Hos, R., Argus, S., Triki, A., Yalcin, M. G., Walshe, R., Santucci, A., & Ponticelli, M. (2023). Performing as teachers and learners: The role of theatre in coming better university instructors. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching, 34*(1), 47-68.

Performing as Teachers and Learners: The Role of Theatre in Becoming Better University Instructors

Rabia Hos
Stefanie Argus
Anis Triki
Mehmet G. Yalcin
Rachel Walshe
Anna Santucci
Max Ponticelli
University of Rhode Island

This mixed-methods interdisciplinary study explores the relationship between theatre skills and graduate teaching assistants' development as university instructors. The authors employ a critical lens to look at classroom interactions as acts of performance. Data, which they collected through surveys and interviews with graduate teaching assistants at a public university in the northeastern United States, reveal that there is a clear institutional need to provide meaningful support to novice teachers. The interdisciplinary research team concludes that the core tenets of theatre practice constitute important elements of the kind of support emergent teachers require.

Enabling development of skills related to teaching during graduate school is an important step toward establishing a graduate student's professional identity as one that takes into account teaching, scholarship, and service (Reid, 2020). Although it's the responsibility of graduate programs to provide opportunities for their imminent faculty members to improve their teaching skills as recognized by the Council

of Graduate Schools (Winter et al., 2018), this is not the common practice in many institutions. The interdisciplinary collaboration that we established through collegial discussions created this opportunity to address some of the challenges that we observe our graduate students face when teaching. Yet we also observed that attempts to formulate a viable training mixed with sink-or-swim approaches fall short.

What happens if we consider the classroom a creative space wherein teachers and learners are co-creators engaged in a dynamic, generative act? How can the skills required of actors taking the stage best be applied to the needs and development of instructors teaching in a college classroom? How do theatre knowledge and practice constitute effective interventions in addressing teacher preparedness in higher education? Might the practices embraced by theatre artists in the generation of live performance be useful not only for teachers but also for students?

With these rather daunting questions in mind, we chose to initiate our work with what we thought were fundamental elements that required exploration. Thus, we set the purposes of our mixed-methods study as follows: first, to understand the perspectives and confidence level of graduate students as they relate to their teaching responsibilities within the institution; and, second, to explore students' first-hand experiences with an educational development experience based on and informed by theatre knowledge and skills.

Review of the Literature

In this section, we examine and organize the potential benefits of interactive, integrated theatre experiences for teaching and learning. The guiding research question for our methodology is this: What asset-oriented outcomes does interactive theatre as pedagogy afford to students in higher education settings in the United States who are predominantly international graduate students serving in teaching roles?

This question represents an area of interest due to the limited number of studies investigating the effects of interactive theatre as pedagogy for students at the college level (Lee et al., 2015). Notedly, building on Lee et al. (2015), we selectively considered only the positive effects and outcomes within the domain of drama and education, focusing on the concept of *interactive theatre as pedagogy.*

Teaching and learning through the dramatic arts involves students serving as active participants, either as audience members or performers/actors. Interactive theatre as pedagogy engages students

in learning both drama-specific content and non-drama content. A multitude of relevant concepts have been used to refer to this idea, including theatre of the oppressed (Boal, 1974), theatre games (Spolin, 1986), story dramatization (Ward, 1986), drama-in-education (Bolton et al., 1987), theatre-in-education (Jackson, 1993), process drama (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995), creative drama (McCaslin, 1996), enactment strategies (Willhelm, 2002), interactive drama (Boggs et al., 2007), applied theatre techniques (Cawthon & Dawson, 2009), dramatic inquiry (Edmiston, 2013), and drama-based pedagogy (Lee et al., 2015). Related activities include improvisation, role-playing, or performance (Lee et al., 2015). Although many of these concepts and activities were developed within specific contexts or were generated to pursue certain aims, for the purposes of this review, we use the phrase *interactive theatre as pedagogy* to encompass the full variety of approaches, strategies, and forms.

