prepare for e-learning implementation. Educational institutions assess student readiness for *online learning* for better understanding and effective implementation (Widodo et al., 2020). The use of suitable and relevant pedagogy for online education may depend on the expertise and exposure to information and communication technology (ICT) for both educators and learners. Some of the online platforms used so far include unified communication and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, Canvas and Blackboard, which allow teachers to create educational courses, training and skill development programmes (Petrie, 2020). These platforms include options for workplace chat, video meetings and file storage that keep classes organised and easy to navigate. They usually support the sharing of a variety of content like Word, PDF, Excel files, audio, videos and many more. Students' learning and assessments can also be tracked through quizzes and the rubric-based assessment of submitted assignments.

Broadly identified challenges with e-learning are accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy (Margatrotd, 2020). Many countries, such as Nigeria, have substantial issues with reliable internet connection and access to digital devices. In many developing countries, economically backward children are unable to afford online learning devices, and for many who can afford them, online education poses a risk of over-exposure to device screens. This is why it is essential for students to also engage in offline activities and self-exploratory learning. Moreover, young learners need parental guidance, and the physical workspaces should be conducive to different ways of learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Relationships with peers and teachers showed a tendency to be perceived as identical to what it was before the lockdown (i.e., in-class sessions). Pokhrel and Chhetri found that the new generation of digital natives, defined as the hyper-cognitive generation (p. 37), is able to interact with peers via social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Thread, Snapchat etc.) in more efficient ways than previous generations (p. 38-39). Social media relationships have changed the way adolescents interact. There is also the issue of the relationship with teachers. The new generation has replaced "communication" with "interaction", and this is forcing teachers to create classroom setups that incorporate new technologies into their classrooms (p. 43-44). Nowadays, the challenges of accessing online learning are less serious because both learners and teachers have experienced the excellent opportunity to learn and interact with educational technology tools such as mobile-based learning, computer-based learning and web-based learning. Learners are now native speakers of technology languages. Hence, their interaction with the virtual and digital world is profuse (Prensky, 2001). The interaction of these learners with a wide array of technology for various purposes enables them to be active recipients of e-learning.

In all e-learning environments or situations, the core issue is that of presence. Ijaselsteijn and Riva (2003) established that the practicality of the internal presence (personal presence) versus the external presence enabled by technology (telepresence) must be addressed in e-learning situations. A key feature of presence is the ability to interact and modify the environment, not simply observe it. Therefore, designers and

architects may be responsible for the overall feel of a space, but it is the people interacting with and within that space that produce the sense of place and being (Benyon, 2014, p.30). The digital space is a world of virtual reality, databases, spreadsheets, the internet, music, electronic books, films and videos, Facebook, Twitter, phone calls, Skype, and all things digital. It is the same as the popular term 'cyberspace', but by foregrounding the digital, we highlight other issues. Digital space is the space of bits rather than atoms. It is intangible but infinitely transmittable and transformable (Benyon, 2014, p. 37).

Findings and Discussion

All acting and directing practical sessions are theatrical performances because the director/facilitator serves as the surrogate audience. Traditionally, theatrical performance is a peculiar kind of interaction between performers and observers in a shared physical space. Also, in Theatre Arts training, acting and directing are core practical courses. That is, the classes would have to have some sort of interaction among students and then between students and their facilitators, lecturers or coaches. And, of course, they would have to share in a physical space. Therefore, the classrooms are usually designed for performances. In the University of Ibadan, there is the Wole Soyinka Theatre and Geoffrey Axworthy Studio. From practical acting to directing sessions through rehearsals to performances, the spaces were specifically designed to accommodate all these kinds of physical interactions. However, these spaces were not equipped with digital technology, as guided by Benyon's Theory of Blended Spaces, to make digital interactivity possible. This study takes a cursory look at the practicality of online learning and the breaking of the spatial barrier between acting and directing classrooms and the digital learning workshop. It also interrogates the skills that are needed by actors and directors during the training to perform within this changing spatial environment, such as cyberspace, and the adequacy of the available teaching materials and methods.

