

Review of Tau, R., Kloetzer, L., & Henein, S. (2024). *Barefoot academic teaching: Performing arts as a pedagogical tool in higher education (Edition Scenario Vol. VII)*. Schibri.

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In the true spirit of improvisation, this book is an across the board “yes”! It places embodied teaching and learning at the centre of the university curriculum and as such, it should appeal to readers with a strong interest in the role of the arts in academia: students, researchers, administrators, performers, and teachers/lecturers alike, because it thoughtfully encompasses voices from almost each of these groups.

The book is divided into three sections and it begins by mapping the field, which includes firmly addressing what is needed to bring performative work into higher education, specifically in non-arts-based courses and subjects. Of specific interest to the authors is the process and the results of applying arts-based methods such as impro, drama, and theatre in teaching university students who don't usually work with the aforementioned methods and who study scientific subjects such as engineering or psychology. Part of mapping the field includes clearly describing and commenting on the two university courses that this book is centred around (described in more detail below), as well as outlining the ASCOPET research project which focuses on the arts-based methodologies applied in these courses. The Performing Arts as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education (ASCOPET) is a collaboration between the Instant-Lab at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and the Institute of Psychology and Education at the University of Neuchâtel (UNINE). It was initiated by professors Simon Henein (EPFL) and Laure Kloetzer (UNINE), along with their postdoctoral researchers Susanne Martin (EPFL) and Ramiro Tau (UNINE). The writing of all four is featured in this book.

In the middle section of the book, ‘discoveries’, the three authors concretely share what they have discovered while working with drama, theatre, and improvisation with engineering and psychology students. Additional voices, such as guest teachers and former students,

complement these discoveries by highlighting additional perspectives. These voices are in the form of written texts as well as short videos, the links to which are provided in the text. The third and final section of the book, 'towards open water', looks ahead. It offers recipes, support, and sound advice for those wishing to experiment with arts-based, performative teaching in their own academic environments. Overall the book is well-written with clear arguments, clear examples, and an engaging style.

The authors teach and research at two Swiss public universities, where they have run the two performance-based courses highlighted in this book since 2016 and 2017 respectively. They transparently map out their experiences of designing, facilitating, co-creating, and documenting two arts-based courses for university students enrolled in traditionally non-artistic disciplines, specifically engineering and psychology. They address both the joys and the challenges of this work, creating space for dialogue and reflection about the need for, and ways of, including embodied performative work in university teaching and learning.

At the core of the book is an in-depth exploration of the body's place in higher education, examining its role in shaping teaching and learning, as well as how performative work can impact students' understanding of this role. Arguments for why this is necessary in a university setting, and how it can best be done are laid out convincingly and transparently.

Positing that – in traditional western educational contexts – an implicit set of ideas about knowledge acquisition dictates and restricts the use of the body and the use of space, the authors experiment with these two parameters, immersing their university students in embodied learning through improvisation and theatre work. In a first step, the classes are moved off-campus, into dedicated performance spaces, such as a dance studio. This moves the group into a new space in which expectations, behaviour, and even clothing – in particular the lack of shoes – differ from what would be the norm in a university classroom. The authors note that many students reflected positively on the experience of leaving their shoes at the door and going into class 'barefoot'. The authors' second step is to make an explicit contract with the university students, specifying the expectations to work performatively and to co-create content through improvisation in one course and through drama in the other. Both courses are evaluated in part by the students' level of engagement, as well as via a reflective diary, and by a final performance.

Simon Henein's "Improgineering" course, offered at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) uses a mix of lectures and workshops on improvisation, dance, theatre, and music to explore creative processes in science, engineering, and the performing arts. Laure Kloetzer's course "the Psychology of Migration", offered at the University of Neuchâtel (UNINE), relies on a sociocultural approach, using literature and theatre to invite students to

reflect on the psychological aspects of migration. Both courses involve co-teaching, collaboration with performing artists, and co-creating content with students. Both courses include a final, public performance, created by the students.

In particular, the authors ask: to what extent can immersion in the performing arts inform the experience of students following scientific career paths? Hand in hand with this question is an invitation to take off our shoes and to enter the performative to space to find answers.

Contained in the approximately 200 pages of this book is an opportunity to savour academic literature with real appetite. For those who are sceptics at first, I recommend beginning with a look at the 'recipe for barefoot academic teaching' at the back of the book (pp. 186-194). As the authors point out, providing recipes in the field of education is a tricky thing: If the instructions and ingredients are too precise, the reader cannot reproduce the same dish. If they are too vague, the reader cannot follow the recipe. Tau, Kloetzer, and Henein have struck just the right balance of honesty, transparency, and competence. Their advice, based on repeated experience, strikes me as sound and useful for those wishing to replicate their ideas or to build their own barefoot courses in higher education.

Part of the appeal of this book is that it minutely and engagingly details the various perspectives documented throughout the process of designing and facilitating two university courses: "Improengineering" and "the Psychology of Migration". These perspectives include 'echos', a reflection provided by some of the course's guest artists, as well as by a former student. In echos A and B, dancer, choreographer and artistic researcher Susanne Martin shares her experience of being both an active observer and a guest teacher on the "Improengineering" course. Martin observed one cohort of students and afterwards conducted performative interviews with some of them: A form of interviewing that celebrates improvisation, which she originally developed for her doctoral thesis. These videos are available online. Viewing these interviews provides the reader with a fresh perspective on the course, as well as a better understanding of Martin's contributions. The videos show science students improvising answers to interview questions using both their bodies and their voices as resources. As Martin points out, being willing to share their playful doing on video demonstrates that these university students have acquired a level of performative skill – and importantly, a comfort with that skill set – that facilitates sharing spontaneous thought and (re)action. This allows them to construct and share their personal perspectives in a vulnerable, artistic, and constructive way. According to Martin's observations, the students appear to have become comfortable communicating with more than just their voices.

Former Improengineering participant Cédéric Tomasini describes his deep emotional connection to the course, which took him out of his computer scientist shell and helped him reflect on his

studies at EPFL. In what he describes as: “[...] a context radically different from the one we had lived in during the entire remainder of our cursus”, this one course offered Tomasini a stark contrast to other ways of learning. In echo E, Tomasini reflects on what it meant to work artistically and collaboratively at the university, and he reflects on his overall learning journey as an engineering student. He emphasises the heady power of creating with others and highlights this as an effective tool for both reflection and connection. Indeed, much of the content of the courses discussed in this book are – by design – co-created with the students, culminating in final, public performances at performance spaces outside of the university.

An additional, and important, part of this book, is that it also has a robust research component, where the authors collect and analyse data from course participants. The research was conducted as part of the Performing Arts as a Pedagogical Tool in Higher Education (ASCOPET) project. This interdisciplinary qualitative research project was a collaboration between the School of Engineering at EPFL and the Institute of Psychology and Education at the University of Neuchâtel. The researchers focus on ten principles shared by the two courses, including the use of the performing arts in higher education, links between collaboration and creativity, use of space, and the use of multimodal reflective diaries. The project aims, among other things, to formalise some of these principles for successfully incorporating the performing arts in higher education.

While reading this book, I constantly heard myself saying ‘yes’ to the approaches proposed for incorporating the arts into teaching in a university setting. I hope this whets the reader’s appetite to find out why, and to see if they, too, will find resonance with the central questions of this book. As Tau, Kloetzer, and Henein point out, this work opens up ever more doors and points to new questions about performative teaching and learning in higher education, thereby inviting many more of us to explore barefoot academic teaching at our own institutions.