Interactive Theatre as Experiential Education

As an interactive, experiential discipline, theatre can engage both audience members and performers/actors on mental, emotional, and kinaesthetic levels, in addition to generating a shared experience (Jackson, 2005; Lazarus, 2012). According to Boud and Pascoe (1978), experiential education involves every learner, connects the pedagogical experience to the world beyond the classroom, and allows students to have control over their own learning experience. Students' reflections on their experiences and their processes of meaning-making (or constructing knowledge) are also important aspects of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005, 2006). Theatre facilitates experiential education (Dewey, 1934) by helping to "move the management learning experience from the lecture platform into the interactive, participative, doing phases" (Mockler, 2002, p. 575). Bräuer (2002) asserts that drama is "the matrix out of which all other so-called basic skills emerge, namely, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In other words, drama is the most basic of the basic skills" (p. 8). Theatre is an intersectional discipline, and Falletti et al. (2016) situate theatre within the "vast territory of the 'human sciences'" (p. xv).

Expanding upon these "basic" and "intersectional" premises, the next section of this literature review distills and orders three major categories of skills gained from theatre-based learning activities: Literacy, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. Then, the authors discuss the benefits pertaining to an individual's orientation to the role of teacher. The final section is dovetailed directly with the literature

review's overarching question of identifying the advantages of theatre as pedagogy for graduate students serving in teaching roles, particularly those who are international students and multilingual learners.

Literacy Skills

Speaking, listening, reading, and writing are core strands of literacy. Macro (2015) suggests that drama may even be viewed as literacy. *Interactive theatre as pedagogy*, in particular, can be supportive in improving literacy (Rockell, 2020) and perhaps is the most directly related to the language education benefits within interactive theatre as pedagogy contexts, especially for international students, (Bräuer, 2002; Galante & Thomson, 2016; Gill, 2016; Iamsaard & Kerdpol, 2015; Piazzoli, 2018; Rockell, 2020; Santucci, 2019; Schewe, 2013;).

Students may increase oral fluency through theatre experiences by smoothly reading texts aloud and incorporating expression and intonation (Galante & Thomson, 2016; Gill, 2016). Students participating in theatre activities may be more likely to speak without rehearsal or prepared notes (Hillary, 2019). They may also be more willing to experiment with different speaking styles, for example, spontaneous, planned, conversational, or formal styles (Gill, 2016).

Cognitive Skills

Cognition refers to the myriad processes of thinking, including acquiring knowledge and meaning-making (McConachie, 2015). Heathcote (1969) and McConachie (2015) note that interactive theatre as pedagogy can improve attention and the exercise of concentration and focus. Memory improvement, as exemplified by the ability to recall and retrieve past information, is another affordance (Falletti et al., 2016; Lazarus, 2012; McConachie, 2015). Students participating in theatre experiences may also manage the paradox of learning[1] by experiencing gains in problem-solving and solution-identifying (Kindelan, 1999, 2004, 2010, 2012), critical thinking and analysis (Kindelan, 1999, 2004, 2010, 2012), and the crystallization of new ideas (Heathcote, 1969), all the while being open to knowledge passed on by the instructors and maintaining high performance in tests and assessments (Zhang et al., 2021).

Social-Emotional Skills

Social-emotional skills reference both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects. Within this domain are individuals' capacity to understand, express, and manage their emotions, in addition to their ability to develop relationships with others. Increased interpersonal effectiveness, or the ability to relate well to other people, is another positive outcome of interactive theatre as pedagogy (Kindelan, 2010). Theatre activities have also been proven to yield heightened feelings of self-efficacy, or the belief in one's own capabilities to reach a certain goal (Bandura, 1997; Burgoyne et al., 2007). Relatedly, confidence, or a firm belief in one's abilities, (Gill, 2016; Rockell, 2020) can be increased through participation in theatre, and participants may strengthen their intrinsic or self-motivation when faced with completing challenging tasks (Gill, 2016; Kindelan, 1999).