In the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, the training for acting and directing was not easy to move online, but we were able to transmute online, using a combination of Zoom, Google Classroom, Telegram and WhatsApp to deliver training and provide artistic, psychological and emotional support to our students. When the closure of universities mandated online learning, it was a general assumption that there should be no problem from the students' angle because they were already used to networking online anyway. However, many of the students in public universities are not as economically and financially buoyant as their counterparts in private universities. So, it was not as easy to migrate online to public universities as it was in private universities. Both the institution and the students complained of the prohibitive cost of online learning and of streaming bitrates of videos and graphics in the electronic remote training (ERT) and Learning Management System (LMS) that the University of Ibadan was deploying. Therefore, the University of Ibadan's ERT and LMS did not work as expected because many of the staff found it very cumbersome to adapt to these platforms. And, of course, the technology deployed by the university was quite difficult as well and not too easy to follow. Therefore, in order to progress into remote teaching and learning, lecturers readily deployed Google Classroom and Zoom Meeting as the preferred method of synchronous training because those two methods support video conferencing on a large scale, and they were quite easy to use. In the Department of Theatre Arts, in addition to Google and Zoom, we also adapted to those platforms the students were used to, such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook, in order to deliver training, especially in acting and directing. We had to create an online space where we could meet and interact.

After the migration of acting and directing

courses online and onto easier platforms, we discovered, during the synchronous classes on Telegram, that some students were still unable to join the classes. They were always absent. This was either due to poor network connection in their areas, lack of data, the unconducive environment at home where they were joining, or, at worst, they didn't have the device that they could use to join in. Also, we had to combat the problem of the students having to be in two spaces at the same time, that is, their physical environment space and the digital space. This is because getting the concentration of students for the classroom tasks was very difficult. Many students were doing other things when they were supposed to be in class. And, of course, the facilitators and tutors struggled with how to control this duality of presence.

The solution was to move from synchronous to asynchronous classes. Further, it was believed that if we had asynchronous training, many of them would be able to learn in their own free time rather than be there at the particular time of synchronous learning delivery. Now, the asynchronous learning that we adopted seems cheaper and easier because it was mainly done with texts and audio recordings. Now, group leaders of the different groups will lead the other students in the workshops and send audio recordings of what they're supposed to be doing. Then, the students will respond either through text or another audio recording. This is because it was discovered that even in asynchronous classrooms, downloading video was heavy and too data-consuming. So they couldn't even download videos. It was a very tough call, and the students finally had to rely on audio recordings and texts. Chatting for the asynchronous classrooms worked very well and seamlessly.

Zoom was retained as the medium for our weekly practical presentations. Here, once a week, everybody could get on Zoom and present their monologues and their improvisations with everybody present. Students could also give and receive feedback during these sessions. There were a few demerits during performances on Zoom. There were issues with technical glitches, like loss of audio, echoes during calls, inability to sign in, Zoom crashes, screen freezes, etc., amidst other problems; these disrupted the flow of action during presentations. These problems contributed to the larger problem of interactivity because it was not easy for students who were unable to log on to Zoom or even get access, or during the performances, their screens froze up. Even at times, the performers' screens did freeze up. So, the whole idea of interacting between the members of the groups became very difficult, and interactivity is quite germane to the training of acting and directing. For the directing students, trying to organise play readings, rehearsals, or movements was also very cumbersome. Some actors might be present and able to sign on, while some were unable to get online or sign on due to poor network connectivity or the actor's inability to afford data. The directing students were frustrated and had to rely on one-on-one personal rehearsals online. Actors had to give individual performances of their parts to the directing students only when they were able and free.

Furthermore, critiquing, which is a very important aspect of actor/director training, suffered latency during these online classes because much of the feedback or critiques have to be sent in after the performances. So, there was no immediate response. That was even where the students had been able to see and do an informed critique of the action. But most of the time, they had to send in these critiques through text or through audio recordings, which will be long after the performance. Maybe another person will be performing before the last critique comes in. This situation greatly reduced the potential for peer-to-peer feedback and discussion.

