

Report Oral storytelling

Oral storytelling as artistic research was a pilot course that was arranged autumn 2020 as a cooperation between Oslomet metropolitan university, department of Art, Design and Drama and Federation for European storytelling (FEST). This was a master level course and gave five ECTS. The idea of building the course, was that 2/3 should take place via digital platforms and 1/3 was planned to be physical presence in the same physical space in Oslo, Norway. Due to Covid19, the entire course 2020, including the exams, was done digitally. The course was finished 30th of October 2020 with an exam that consisted of a solo performance and a written paper.

Background

The teacher in the pilot course and the storyteller Abbi Patrix points out of one of the key functions of the course: “We cannot reproduce an idea of the past, we have to reinvent the content and the context of the storytelling revival, so we have to be searchers” (Carmelo & Patrix, 2020).

As part of the European network grant attained by FEST, the federation was to secure the professional development of storytellers in Europe. For this work a group of experts formed *strand 3* who pursued raising the topic through different methods: the analysis of training needs, residencies and performance opportunities for young storytellers and continued professional development for established storytellers, surveys, historical background research, work on the competences, and in-depth interviews. The work was done through online meetings/discussions, live meetings, document search and reading, solitary work by the individuals and communication on different platforms and ways.

According to the research there are very few institutions which offer formal training of storytellers. Most of the training of storytellers today happens through informal and non-formal practice. The research showed that most of the formal and informal studies are concentrated around giving the participants some basic skills in oral storytelling. Other result from the research:

- ✓ From the outside the content of the formal and informal courses seem not to differ, despite that it seems like the different trainings aim at different target groups.
- ✓ None of the trainings are on a higher level than bachelor.
- ✓ It seems like the formal educations are more contextualised than the non – formal training. The non – formal training are more focused on the personal development of the individual participant, except for training aimed at teachers.
- ✓ The non-formal trainings are “not clear” on the learning outcomes of the trainings regarding competences, skills and knowledges.
- ✓ Most courses are focused on the practical way of learning, performing and using storytelling in different contexts.

The research also shows a lack of theoretical background, as pinpointed by the teacher in the course and the storyteller Luis Correia Carmelo:

As pointed out by several authors, one of the most worrying aspects of oral storytelling professional activity is the lack of theoretical background and critical language, what is surely reinforced by the fact that a big part of the literature and the training programs available is based and targeting practice (see Birch & Heckler, 1996; Ryan, 2003; Sanfillippo, 2007). Because of that, the professional development of oral storytellers should be necessarily connected with the acquisition of competences included in what the competence model developed by FEST called the “researcher” domain. These are the competences involved in the activities of search for story material, research on the background of stories and oral storytelling, explore and assess own and others practices, among others, essential in artistic research processes. These competences demand an extensive understanding of the oral storytelling contemporary phenomenon, a broad knowledge of folklore theory in general and specific references of performing arts practices and approaches. (Carmelo & Patrix, 2020)

Based on this, *strand 3* was challenged to create a new course for experienced storytellers.

Curricula

Strand 3 wanted a course that would give the students credits. We ended up with a course giving five ECTS. The course was also to be at a master's level, and it was then natural that it became a further education course, as it could not be included in a full program plan in a master's degree. The indication of the master level can be seen through the formulation of the learning outcome.

Preliminary investigations and research by *strand 3* formed the content of the plan, and also Norwegian conditions had to affect this content. An overview was therefore made to see

the frequency of oral storytelling in Norwegian education and culture. Oral storytelling is well established in pedagogy, for this reason the focus of the course plan was aimed at performing arts, because oral storytelling needs to be strengthened in relation to the discourse of the art world. The focus of the course was thus artistic research.

Artistic research is a research methodology where the process within an art field and the work of art is central. The research has practice as its central subject, while at the same time being theory-driven. The research will take place through or within an artistic process and an artistic work. Having this as a topic in a study, was then central because the students could through this contribute to developing the oral storytelling further.

We ended up with a program plan having the following learning outcome:

Learning Outcome:

Knowledge

The student

- has in-depth knowledge of practices of oral storytelling as performing art
- has in-depth knowledge of artistic research
- is capable of analyzing and using oral storytelling based on social needs

Skills

The student:

- is capable of analyzing relevant topics based on oral storytelling's distinctive character and place in society
- is capable of using relevant methods for developing artistic research in an independent manner
- is capable of developing and using relevant methods to achieve a result

General competence

The student:

- is capable to carrying out an oral storytelling artistic development project under supervision and in line with current research ethics norms
- is capable of contributing to innovation and innovation processes within the area of oral storytelling
- is capable of analyzing, reflecting and communicating oral storytelling in a community-oriented context

Reading list

In terms of the reading list, this had to be adapted to both the theme of the subject, but also BA and MA in drama and theatre that already exists at the department. This is to prevent students from "earning" the same credits multiple times.

The course featured fixed literature, extra literature, and in addition the students' self-selected literature.

The fixed list covered both the subject – and the field of research and here we made attempts to achieve the last published with a high academic standard. Oral storytelling is a marginal subject and it is difficult to find specific literature that is not too wide and not at the beginner level. The extra literature was based on the idea that students had to have some competence before they started studying in this course. The literature of their choice, the students chose themselves aimed at their own field of research.