Orientation as Teacher

Interactive theatre espouses the pedagogical values of instructors and educators who believe that their students possess expert knowledge (Heathcote & Herbert, 1985), respect what their students bring to learning situations (Heathcote, 1967), and remain learner-centered by putting students' needs first (Heathcote, 1969; Lazarus, 2012). Theatre experiences can be linked with instruction, ultimately ensuring that course content is relevant to individual students (Heathcote, 1969; Lazarus, 2012) and to real-world topics and issues (Ampka, 2004; Boal, 1974; Chitiga, 2014; Kindelan, 2010). Instructors may purposefully design lessons and activities that are accessible to all learners and that value the learning process over learning products (Jackson, 1993). Perhaps unsurprisingly, theatre promotes teacher imagination, innovation, creativity, and openness to discovery (Heathcote, 1967; Kindelan, 1999, 2004, 2010, 2012). Instructors may, therefore, be more comfortable with risk-taking (Lazarus, 2012), making adaptations to lessons or strategies when teaching (Heathcote, 1969), or responding to the unexpected or unpredictable within a classroom environment (Hillary, 2019). After teaching a class, educators often engage in self-reflection (Kindelan, 2010; Lazarus, 2012), debriefing with students (Lazarus, 2012), and feedbacking (Heathcote, 1970).

Interactive *theatre as pedagogy* supports educators' development of leadership skills (Kindelan, 2010) and teamwork skills (Heathcote, 1969; Kindelan, 2012). As a result, teachers also may be able to effectively manage the paradox of organizing[2] (Ashraf et al., 2021)

by engaging with various personalities and differing points of view (Heathcote, 1969). In utilizing theatre as a tool, teachers position themselves as active citizens in the learning environment (Gill, 2016; Heathcote, 1967; Lazarus, 2012) and prioritize collaboration within the learning community (Kindelan, 2010, 2012; Lazarus, 2012). They may uphold participatory democracy by creating opportunities for all individuals to make contributions and share in decision-making power (Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2018; Lazarus, 2012). Their classrooms may, thus, represent a flattened hierarchy (Donohue-Bergeler et al., 2018). Lastly, given theatre's inherent political nature, educators influenced by incorporating drama into education may act or inspire others to act in the broader community for purposes of social change (Amkpa, 2004; Boal, 1974; Chitiga, 2014; Kindelan, 2004, 2010, 2012; Lazarus, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

Extant knowledge in performance studies, a relatively young field informed by a combination of anthropology, speech studies, and theatre theories, suggests that significant insights emerge when utilizing a critical lens to unpack and analyze classroom interactions as *acts of performance.* Such a lens can help individuals explore the ways in which they practice identity performance. From this premise, the theoretical underpinning of our study aims to explore how we embody our roles as teachers and view teaching practice itself as a performance act.

In keeping with the scope of the project at hand, we focused on providing theatre-based opportunities for educational professional development to novice practitioners in an institution where these opportunities have been perceived by the students themselves as relatively scarce (see "Methodology," below). As Santucci (2019) argued, interdisciplinary work of this sort "constitutes an attempt at systemic critique from within our educational institutions that is our utmost responsibility" (p. 232).

Methodology

In August 2019, two of the authors offered an orientation workshop to graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) preparing to assume teaching duties in the fall 2019 semester. The two-hour workshop was designed to expose the GTAs to core principles of theatre performance and empower them to apply these principles to their own teaching and learning environments. Developed over the summer of 2019, the

workshop sought to integrate the behaviors and attitudes described by Santucci (2019) as core aspects of applied theatre for educational development and practice: experimentation, authenticity, confidence, self-awareness, and a tolerance for unpredictability.

Our research study took place at a large public university in the New England region of the U.S. The efforts involved the unique and multi-disciplinary expertise of diverse collaborators among four different units at the university: two faculty members from the Theatre Department in the College of Arts and Sciences, two faculty members from the College of Business, one faculty member from the School of Education, and a faculty development specialist from the Office of Advancement for Teaching and Learning. The purpose of our project was two-fold during its first year. The initial goal was to understand the perspectives and confidence level of graduate students as they relate to their teaching responsibilities within the institution. The second objective was to explore the students' first-hand experiences with an educational development experience based on and informed by theatre knowledge and skills. Upon obtaining the institutional review board's approval for responsible conduct of research in July 2019, our research team reached out to the pool of graduate students who were registered for the graduate student orientation session. Also, participants for possible further study were recruited at the Graduate School orientation that took place at the start of the academic year.

