Online Theatre Education: Theatre's Doom or Salvation?

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Abstract

Online education is growing in popularity and demand, yet there is not an undergraduate online theatre degree program. I argue that online theatre degrees should parallel traditional theatre degrees in higher education to spread advocacy for theatre, educate atypical students, and stay competitive with other online degree programs. The success of any discipline relies on the ability to advocate and educate future generations. Every year more students are choosing to pursue an online education over a traditional education. Online programs do not attract the same "type" of students as traditional programs. Online students differ from traditional students for many reasons. Most notably, successful online students must already possess autonomous skills and self-advocate. The specific students interested in online education include, adult learners, distance learners, and bargain learners. Education is continuing to make strides toward electronic learning. If theatre does not join these efforts, then their reluctance could lead to extinction in the academic world. Given the opportunity, most students would undoubtedly choose a face-to-face theatre education over an online theatre education. My argument is stating that many students do not have the choice to attend a face-to-face program, so the educational theatre community should provide online alternatives. Online theatre education degrees are often seen as a step backwards but embracing the online education platform will immerse theatre in the twenty-first century and provide the pathway for the newest generation of theatre artists.

Keywords: Online Theatre Education, Experiential Learning, Diverse Learners, Theatre Advocacy;

1. Introduction

Theatre artists and educators tend to have strong feelings about online instruction. Some theatre educators think "online" and "theatre education" are three words that don't belong together, while others believe online theatre education programs are the future. How popular are online courses? According to U.S. News, "5.8 million students were enrolled in at least one distance learning course in fall 2014" [1]. Online degrees are a prominent force in American education, yet there is not a single online theatre degree available to undergraduates. Generally speaking, academia is embracing the online platform, so why is theatre resisting this twenty first-century trend?

As it turns out, theatre is not alone in withstanding the temptations of online education. Disciplines requiring both theory and practice in a collaborative face-to-face setting, like sciences, engineering, and arts, often provide the fewest amount of online course offerings [2]. Though many of my arguments apply to multiple disciplines, I focus my advocacy primarily on theatre disciplines. However, due to the infancy and rarity of online theatre courses, I look to established online degrees for insight and answers. The two most popular types of online degrees in the United States are business degrees and education degrees [3]. Each of these disciplines offer a series of collaborative specializations not unlike those of theatre, yet they have thriving online enrollment. Education and business, despite their current success, experienced their own resistance during the inception of their online education programs [4]. Ultimately, educators in these vocations developed online teaching strategies and opportunities that parallel face-to-face education. Theatre educators, however, still provide more obstacles than solutions when it comes to developing online degrees. What if theatre followed in the footsteps of business and education? I argue that online theatre degrees should parallel traditional theatre degrees in higher education in order to spread advocacy for theatre, educate atypical students, and stay competitive with other online degree programs.

2. Advocacy for theatre

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The success of any discipline relies on its ability to advocate and educate future generations. Every year more students are choosing to pursue an online education over a traditional education [1]. Without theatre degrees as an online option, is the field of theatre missing out on students and future scholars?

Online theatre courses already exist. At the graduate and undergraduate levels, students may pursue coursework online, but not complete an entire degree online. This reinforces the common perception plaguing modern-day theatre advocacy that theatre is merely a hobby rather than a degree-worthy vocation. Without online theatre degrees, institutions are missing out on twenty-first century learners who have the potential and willingness to contribute to the field of theatre. Similar to the fields of business and education, theatre educators need to take it upon themselves to transfer their coursework to an online platform. Educators are the primary advocates and motivating factors in developing online education opportunities. Conversely, educators are also the main obstacle. Why are some educators on board for an online shift while other educators strongly oppose this change [5]?

The main argument and deterrent against online theatre degrees is the inability for students to collaborate and hone artistic crafts in a responsive environment [6]. Business and education faced similar issues during their early years of online programming, yet educators in those fields established solutions and provided online modifications to help students succeed [4]. Online education experienced criticism at first and was accused of providing an incomparable and inadequate educational opportunity for students [7]. Theatre educators may fear similar scrutiny and results, but as business and education exemplify, criticism leads to adjustments and advancements. Online theatre classrooms would undoubtedly produce unforeseen issues at first, but it would also provide new educational opportunities. After all, a developing theatre artist is a more powerful resource than the nonexistent alternative.

