

Theater educational framings as complex relations

Answering polarization

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At the beginning there is a great malaise

Various simultaneous crises are shaping our perception of the present. The current crisis reports are probably characterized by the fact that they are global in scope, emerge in a relatively short space of time and affect the global North more noticeably than in previous decades. Especially in times like these, it seems all the more important to keep the public discourse open with regard to complex global interdependencies and democratic societies. Therefore, we can engage with the present in a differentiated and critical manner from different positions and with different perspectives in order to be able to think and negotiate “possible futures” [trans. by A. B.] (Platzer 2022: 94). In view of the current times, I am concerned about dysfunctional tendencies in public discourse and the resulting impression of a polarized world. In the following, I am reproducing a process: How can I become creative again as a teacher and theaterpedagogue, and how can I deliberate myself from the malaise that has started to paralyze me? The writing of this text is part of this ongoing endeavor.

Spotlight on my social media feed

My perception of public discourse is shaped by my impressions from my social media channels and the many headlines from traditional media that point to disputes on social media. This environment gives a picture of the world, which is polarized and morally charged in terms of crisis-related issues and complex challenges.

Authors such as Nushin Hosseini-Eckhardt (cf. 2021), Andreas Reckwitz (cf. 2019) and Kijan Espahangizi (cf. 2024) see possible causes for the (seemingly) polarized public discourse in powerful mechanisms of order in connection with social media. In a self-reinforcing dynamic, increasingly differentiated communities emerge whose discourse becomes more and more specified. As a result, these discourses become incommensurable (cf. Reckwitz 2019) with the discourses of other communities. The logic of an attention economy of social media (loud, clear and short get clicks) further leads to the impression that only loud, extreme opinion leaders are left in the domain of the public sphere (cf. Reckwitz 2019).

Posts from relatively active colleagues on Instagram tell me what the hottest topics are in my bubble before I consult the traditional media. The content of these posts is often clear, judgmental and condemning of the other side. A friend of mine posts unfiltered, unverified brutal videos from a current war zone. He comments on the videos with clear condemnations of one side and clear victim attribution to the other. Another friend posts daily videos of influencers who expose the attitudes and arguments of the other side of this conflict in an ironic and comedic way. I encounter the portrayal of opponents as stupid in various forms. Christiane Thompson (2020: 192) states in an essay on the type and manner of criticism that the concept of political correctness is met with, that in the current discursive climate, criticism has “transformed into a communication practice charged with resentment” [trans. by A. B.]. Polarization and affect mobilization provoke a communication spiral in which the participants increasingly close themselves off in their positioning and feel confirmed in their assessment of the other side. In its escalation, this can lead to dogmatism. This is present, according to Thomp-

son, “when positions claim that they no longer have to deal with the objections of others or remove themselves from a factual debate through a moral¹ transposition” [trans. by A. B.] (ibid.: 187).

I also observe a kind of response that seems to be open for dialogue with ‘the other side’. At a second glance, those posts are inherently instructive: the other side doesn’t know certain things, doesn’t understand the context, so here’s another explanation. The conclusions and positions that the readership of such posts should come to are communicated indirectly. Within the argumentation logic of my circle of friends, the bubble in which I move, such posts show a certain differentiation and are argumentatively consistent and therefore actually debatable. The arguments, the language, the internal self-evidences of the “collective” [trans. by A. B.] (Reckwitz 2019: 265) lack directionality towards people who have nothing to do with the collective. When a directionality is consciously inserted, I often recognize an enlightening-educative gesture that devalues the others to ‘those to be taught’.

Cell phone off

A colleague posts a video explaining why gender asterisks are less inclusive than spelling with a colon: ‘Autor:in’ instead of ‘Autor*in’. On the same day, I see a headline about a Swiss politician from a right-wing party who is upset about “all that gender gaga”. I also read the same headline in a post by another friend who calls the politician a misogynist and links his statement to the issue of femicide.

Cut. Cell phone off. I am tired. Where is the ambiguity? Where is the openness for the unknown, the undefined? I ask these questions in the knowledge that it all exists. But not in my news feed and not on page one.

1 Christian Neuhäuser and Christel Seidel (c.f.2022) note an increased use of morality in public debates. Moral condemnation as a reaction to a statement or action makes an objective discussion impossible. The moral response would become an end in itself, which is why Neuhäuser/Seidel (c.f. 2022) advocate evaluating moral responses themselves. They propose to do so on the basis of the criteria of effectiveness and appropriateness. Of course, those criteria are discussable. But they open ways for staying in an argumentative exchange.

I am emotionally agitated. I present my experiences unambiguously to make sense of my anger and exhaustion.