An important step was to learn how graduate students viewed their own preparation for teaching at the college level. To this end, the research team created a survey that was administered to all graduate students who registered to attend the orientation session in August 2019. The survey was organized into three sections: demographic information, confidence in teaching, and previous professional learning about teaching skills, including areas to improve on for becoming a better teacher. The Graduate School initiated the invitation to participate in the survey.

After the survey implementation and before the orientation session, the graduate students were asked about their willingness to participate further in our study in the upcoming academic year. From the pool of 110 students who initially participated in the survey, 50 students volunteered to participate in the interviews, and of those, 14 students were interviewed during fall 2019. The respondent pool was of "convenience"; therefore, the research team cannot ensure the generalizability of the survey findings. However, the survey data were informative, and we also used the interviews to gather richer

data from the graduate student participants. The interviews were scheduled using an online calendar poll, and two co-PIs were present during each interview. The semi-structured interview guide consisted of 11 questions, and the interview sessions were recorded using an audio-recorder and transcribed.

We used a mixed-methods research design including both quantitative and qualitative data, which we saw as complementary (Creswell, 2021). The preliminary data from the survey provided us with potentially insightful results. The qualitative data from the interviews helped us to interpret these results, to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of the graduate students as they relate to teaching, and to assess their needs for further educational professional development informed by the use of theatre knowledge and skills (Creswell, 2021).

Findings and Discussion

The data from the survey and the interviews were organized, coded, and analysed by the primary investigator (PI). Analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data concluded that three main themes emerged, as follows: (1) the need to support graduate students' preparation and self-efficacy in teaching, (2) the need to support graduate students' teaching skills, and (3) the need to support graduate students' personal and academic growth. We share our quantitative and qualitative findings for each theme in detail below.

Quantitative Findings

According to our demographic results, 65% of the graduate student participants were female, 33% were male, and 2% declined to state their gender. Twelve percent of participants were Asian, 7% were Black or African American, 68% were White, 2% selected "Other," and 11% declined to state their race. The age range of participants comprised 62% from 21-25 years old, an additional 20% from 25-30, and 18% from 30-60.

The survey contained 14 Likert-scale items to assess respondents' confidence in teaching anchored from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). After running a Principal Component Analysis with SPSS, we found that one item loaded highly on more than one component (see Table 1). Removing this item resulted in a one-component solution (see Table 2). We excluded this item from the analysis, and we used the average score on the remaining 13 items as a measure of teaching confidence.

Table 1
Principal Component Analysis

I am confident in my ability to	*Component 1*	*Component 2*
teach a course as a co-inquirer with students.	0.759	0.000
determine the academic needs of my students.	0.695	0.043
teach effectively at the university level.	0.778	0.173
facilitate class discussions.	0.758	0.206
establish a feeling of community in my classes.	0.845	0.149
construct student-centered activities.	0.819	0.170
manage the classroom.	0.800	0.135
facilitate students' communication about course content.	0.733	0.424
implement a variety of teaching strategies.	0.756	0.169
analyze my teaching in an objective and ethical manner.	0.786	0.069
understand the impact of cultural diversity on classroom content, context, & instructional strategies.	0.654	0.434
feel confident about speaking in public.	0.642	0.637

We also calculated Cronbach's alpha to check the reliability of our measure. Our results indicate that our measure has a Cronbach Alpha of .936, which exceeds the recommended cut-off value of .7 (Nunnally, 1978). We ran a one-way ANOVA to see whether participants' confi-

Table 2
Principal Component Analysis

I am confident in my ability to:	*Component 1*
teach a course as a co-inquirer with students.	0.761
determine the academic needs of my students.	0.689
teach effectively at the university level.	0.764
facilitate class discussions.	0.764
establish a feeling of community in my classes.	0.841
construct student-centered activities.	0.820
manage the classroom.	0.807
facilitate students' communication about course content.	0.754
implement a variety of teaching strategies.	0.766
analyze my teaching in an objective and ethical manner.	0.792
understand the impact of cultural diversity on classroom content, context, & instructional strategies.	0.674
voice my opinions and concerns openly in public (meetings, conferences, etc.).	0.613
connect with my students with spontaneity and authenticity.	0.750

dence differed between those who received previous professional development and those who did not (see Table 3). Our results suggest that students who received professional development training on teaching skills were significantly ($p < 0.05$) more confident (Mean = 3.94, *SD* = .62) than those who did not (Mean = 3.49, *SD* = .70).