Conclusion

Online space and online mode of learning delivery, as they stand presently, have proved to barely support coaching students in acting and directing. For instance, our monologue improvisations and directing workshops, which thrive on audience participation, suffered greatly

during the training delivery. The performance spaces on Zoom and Telegram reduced or outrightly took out the spontaneity of the performance. Also, students have accessibility problems, poor internet service and problems with high data costs. Many students lacked access to digital devices that they needed to use to get on the internet. Therefore, they receive less learning and support online. Most importantly, embodied enactment and instinctive exchange, central to performing arts, are lost in cyberspace. Therefore, the attention we pay to online content is different for both students and coaches. Either performing in space or watching a performance, those who share this space and not just 'in space', their interrelationship shapes the shared space.

The future of digital performance promises a very deep collaboration with cutting-edge technology. Training in performing arts cannot be otherwise. For instance, Microsoft developed Hololens in 2016, and with David Nussbaum's PORTL in 2019, they are pioneering *Holoportation* together. This state-of-the-art hologram technology will improve our notion of digital space and interactivity. This technology would demand an understanding of the spatial topology of digital performance for the actor and the director. Hence, it is imperative to include methods of digital interactivity early in the training of actors and directors. The challenge, however, is how developing countries like Nigeria will get onto the 5G+ technology and domesticate it. Undoubtedly, 5G+ technology is definitely the future of online performance or 'cyberformance.' The coming of COVID-19 has revolutionised teaching and learning, and the Nigerian educational system must rise up and meet the challenges of emerging alternative spaces and learning locations.

References

Benyon, D. (2012). Presence in blended spaces. *Interacting with computers*, *24(4)*, 219–226. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intcom.2012.04.005

Benyon, D. (2014). Spaces of interaction, places for experience. Synthesis Lectures on Human-Centered Informatics *7(2)*. Morgan and Claypool

Brook, P. (1968). *The empty space*. Touchstone.

Hentschel, U. (2007). ...mit Schiller zur mehr social skills...? Zur Rolle des Theaters im aktuellen Bildungsdiskurs. dramaturgie. Zeitschrift der Dramaturgischen Gesellschaft 1/2007, pp. 5 – 9.

IJsselsteijn, W., & Riva, G. (2003). Being there: the experience of presence in mediated environments. In G. Riva, F. Davide, & W. A. IJsselsteijn (Eds.), *Being there: concepts, effects and measurements of user presence in synthetic environments* (pp. 3–16). IOS Press.

Llewellyn-Jones L. (2002). Understanding theatre space. https://www5.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greek-plays/publications/essays/llewellyn-jones-understanding-theatre-space.

Pinkert, U. (2011). The concept of theatre in theatre pedagogy. In S. Schonmann (Ed.) *Key concepts in theatre/drama education.* Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-332-7_19

Schechner, R. (1968) 6 Axioms for the environmental theatre. *The Drama Review: TDR, Spring, 1968, 12(3),* 41-64.

Microsoft HoloLens - https://m.youtube.com/channel/UCT2rZIAL-zNqeK1OmLLUa6g

Murgatrotd, S. (2021). Insight: a cancelled future. What's next for Universities and Colleges? In D. Burgos, A.Tlili and A. Tabacco (Eds.) (2021).*Radical Solutions for Education in a Crisis Context*. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-15-7869-4_22

Petrie, C. (2020). Spotlight: quality education for all during COVID-19 crisis (Hundred Research Report #01). United Nations. https://hundredcdn.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/report/file/15/hundred_spotlight_covid-19_digital.pdf

Pokhrel, S., & Chhetri, R. (2021). A literature review on impact of COVID-19 pandemic on teaching and learning. *Higher Education for the Future*, 8, 133-141. https://doi.org/10.1177/2347631120983481

PORTL CEO David Nussbaum live HoloPortation demonstration - https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=zIVnYzjcVtA

Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants part 1, On the Horizon, *9(5)*,1-6. https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816

Widodo, SFA & Wibowo, YE & Wagiran, Wagiran. (2020). Online learning readiness during the

Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Physics: Conference Series*. 1700,1-4. 012033. 10.1088/1742-6596/1700/1/012033.

Stuckey, M., V. Richard, A. Decker, P. Aubertin, D. Kriellaars (2021). Supporting holistic wellbeing for performing artists during the COVID-19 pandemic and recovery: Study Protocol. *Frontier Psychology*. *12,* 1-8. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.577882