DIY² Lab – Summary Report

Drama in Education in
the digital space

IJAB

February 2022

In March 2021, IJAB launched its new project DIY² Lab: Do-it-Yourself in Digital International Youth Work for experts, project managers and team leaders who want to explore the possibilities afforded by digital international youth work. The DIY² Labs are an opportunity for experts and team leaders to try out digital tools and methods and discuss practical as well as more fundamental issues associated with digital international youth work in the group. The events were all held on Zoom.

The experiences made with digital international youth exchanges over the last two years clearly show that creative and art-based activities for young people work exceptionally well in the virtual space – also, they encourage great group dynamics across national borders and computer screens.

The DIY² Lab event on 14 October 2021 focused on Drama in Education in the digital space, with participants discussing the potential for digital and hybrid youth exchanges. Participants tried out a number of methods, led by drama teacher Nikolas Hamm (Nihma GbR, https://nihma.de/).
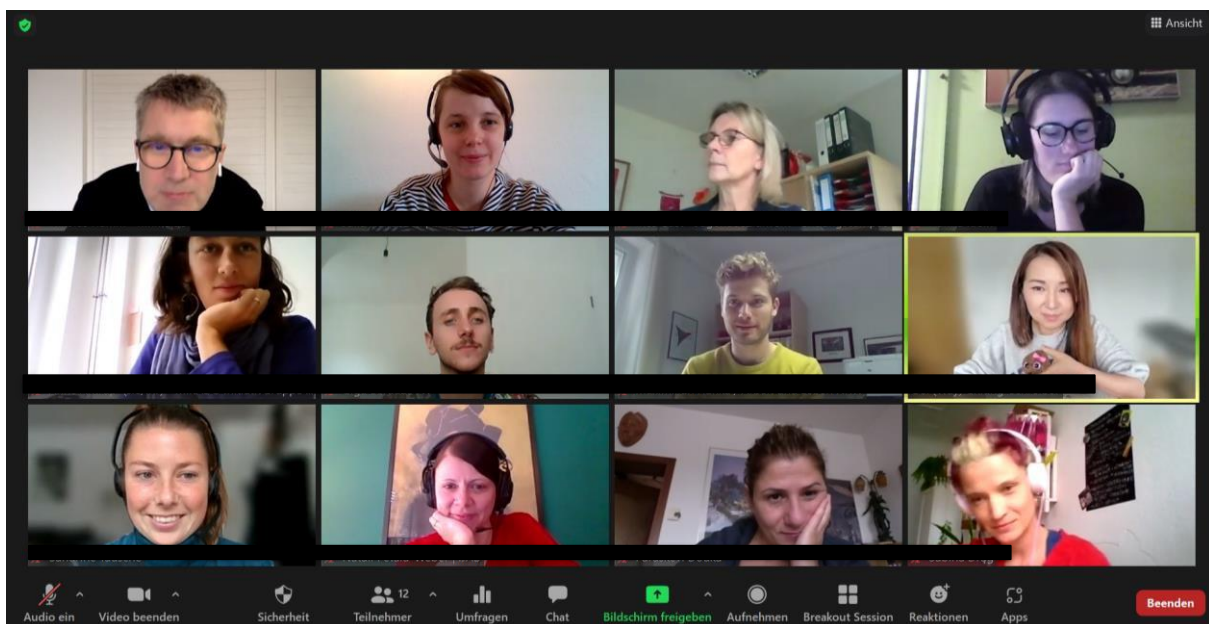
Screenshot from the check-in activity (screenshot: IJAB)

DIY² Lab

From January 2022, further DIY² Labs will take place monthly, one month in English, the next in German.

17 February 2022 (German)
10 March 2022 (English)
7 April 2022 (German)

Programme

Check-in activity

The participants briefly introduce themselves by name before stating a country (not Germany) that they know well. Participants should use the gallery view in Zoom (which displays everyone's thumbnail image). The person speaking finishes by handing over a pen to the next person above/below/to the right or left of them. In our example, during "transit" the pen changed into a different item, e.g., a heart, a mobile phone or a dog.

Warm-up activity: Physical exercise and games using the camera

Participants stand up and put some distance between themselves and their camera. They then go through a series of movements, e.g.,

- looking at the camera sideways
- peering into the camera with just one eye
- turning their heads so they look at the camera from above
- moving out of the camera's range
- holding first one arm, then both arms into the camera
- holding a leg into the camera
- moving away from the camera as far as possible, then approaching the camera in slow motion

Breakout conversations on participants' experience of theatre

The participants split into breakout groups of two or three to discuss their personal experience of theatre. They shared happy, unusual, confusing, embarrassing, awesome and overwhelming stories. Back in the plenary session, they summarise their conversations in a few words in the chat.

Presentation by Nikolas Hamm

Drama teacher Nikolas Hamm bases his work around giving participants time to settle into the space and working with the people who are present. In other words, he adapts his piece to the dynamics of the group and makes use of the diversity of people inside that group. However, the principle of working with what he is given goes beyond the group's composition; it also incorporates things, spaces and themes. Nikolas Hamm seeks to answer the following questions: Is there a common theme here? A story we can and want to tell together? And maybe even do a really good job of it?

When working in the digital space, he follows an approach known as site-specific theatre. Here, the questions to be answered are: Where are we now? What situation are we in? And what story fits in with that?

Improvisation exercise

From the here and now to the there and then... All participants are asked to switch off their cameras and mute their mics. Then, Siri reads out the following text, placing everyone in a fictitious scenario to prepare them for the improvisation exercise that follows. Nikolas Hamm encourages participants to show courage, to be silly and to not be afraid to fail.