Table 3
One-Way ANOVA

Confidence	*Sum of Squares*	df	*Mean Square*	F	*Sig. (two-tailed)*
Between Groups	2.462	1	2.462	5.351	0.024
Within Groups	26.684	58	0.460		
Total	29.146	59			

Qualitative Findings

The open-ended qualitative survey responses were read line-by-line and coded for common categories and themes. The PI and co-PIs also conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 of the graduate students who volunteered to participate in the study. The interviews served dual purposes: to gather the graduate students' thoughts on the effectiveness of the theatre workshop during the orientation, and to explore their perceptions of their personal strengths and needs in terms of teaching. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and read multiple times line-by-line. The PI employed inductive coding for the interview transcripts. First, the transcripts were read line-by-line, then open coding was conducted, and finally the codes were categorized as themes emerged. Many of the graduate students were concerned about their preparation and self-efficacy as teachers. Additionally, they felt that they needed further improvement in many areas of teaching. Each theme will be discussed in detail below.

Theme 1: The Need to Support Graduate Students' Preparation and Self-Efficacy in Teaching

According to the open-ended qualitative survey responses, participants were concerned that they were not prepared to teach as they began their first year as graduate assistants. There were multiple areas of concern as it related to teaching. The first area in which graduate students felt unprepared was understanding their role as teaching assistants was tied to their preparation for teaching. One student said, "I've been out of a formal learning environment for many years now,

so coming in as a TA is a little daunting." Another student mentioned, "I'm still not entirely sure of the details of my role." As new graduate students embark on their journeys as GTAs, many clearly do not feel prepared; not clearly laying out their expectations and roles could create or add to their uncertainty.

In addition to the uncertainty of what the expectations of the GTA role are, many graduate students also stated that they were afraid that they did not have the necessary content knowledge to be an expert in their areas of specialty. One student expressed their anxiety as follows:

> Will I be seen as helpful or expert enough? Am I an imposter? "[...] "Not feeling as if I am properly prepared or educated enough on the subject material I am supposed to teach concerns me the most." [...] "I'm nervous I'll do a bad job and the students won't learn anything.

When students were asked about their concerns in both the Likert items and the open-ended questions, 32% expressed a lack of confidence in classroom management, 22% mentioned a lack of confidence in teaching skills, and 17% shared a lack of confidence in content knowledge (see Figure 1).

The graduate students reported their major areas of concerns to be facilitating classroom management, navigating language barriers, establishing an authority role, managing time, managing challenging situations and students, and relationship building or gaining the trust and respect of students.

Theme 2: The Need to Support Graduate Students' Teaching Skills

The graduate students also responded to the survey question, "What excites you most about teaching?" Twenty-nine percent stated that supporting the learning of students excited them, 25% cited their enthusiasm for teaching, and 21% mentioned the academic growth of themselves and of their students (see Figure 2).

When students were asked in what areas of their teaching they needed professional support, 32% shared that they needed a professional development session on teaching, and 26% stated they needed to improve their classroom management skills (see Figure 3).

Figure 1

Frequency Graph for the Question: What Concerns You the Most?