I am adding a concept to my search for a constructive way of dealing with my malaise, which should help me to think in other directions. In other words, I am looking for strategies other than just fighting ‘against’ the practices of disambiguation and condemnation described above. The search for ‘counter-disambiguation’, for ‘counter-rapidity’, for ‘counter-condemnation’ and ‘counter-closure’ of arguments harbors a danger, one in which the perceived polarization is further confirmed performatively and discursively and that one’s own reception ignores nuances.

Answering polarization with complex logic

I find an alternative to the concept of the countermovement in various places; for example, I would like to highlight Nushin Hosseini-Eckhardt (cf. 2021), who, among many others, proposes strategies in her PHD thesis “Approaches to Hybridity” [trans. by A.B.] such as deceleration along the concept of the third space and hybridity. At this point, however, I would like to draw attention to Alexander Henschel’s concepts of the paradoxical and the complex to engage with binarity. The art educator Henschel (cf. 2019) describes the extent to which a logic of the binary cannot grasp positions and ideas that do not correspond to it. So, if someone is classified as an opponent, a misogynist or a woke snowflake, then everything that is beside it, that points beyond it, is overlooked. If I, as a lecturer, were to adhere to the binary of ‘improvisation equals everything is allowed’ and ‘language regulation equals the end of improvisation’, a vital exchange with the students in a yet unknown position towards improvisation would end before it has begun. Henschel (2019: 9) goes on to explain that “well-ordered polarities are only possible by ignoring third and further positions” [trans. by A. B.] (ibid.: 9). A binary logic creates the world through its application (performative logic) and can only be practiced through inclusion and exclusion (operation of binary polarity) by “unmistakably stating what characterizes it and from which it is unambiguously distinguished” [trans. by A. B.] (ibid.: 17).

With paradoxes and complex logics, he presents structures that set the closed nature of binary logic in motion (paradoxical logic) or overcome it (complex logic).

In paradoxical logic, the relationship between two poles is set in motion. If two poles are in a stable relationship to each other—in a binary logic—the attribution of opposing properties to both poles unsettles the observation. Referring to Nana Lüth and Carmen Mörsch, Henschel (cf. 2019) thinks through the paradoxical operation at the poles of art and pedagogy. In a clean binary logic, one could ascribe to art the quality of resistance (through unplannability) and to pedagogy that of compulsion (through planning). This relationship is set in motion when one recognizes that in many art projects meticulous planning and regulation can be constitutive for their realization and moments of reception. The same applies to contingency and the unplannable in pedagogical situations (cf. *ibid.*: 17). The paradoxical circle between art and pedagogy picks up speed “when an exhibition is perceived in art discourse as a prime example of artistic freedom, but parts of the audience are struck precisely by its exclusionary coercive character, which in turn turns into resistance through an opening pedagogical situation, which in turn produces new exclusions that can be thematized artistically” [trans. by A. B.] (*ibid.*: 18). The binarity between Art and Education remains intact. However, its constructedness is revealed.

A paradoxical logic opens a new space of imagination and possibility for me regarding possible strategies in public discourse: constructive spaces for thought open in the space between ‘loud’ and ‘timid’ voices. When I describe that in my social media feed polarizing voices suppress the differentiated, calm, timid voices, I may no longer hear the differentiated in the loud or the simplifying of the quiet voices. Note to myself: why not a theater project with voices that loudly express their uncertainty about a crisis in 256 characters?

Henschel (cf. 2019) goes on to speak of a complex logic of relations. This is when many other elements are added to the binary except for least one. In other words, new connections emerge from the two original poles to the new elements. Complex logic overcomes binarity in contrast to the paradoxical relationship (in which the logic of binarity spirals through

the flow of the two poles towards and into each other due to oppositional properties). The original elements become ambivalent. The elements can no longer all be related to each other in the same logic (ibid: 20). Complex relationships “mark unsolvable problems” [trans. by A. B.] (ibid: 20), “or the simultaneity of alternative, equally valid solution options” [trans. by A. B.] (ibid: 20).

Making the relationships of my world references more complex

When I add the element of power to the two poles of ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ in my conception of communicative strategies and practices, my clear normative-moral evaluation crumbles. From a power-critical perspective, I think about the fact that a loud strategy makes voices heard that would otherwise go unnoticed. While quiet voices can also be accused of shying away from confrontation and thus leaving power relations untouched. Just by taking this first step (delivering the third element), I can already sense the ambivalences that could open in me and my attitude to the phenomenon if further elements were added. My attitude towards the phenomenon becomes unstable and demands further examination. I endure my unstable position towards the phenomenon by understanding it as constantly evolving.