Dear audience! This is your computer speaking!

You have been unconscious for some time. Owing to an unfortunate glitch, Earth was uninhabitable for a few years. Only a few members of the human species were able to survive in tiny, man-made space capsules. That's where they are now, in one of those capsules, flying through space. If you can hear this announcement, you, too, have made it into a capsule. Don't be surprised if your capsule feels like a familiar space, like your apartment. This is an automatically generated illusion in your brain, designed to make your journey as pleasant as possible. Stay calm! Try to breathe in and out slowly! Don't be alarmed! You have sufficient food and water. There's also a toilet, plus you have Netflix. Try to relax!

To return back to Earth safely after the disaster, you need to make contact with other members of your species. However, this could be tricky and may involve connection problems. In front of you, you see a screen. After this announcement ends, try to activate your camera and mic and establish contact to other human beings. Please remember: it is now your job to save the human race!

You should also remember that reproduction is not your only job. You also need to save the human culture. So make good use of the time you have been given. Enjoy the experience and please come up with some good ideas.

Maybe you were in the theatre at some point in your life. That may help you now. Good luck! Now, switch your camera on.

The exercise can be done in a number of versions with/without image and sound. The chat function is used to provide input.

Variation 1: Everyone talks at the same time

All participants read out sections from the chat at the same time, completing these with their own words. The cameras are off.

Variation 2: Dialogue without camera images

Two participants engage in a free dialogue, using messages from the chat as input. Their cameras are off; only their voices are audible.

Variation 3: Dialogue with a different camera image plus an emotion

Two participants engage in a free dialogue. using messages from the chat as input. Their cameras are off; only their voices are audible.
Two further participants act out the first two people's facial expressions. Their mics are muted, their cameras are on. They adapt their expressions and gestures to what they hear from the first pair. This way, new audio/video pairs are created, meaning each speaker is assigned a face. In addition, the group suggests a basic emotion for each person that should be considered during the dialogue and the "performance".

Example

Speaker 1, performer 1, emotion 1 (e.g., boredom or excitement)
Speaker 2, performer 2, emotion 2 (e.g., exhaustion or being in love)

For this variant, participants need to switch to gallery view. Just before the dialogue begins, a brief test should be done to ensure that the performers are able to "dub" the right speakers.

In the present case, volunteers were asked to come forward to try out the variations. No one did, so those who were last in switching off their cameras were asked whether they would agree to improvise in front of the others.

The improvisation session is normally be followed by a feedback session to work out where and how emotions were made visible and audible, and what adaptations could be made to expression.

It is also possible to use the chat function to share information with the group or individual participants. For instance, conflicting information can be shared, or new information can be provided during the ongoing session.

One participant proposed yet another variation: rather than base the facial expressions and gestures on what is being said, the exercise can be done vice versa: basing what is spoken on that which can be seen.

Outcomes, questions and impulses

One question that came up was how to **overcome the language barrier when working with an international group**. Maybe some participants don't speak (enough) English, for instance. How can everyone be included?

The participants had a few ideas on how to adapt the improvisation exercise to focus more on expression than on content:

- Use of different languages, e.g., each speaker uses their mother tongue.
- Dialogue among the speakers in their native language; choose performers who use a different language, e.g., with focus on emotion (and inform them that the dialogue begins with one emotion and ends with another, e.g., going from sad to happy).
- Use of an "imagined" language, with lots of emphasis on expression.

- One participant reported on her foreign language classes and suggested **using the chat** to send direct messages to individual participants or messages to the entire group…
- if a speaker struggled to find a specific word,
- to share information with one person without the others in the group knowing,
- to influence the course of the dialogue by, e.g., a term that the interlocutors have to use in their conversation.

Words to be included in the conversation can either be contributed by specific participants or the entire group.

One participant reported that they now felt confident enough to organise a digital drama festival with workshops that so far had only ever taken place on site. She said that in her experience, many young people are very **hesitant to switch on their cameras**. This aspect is the focus of the DIY² Lab on Using cameras creatively.

Another participant reported on their experience of two drama projects on Zoom, stating how important it was to meet up in person, too, given the constant distance between the participants.

To counteract any physical exhaustion and create a positive atmosphere, they had tried to **incorporate a lot of dance and exercise**, in doing so using the methods developed by Rudolf von Laban, which allow "non-dancers" to dance aesthetically. These methods, they said, translated well to digital settings.

One example, they continued, is the **Nine Point Method**, which involves connecting parts of the body with nine different points, creating movement in the process. Much like the game *Twister*, you imagine nine points on the

ground that need to be touched with one's feet, knees, hands, elbows and head. Having tried out a few movements, the combinations can be extended to include another set of nine points at chest height or above the head. It is also possible to prescribe certain movement types, for instance "flowing" or "staccato" movements.

The projects employed these methods as an improvisation exercise. The movements that participants chose were grouped into categories, e.g., movements that participants felt comfortable with. One by one, the participants demonstrated movements that they enjoyed. A dancer who was part of the instructors' team used these to create a short choreography.

One drama project was organised using the tool Padlet. Padlet is ideal for noting down the rough outline of a piece (role cards, scenes etc.). Another suitable tool is Taskcards (the German alternative to Padlet).

Inspiration for drama projects in the digital space may come from the summary reports on the previous DIY² Labs on Language Animation and/or Using cameras creatively.

Check-out activity

The participants moved as far away from the camera as possible and then drew closer again in slow motion, waving at the others, until they stood right in front of the camera and obscured it with their hand.

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Digital Tools

Zoom (Videokonferenz-Tool): https://zoom.us

Taskcards: www.taskcards.de

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