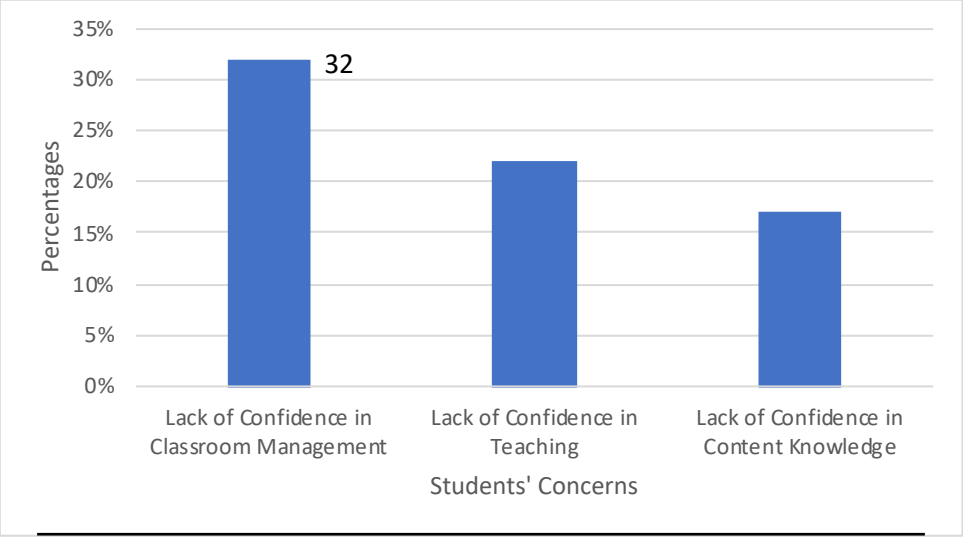


Figure 2

Frequency Graph for the Question:
What Excites You Most About Teaching?

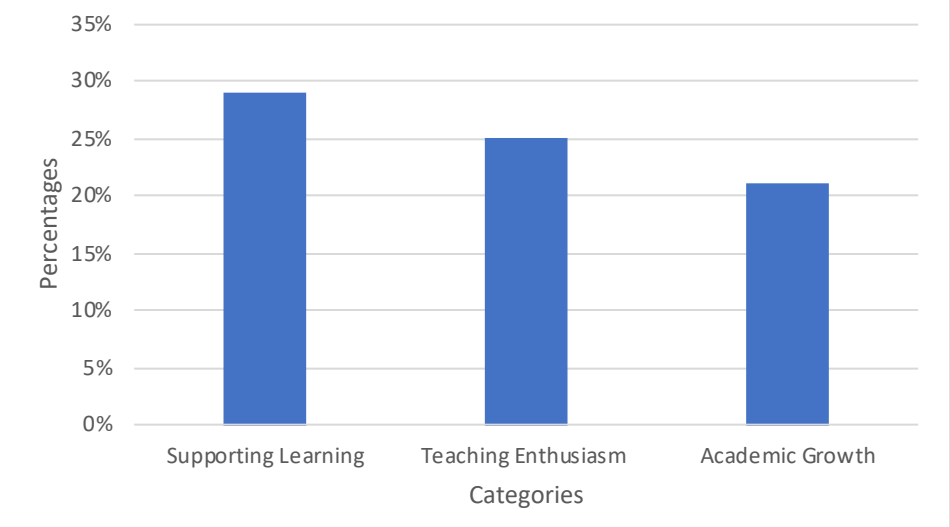
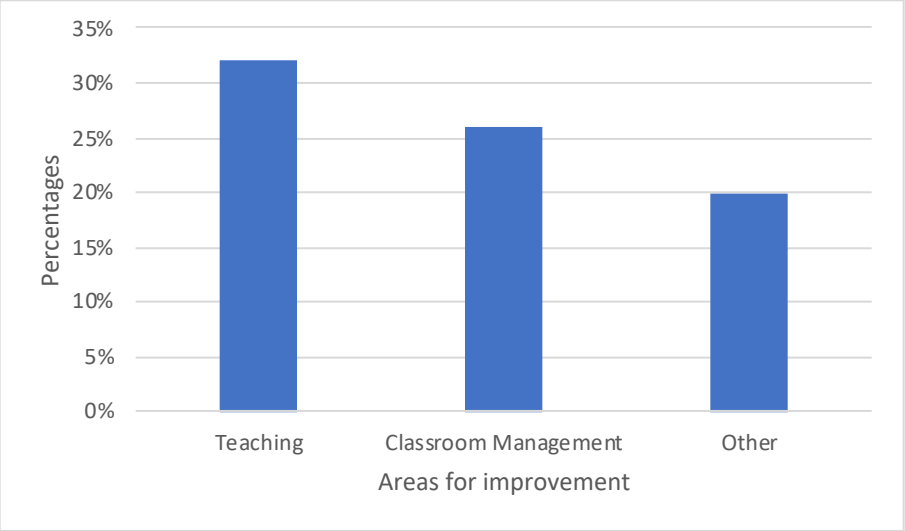