A common criticism presented to business and education educators is that online instruction does not provide students with real-world experience. In theatre, real-world experience comes in the form of productions and artistic and scholarly pursuits. Can online degrees possibly offer an artistic home and experimental laboratory that allows failure in the pursuit of success? The task for educational institutions offering online theatre degrees is to create environments and opportunities in which students can experiment with their art and make artistic risks without major repercussions. Universities may follow the example of business and education programs by providing opportunities for students to intern or volunteer at a local theatre. Similar to pairing student teachers to schools, online theatre education programs could pair theatre students with local theatre companies. This relationship would provide a mutually beneficial exchange and widen the network and resources of the hosting university.

3. Atypical students

Another common fear among theatre educators is that online theatre degrees will not properly prepare students to face the demands of various careers in theatre [6]. Though there is validity in this argument, there are factors that its adherents may not have considered. Online programs do not attract the same "type" of students as traditional programs [5]. Online students differ from traditional students for many reasons; most notably, successful online students must already possess autonomous skills and an ability to self-advocate [8]. Autonomy and self-advocacy are skills that institutions try to instill in their theatre students, yet many institutions may overlook that their online students already excel in these skills. The specific students interested in online education include adult learners, distance learners, and bargain learners.

The practice of adult learning, or "andragogy," expounds on the educational psychology and methodology of adolescent pedagogy and defines the needs and differences of adult students. The average age of online bachelor's students is thirty-two years old [9]. Unlike most adolescent students, adults approach their education with a lifetime of experiences. Even if their experiences don't directly apply to their education, adult learners are more liable to make connections and retain new material. Additionally, adult learners often have a stronger purpose and discernible outcome for pursuing education [8]. Online education, paired with internships at local theaters, would allow adult learners to practice their education in an immediate setting. Theatre educators should consider adult learners as an asset and contributing factor to the success of online theatre degrees.

Distance learners also fall into the category of atypical students. Distance learners are defined as any student unable, for whatever reason, to travel to a physical educational institution. Examples of distance learners lend some insight into why a student would choose to pursue a distance learning experience. International students seeking a higher quality education might look for schools outside their country.

International students don't always have the financial means or ability to leave their home country, so learning online is often their only option for a viable international education. Rather than viewing online theatre degrees as an alternative for some students, educators should consider an online degree as an opportunity for students without access to an education.

The third and final example of an atypical student is a student seeking an affordable learning opportunity. The high cost of education may play a role for adult learners and distance learners, but for some students, it is the primary factor holding them back from pursuing an education at a traditional establishment [2]. Online learning offers cheaper learning experiences by avoiding relocation fees, on-campus dining/housing fees, and often allows students to maintain full-time and part-time work.

Ultimately, atypical students have an edge over their traditional student counterparts because of their ability to work autonomously and self-advocate. How many atypical students preferring an online theatre degree settled for a different degree solely because of its online availability?

4. Competing with other online degrees

The best way to ensure the future of any discipline is to provide an accessible education. Students are pursuing options that are convenient. A traditional university has numerous degrees and educational options from which to choose. Online degree programs, specifically undergraduate degrees, already pose a threat to online theatre degrees. Education continues to prosper with the aid of technology. In the absence of a traditional learning environment, technology gives students a comparable experience. Many undergraduate courses are already accompanied by an online entity. Online platforms like BlackBoard and Schoology provide organizational tools and course materials, which assist in accompanying face-to-face courses.

The transition from face-to-face to online would not be a difficult task if faculty and institutions supported the idea. Online theatre degrees could easily exist with the tools and resources already available. A hindering factor is the perception of online theatre degrees within the theatre community. Successful implementation of online theatre degrees requires theatre artists and scholars to change their cultural perception of this degree. In this sense, theatre, (and many other arts) are lost in the shadows of other thriving online degree programs. Education is continuing to make strides toward electronic learning. If theatre does not join these efforts, their reluctance could lead to extinction in the academic world [7].

5. Moving forward

There is no denying that our world is influenced by technology. Technology in the classroom looked very different twenty years ago, forty years ago, and sixty years ago. Similarly, technology in the classroom will look very different twenty years, forty years, and sixty years from now. It is imperative that educational institutions, in every department and discipline, maintain an understanding and ability to implement new and prominent ideas.

Given the opportunity, most students would undoubtedly choose face-to-face theatre education over online theatre education. My argument is that many students do not have the choice to attend a face-to-face program, so the educational theatre community should provide online alternatives.

Theatre must constantly be fostered and advocated. Online theatre education degrees are often seen as a step backwards but embracing the online education platform will immerse theatre in the twenty-first century and provide the pathway for the newest generation of theatre artists.

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