The students

The requirement to enter the program was BA (regardless of what they had BA in), two years of documented oral storytelling experience, and the applicants had to submit a motivational letter. There were twelve applicants for the program, of which eleven were eligible. When Norway was shut down due to the pandemic, the study had to be digital, which led to the resignation of some of the students. One resigned because the study was too laborious. The program then ended up with six students, five of whom completed the exam.

Both gender were represented and age was from the beginning of the twenties to sixties. All students had some experience in oral storytelling and all had a BA in different subjects. Several also had a master and one had a PHD.

Teachers

Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen was responsible for the course and had some teaching in the pilot. Luis Correia Carmelo and Abbi Patrix was responsible for most of the teaching and mentoring. In addition, professor Camilla Eeg-Tverrbakke had a lesson lasting three hours. The university librarian Tone Hoemsnes was also supposed to have a three-hour session, but this was cancelled due to illness.

Implementation

The study spanned four weeks, which was then followed up by exams. Two days a week was intended for teaching, then followed mentoring in groups and individually over two days, and one day was set aside for study day. Each week also had a regular fixture of the class hour, where students and teachers could discuss various things related to the organization of the week. We made an effort to combine theory with practice in a dynamic way.

Luis Correia Carmelo describes the teaching as follows:

To achieve that we implemented a model organized in work days in which our training was complementary: I assured theoretical inputs while Patrix reflected on the practical implications of those through examples and exercises.

This same complementarity between theory and practice was pursued in the mentoring component of the course. The groups and trainees were divided for mentoring between Patrix and I according to the specific needs of their research processes at the moment (Carmelo & Patrix, 2020).

It eventually became clear that too many days were overfilled with teaching and mentoring and the students felt they did not have time to work on their own projects. In the last week, the number of hours in terms of teaching was reduced, giving students more time for their own projects.

Evaluation and assement

The evaluation of the study took place through an electronic questionnaire, as well as a conversation between students and teachers. Overall, the students were satisfied with the pilot course:

The combination of theoretical and practical information provided by Abbi and Luis worked well for me. Also, the methods that Heidi used to push us to make quick decisions about our projects. That was really helpful even though didn't feel very comfortable, but worked well in the end as from the very first day of the school we've got an idea of what is expected from us. I also really enjoyed the general mood in the group, was always pleasant and felt open, we could ask anything we were interested in. (Anonym2, 2020).

At the same time, there were several comments on what could be improved. First and foremost, the course was too intense and laborious: “I think it would be worth considering to stretch the masterclass over a longer period (for example 4 month or whole semester) having every month a meeting for four or five days. So you would have more time to digest all the great information and input you get. (Anonym3, 2020).»

There was also a desire for more varied digital teaching:

Also, if the course continues to be an online course, the screen time needs to be reduced, or at least the students should be allowed just to listen for a lecture without turning on their video. (Anonym2, 2020)

I would like more workshop-style sessions and to have the opportunity to apply theory and try it out myself not just hear or read about it. (Anonym4, 2020).

It also emerged in the conversation that there could have been more focus on artistic research work, preferably with examples.

It should be noted that working language of the pilot was English, and this was for some students somewhat demanding.

The study was completed with exams. The first exam was a solo performance conducted on the platform zoom. The performance was followed up by a ten minutes talk with the examiners. The external examiner Ragnhild Alette Mørch writes the following about the exam:

The procedure of the exam was well organised and ran smoothly. The zoom space was open 20 minutes before the start of each exam and Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen was in on-going contact with the members of the audience via the chat function. Once the exam had officially started, Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen introduced the tellers and informed the audience on how to pin the correct speaker-view to allow for uninterrupted viewing of the performance. There was no issue with the Internet connections, some technical problems occurred with regards to the use of a microphone.

The usage of two different Zoom rooms and the waiting room function allowed for an undisturbed talk between the examiners and performer after the performance. Only in one instance were some issues with the Internet connection, which caused a delayed start of the talk. (Mørch, 2020)

The grading scale used was from A (excellent) to C (good). One candidate led to a lengthy discussion:

One student decided to perform an experimental piece, in which the student deconstructed the story completely. If one defines oral storytelling as an art form in which a story is told and remains recognisable as a story as a narration based on a comprehensive structure, his piece, as an exam, was problematic. As a stand-alone performance, for me, his final exam presented work beyond the art form of oral storytelling. Nevertheless, for the long-term effect of him participating in the course, it might very well be that this exploration was an important step for him. (Mørch, 2020).

The last exam was a written paper, also here the grade scale A to C was used. This exam was assessed by an internal examiner. Both exams were related to their research project.

Conclusion

It has been a rich experience to complete this pilot course. As teachers and academically responsible, I agree that the study becomes too much in such a short time. It is then proposed to turn the study into a part-time study and to do it late spring term. The intention is to do it as originally intended, with introductory digital teaching and a final physical attendance week in Oslo followed by exams.

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Mimesis Heidi Dahlsveen, Oslo December 2020.