Figure 3
Frequency Graph for the Question:
Areas for Future Training [This isn't a question]



Theme 3: The Need to Support Graduate Students' Personal and Academic Growth

During the interviews, the researchers asked the graduate students about their thoughts on the theatre workshop offered as part of GTA orientation in August 2019. Overall, all of the interviewees reported positive experiences. In fact, many attested that the theatre workshop was the best workshop of the orientation. For example, one participant said,

> The theatre thing with me at least resonated in more of a way that it made me think about specific things that I could do and specific connections I could make from one side of my life to another that I never really thought were things that were related before.

Another participant stated,

> I think it was wonderful. We had fun watching it and participating in it. [...] So, one thing it did was it, it lowered our stage fright, right? Like, it took away our nervousness and

> made us more confident to perform but to do anything in front of an audience.

Additionally, a student commented that their theatre knowledge and skills increased:

> The ability to, like, think on your feet and again, just sort of being able to project like, self-confidence and a surety that you know, the material that you are, like, able to fulfil the role that you're . . . trying to do.

Another student reported that the theatre workshop "was one of those sessions of the whole day where everyone was involved, and everyone got the most of it and everyone had fun."

Another participant summed up the relationship of theatre to teaching:

> Well, so, actors, bring everyone into, like, a different world . . . the world that they're trying to portray and when you're a teacher, you're bringing everyone outside of their world and back into your accounting world, and trying to get them on board with accounting.

In addition to the orientation support, participants also mentioned that systematic support would be needed to facilitate their personal and academic growth at the university level. For example, a student suggested "offering classes that are specifically about teaching would be really good." In addition to providing teaching support, the graduate students thought that specialized support within various departments was necessary.

Several graduate students also wished that there were a centralized contact for teaching in general when they first arrived on campus and needed support. One student said, "I didn't know what to do as a teacher. So I was copying other people. But if there was a contact person that I can ask, 'Hey, I have the following questions about teaching!'"

It is evident from the interview feedback that there needs to be a systematic and inclusive support system in place to prepare and support the GTAs' development as instructors in higher education.

The findings provided in the survey responses as well as the rich interview data align with Reid's (2020) suggestion and the Council of Graduate Schools' recommendation (Winter et al., 2018) that there is a critical need for GTAs to develop teaching skills. This need could be addressed in multiple ways, but using interactive *theatre as pedagogy* is one way that GTAs can be supported in developing these skills (Kindelan, 2010) to position themselves as active citizens in the learning environment (Gill, 2016; Lazarus, 2012).

Conclusions and Implications

As evidenced by the study data, there is a clear institutional need to provide meaningful support to novice teachers. These results confirm what we know to be a common pattern documented in recent decades by the ongoing research in the field of educational development (POD Network, 2016). While educational development services have been growing within U.S.-based higher education institutions, the results of this study indicate that the need remains strong and call for a substantial increase in these services. The support provided to the GTAs documented here also suggests that the core tenets of theatre practice—experimentation, authenticity, confidence, self-awareness, and a tolerance for unpredictability—constitute important elements of the kind of support emergent teachers require.

Applied theatre for educational development is indeed an extremely promising emerging field; notable institutional examples are, for instance, the CRLT Players program in the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching at the University of Michigan and the UVA Acts program in the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Virginia. We intend to pursue the development and implementation of a fully-fledged program based on a similar model at our institution. Next steps already taken in this direction have been the adaptation of the GTA workshop described in this study for a variety of modalities, including the following:

1. Workshops currently offered by two of the co-authors as part of the institution's Graduate School's Diversity and Inclusion Badge Program.
2. The integration of theatre techniques modules into the teaching practicum graduate courses within the College of Business and the School of Communication.
3. The development of a core syllabus that expands the premier concepts underpinning these short-form workshops into a semester-long course for graduate students preparing to teach: *All the World's a Classroom: Performing as Teachers and Learners*.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has inevitably slowed our progress, we look forward to continuing the training sessions, including the proposed course mentioned under item 3 above, and to

expanding the scope of this study to include students in this course as well as faculty members participating in further educational development activities within the Office for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning. The revealing preliminary results from the GTA workshops cited in this study contribute to the body of knowledge signalling the promising impact that applied theatre for teacher education can have on GTA teaching at higher education institutions.

