

Hybrid Acting Course Challenges Teachers and Students



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The 144 University of Virginia aspiring actors enrolled in a dozen sections of an introductory drama course are exploring new ways of teaching and learning, thanks to a 2012 Hybrid Challenge Grant.

Students and their instructors in Acting I are interacting online and accessing digital resources to improve both the teaching and the classroom learning experience.

Colleen Kelly, a **drama** professor in the **College of Arts & Sciences**, was one of 10 professors awarded \$10,000 this fall, funded by U.Va. **President** Teresa A. Sullivan, to convert a class to a “hybrid” model, incorporating the use of digital technology with classroom time.

Before applying for the grant, Kelly said she found “there was no model out there that incorporated hybrid learning to teach acting.” Her goals for the endeavor: Find ways to embrace technology and explore how performance classes could benefit, and introduce her eight graduate student instructors to the emerging approach.

Graduate instructors Mitch Voss and Sandi Carroll said they have already used technology in their own studies. Voss regularly uses the Internet to research scholarly articles and to search for videos of seasoned actors to help him develop the characters he plays. Carroll reviews video of her own rehearsals to explore her character development as a professional. Both agreed that bringing technology into Acting I created a huge learning curve for them on the teaching level, but has also been rewarding.

Using inexpensive cameras bought for the project, most instructors require students to record their rehearsals outside class and post them to UVaCollab, the University’s centrally supported digital collaborative and learning environment. Then their peers comment on a discussion page before the scenes are acted out during class time.

As a result, Carroll said students seem better prepared for scene work in class. It also helps her

coach better, because she can see choices the students made as they rehearsed and the changes they incorporated after watching themselves and getting feedback from classmates.

Second-year student Augustina Mensa-Kwao said, “It was really interesting to record our performance and have the rest of the class view it before we presented in class, because it allowed for constructive feedback.”

Christopher Murray works with his students through a private Facebook page, where they post and discuss their videos. “A lot of them do not know how to use Collab very well and they are familiar with Facebook,” he said.

Part of the investigation of the hybrid course is “to learn how best the University can support us in developing these types of classes,” Kelly said.

For an assignment on comedy techniques, students found and shared comedic videos and commented about them on Collab.

“I think that using technology broadens learning and takes it beyond the classroom and into the real world,” said Elizabeth Vilgan, an exchange student from Australia. “It allows you to more effectively see and apply the concepts and theories addressed in the classroom.”

Instructor Brad Fraizer said the use of technology “keeps the students’ minds and energy on the class. They think about the class more outside of class.”

He said videos are making a “big difference in the students thinking about how they have changed” as they progress through the course.

Instructor Amy Barrick added, “The technology makes them take the course more seriously. I understand now how much my students respond to media and am astonished how they latch on to it.”

Analysis and assessment are part of the grant requirement and these tools have “the tracking and assessment already built in” and it is easy to look back and see how much the students have grown in the application of techniques and in the understanding of the material through their discussions, Kelly said.

Two students in Murray’s section are preparing a scene they will present in a public place. As they perform, the scene will be transmitted via Skype back to the classroom, where the students can deconstruct the presentation. It was the students’ idea, Murray said.

To ensure that the videotaped exercises do not become too focused on the production aspect of recording, you need to be clear about what the assignment is and what you are looking for, Carroll added.

Instructor Mike Long said he felt the use of technology broadened the student comprehension and “appeals to different learners and the way they learn.”

“We are offering the same quality of teaching that U.Va. is known for, while at the same time bringing a new aspect to the classroom,” Voss said.

As an additional resource, the instructors worked with Robert Holden, who graduated in 2012 with majors in drama and **studio art**, to create a behind-the-scenes video of the department’s fall production of Eugene Ionesco’s absurdist play, “Rhinoceros.” The resource includes an overall discussion of how each of the production areas – direction, scene design, lighting, costume – work together to make the play a whole. It also includes videos of more in-depth discussions of each aspect.

Mensa-Kwao said, “It really helped me get into the actor’s mind as well as all the other aspects that go into a play like ‘Rhinoceros,’ and allowed me to truly appreciate acting as an art form.”

One of the class assignments is to see a production and respond to it from an actor’s perspective. The video gives them valuable background information for that task, Kelly said.

Developing all these resources will be invaluable for the graduate instructors who will teach Acting I in the future. The learning curve has been huge, but the results are showing the power of the “hybrid” model to improve and enhance learning, Kelly said.

“This is not a class that could be just an online class,” Barrick said. “The technology enhances the online work they are doing in class.”

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Jessica Wang, left, and Peyton Chaney rehearse and videotape an exercise as part of a new hybrid Acting I course. The students are learning to exaggerate their gestures for a live audience.

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