I try to sharpen my impression of a polarized world for moments that set this impression in motion. When and where do I find myself in situations that are so complex that I can no longer fit my position, my division into good and bad, me and the others, into the binary logic of two irreconcilable poles? How does this path inform my professional understanding of conflict?

Adding an element: Non-digital encounters

When I encounter representatives of clearly delineated positions on social media, fighters for one right side and cause, I meet colleagues and friends (and therefore not primarily representatives of a cause) in my

circle of acquaintances who feel the same way I do. I almost never meet someone who divides the world into good and bad, into those who understand and those who don't in a black and white way. We then talk about the discourse on a topic (and less often about the topic itself) and find ourselves in the shared dejection (to the point of despair in the face of what our world currently faces). Many express the desire for encounters between people with different views along with the ability to endure them. These encounters factor into my impression of a polarized world. I could put this into a binary scheme: online everything is polarized and bad, while offline encounters are moments of differentiated debate and therefore good. But when I think about how often I have come across people offline who have a completely different opinion to mine, I can't think of many moments. I am also thinking of forums and blogs in which topics are discussed online with academic precision in a relatively democratic framework. I could continue the spiral here, looking for other oppositional characteristics. It was a small attempt to relate irritations of my perception to Henschel's operations. In this approach, I notice that I had adopted a very judgmental attitude towards the two poles. I recognize forks in the road to be able to think in new directions. On the other hand, I notice the danger of evading any positioning due to the abyss of relativism that it opens. Respectively, this road can be taken to avoid any discussion and confrontation. If I try to see my position as a teacher as a player in making relations more complex, one task is to keep giving space to positions. This includes my own, so as not to give the impression of objectivity. Because then I would be withdrawing from the discourse, an "impossible position" [trans. by A. B.] (cf. Bourdieu/Wacquant 2006) to take in. As I mentioned at the beginning: this article is part of a process. A note to myself: try to reflect your didactical practice along the ways, circumstances and routines you must position yourself around to engage with conflicts and hot topics in pedagogical situations.

From an allover impression to a reflection of pedagogical situations

I would now like to turn to pedagogical situations in which I was more or less centrally involved as a lecturer. Now the question arises: why all this introduction to polarized discourse on social media? The impression of polarized, moralizing political camps and of disrupted public discourse shapes my perception of substantive conflicts, or even just potentially emerging conflicts in pedagogical situations. This impression makes me more anxious, more cautious, as my expectation of possible escalating conflicts takes up a relatively large amount of space in the rolling reflection of teaching events. This does not mean that this connection or transfer of this impression can be clearly derived theoretically, but I still perceive this effect in this way.

Adding an element: conflict in an 'impossible' theater project

During a student's final project, the process developed into a conflict at times due to fundamentally different world views. For example, three women from Afghanistan who are currently living in Switzerland with asylum status and three people who are read as women and with full right of residence created a theater evening. The group was formed while they were taking part in a summer program. This program brings people with refugee experience together with those who do not to work together creatively and artistically. In addition to legal hurdles in connection with the right of residence and financially limited resources, fundamental differences emerged among the participants during the rehearsal process in their approaches to the topic of sex and gender. While the women from Afghanistan wanted to create a play that celebrated women, among other things, others felt disturbed by the fact that it reproduced a binary gender image. One scene, developed by one of the Afghani actors herself, made some of the other actors and the student very uncomfortable. In terms of content, it was a speech in which the actor said, among other things, that the 'woman in general' is a pearl to be protected.

In the end, the project could be carried out and everyone stayed on as actors. The student described the reason for this as that everyone knew that they had something in common, which, however, could not be clearly stated. The fact that women or female read people are doing a project together in a place designed for artistic encounters between people who have or have not fled their home countries is not surprising at first. I rather assume that this setting has created a great willingness to get to know and to encounter each other in all their complexity.

To play on common ground

Through the encounter, during the theatrical development process, the relationships became more complex. In this complexity, conflictual and unifying relationships can be described at the same time. The statement, that they have something in common perhaps describes the relationship between the actors and the Swiss asylum system. At the same time, the discomfort describes the conflictual relationship when the question of sex or gender is added. In contrast to repressive (digital) encounters, this did not lead to judgmental attributions, anger and withdrawal into one's own bubble. Perhaps the project and production logic and the opportunities for trial and error during behavior in rehearsal (in frame of play) opened alternative options for encounters and negotiations. Self-world references could be tried out in front of others with distance to oneself. One's own usual position in the world is interrupted. As a representative of one side or the other, I am not directly questioned in the trial. The 'everyday' position can potentially be taken up again after the play when leaving the rehearsal room. This understanding is certainly helpful to be able to adopt an open attitude for theatrical experimentation and negotiation. These considerations focus on the transitional moments of play and non-play, rehearsal and non-rehearsal. To what extent are the positions and relationships adopted in an improvisation still available in moments of pause, for example? What practices emerge in a rehearsal community? To what extent does this positioning-play reflect real world structures? These experiences of various intermediate positions in the rehearsal space, in the playframe in relation to the world-

self positions outside of play can be compared with the “experience of difference” [trans. by A. B.], as “Differenz Erfahrung” described by Ulrike Hentschel (cf. 2010): that in-between position of oneself between not being the role you play/take in and not not being the subject you are outside of the play. These potential experiences of a ‘positioning play’ can therefore be attributed a transformative educational potential.