We recognize that there may be barriers to the implementation of theatre knowledge into GTAs' training. GTAs are expected to teach and study at the same time. Adding another layer of expectations could result in higher pressure on the GTAs. Future research could investigate how theatre knowledge can be integrated without raising the training load of GTAs. Another notable barrier would be the additional cost required to implement theatre training.

Like most studies, ours is not free from limitations. We provide some preliminary findings here, and the results may not be generalizable. Additionally, the qualitative results are based on the 14 interviews that we conducted with GTAs who participated in our study. The results may be driven by institutional factors that are not captured in our investigation. We believe that these limitations can be addressed by additional research studies conducted in other settings and/or institutions.

Footnotes

[1]The paradox of learning refers to the efforts to adjust, change, and innovate in order to foster tensions between building upon and destroying the past to create the future (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

[2]The organizing paradox refers to structuring and leading in order to foster collaboration and competition, empowerment and direction, and control and flexibility (Ashraf et al., 2021; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

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Acknowledgments

The authors sincerely thank the office of the University of Rhode Island Vice President for Research & Economic Development, Peter J. Snyder, Ph.D., for the grant support that they extended to our interdisciplinary initiative. For further information about Performing as Teachers & Learners (PT&L), visit https://web.uri.edu/atl/performing-as-teachers-learners/

The authors sincerely acknowledge the valuable contributions provided by Mr. Muhammad Hasan Ashraf, a Ph.D. Candidate in the College of Business at the University of Rhode Island, whose theater knowledge in instructional development provided anecdotal evidence and further inspiration to the authors of this interdisciplinary work.

Rabia Hos *is an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director at the School of Education in Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies at the University of Rhode Island. Her research focuses on supporting immigrant and refugee background multilingual students.* **Stefanie Argus** *is a doctoral student in the joint University of Rhode Island/Rhode Island College Ph.D. in Education program. Stefanie's graduate-level research and writing has focused on issues of (in)equity, critical whiteness studies, English Language Learners, and LGBTQ+ topics. She holds a TESOL certification, a MA in Adventure Education, and a BA in Psychology & Education.* **Anis Triki**, *Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Accounting at the University of Rhode Island. Dr. Triki teaches accounting courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. His research focuses on investors' judgment and decision making and emergent technologies.* **Mehmet G. Yalcin**, *Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Operations and Supply Chain Management at the University of Rhode Island, College of Business. Dr. Yalcin's research focus is at the interface of sustainability and innovation, with the focal point on Supply Chain Ambidexterity (SCX).* **Rachel Walshe** *is an Assistant Professor of Performance at the University of Rhode Island, where she heads up the BFA Acting and Directing programs. She is a professional director and dramarturge and holds an MA in English from Oxford University, UK, and an MFA in Directing from the Theatre School at Depaul University.* **Anna Santucci**, *Ph.D. (she/lei/sie/ella), is Senior Lecturer in Teaching & Learning Enhancement at University College Cork (Ireland), and she was Faculty Development Specialist at the University of Rhode Island (U.S.) from 2019 to 2022. A Brown University Open Graduate Education alumna, her international trans-disciplinary scholarship and practice focus on critically inclusive pedagogies informed by applied theatre, performance theory, language education, and intercultural teaching & learning. A lecturer in the University of Rhode Island community,* **Max Ponticelli** *(he/him) is a graduate of University of Rhode Island's Theatre Department and the College of Business. He is the General Manager of The Wilbury Theatre Group, an award-winning, professional theatre company in Providence, RI. A self-described jack-of-all-trades, he instructs a variety of theatre curricula and is involved with a wide range of non-profit and consulting work.*