Back to the actual project: the following scene on stage was shown at the performance: In a cozy living room, there was a large carpet. During the Afghan actor’s monologue, she fought with another player over who would be allowed to stand on the carpet. In her monologue, the player linked the need to talk about the worthiness of protection with the theme that emerged as a crystallization point in the process and then in the production: access and exclusion to and from spaces. Her monologue recounted the chronology of the disappearance of spaces for women (e.g. hair salons).

Adding an element: (my) emotional response

In a seminar with theater pedagogy students, we try out rehearsal methods. Texts about rehearsals alternate with our own attempts and subsequent reflection. In one such reflection, a discussion arises about what rules should be agreed upon for improvisation. The occasion was a report about an ‘MC Battle’ in which a participant was excluded from the competition because he had rhymed homophobic lyrics. Based on this, the students wanted to apply the rule to improvisations that nothing should be said that could be interpreted or perceived as homophobic, sexist, racist or classist. This is to prevent any of the players or spectators involved from feeling hurt. The fear is expressed that in an improvisation, despite such rules, a hurtful statement could still appear in the heat of the action. The students raise the question of whether improvisation should still be regarded as a legitimate means of the rehearsal process. In my function as a lecturer, I have tried to capture as such the contradiction or conflict between the desire that no one should be hurt and the promise of an improvisation to play into an open, unknown future that none of the participants controls or owns. This suggestion of

an open, unresolvable conflict of goals resonated with the students. This process of pointing out the dilemma was an attempt to keep the issue open, meaning: not to look for an either-or answer to the problem.

I am now realizing that I consciously tried to hide my opinion and my astonishment over the idea of excluding improvisation from rehearsals. My emotion^{2[2]} was linked to my strong understanding that improvisation is crucial to any rehearsing dramaturgy. To what extent is the expression of these useful for the further course of a discussion? I take this consideration further with the basic didactical question posed by Ulrike Hentschel/Ute Pinkert (cf. 2008): What am I doing here and why? Why should I bring the emotional component, my connection to the hot topic or my opinion into play? If I combine this question with my intention to re-inform my reflective practice with the concept of complex logics, I recognize two moments in which I come to a new way of thinking.

By actively involving my own emotions, I first (potentially) complicate my own relationship to the content and the situation, on the other hand, I complicate the matter of discussion for everyone by adding new elements to it. This separation of content and situation is an artificial simplification in order to be able to widen the scope a little.^{3[3]}

Emotions as quasi-content

I initially think further with the supposedly simpler relation, the inclusion of my emotion in relation to the content. It is part of a lecturer's professional self-image to become aware of which subjects are central to the teaching setting. Indirectly, the reflection on one's own emotional reaction can be played back into the lesson in an objectified way. I complicate my situation as a lecturer if I do not ignore my emotion, or rather, if I do

2 In terms of practice theory, Alkemeyer (et. al.: 2015), for example, speaks of "affects", i.e. emotions that can also be regarded as practices, as reactions recognized and acknowledged by others.

3 Situationally, I would describe the spatio-temporally perceived and shared context of meaning with all its interwoven elements and circumstances, all participants with their positions and relative relationships to the topic and to each other.

not simply withdraw to the sober position of the summarizing moderator. Why am I so astonished and somehow also shocked by the idea of removing improvisation from the repertoire of theater rehearsals? What are the concepts behind it? By introducing these concepts in the form of questions and other content-related aspects, I make the thinking and discussion space of the whole group more complex. If I now switch to the situational level, nothing changes from what I have already described, at least when I am sitting here at my desk. My emotion can be added to the situation as a quasi-content element. The way it is perceived is something I can not control. The unfiltered introduction of my emotions harbors the danger of fuelling binary logics and polarized constellations in the actual teaching situation. My emotionality could be understood as a counter-response, a counter-positioning, which in turn evokes a defense of one's own position, the situation could be read as an emotional argument.

It depends: Situational, collaborative handling of emotions

As a lecturer, you have the task of selecting and shaping the aspects of your own emotional reaction contextually appropriate. Only if the situation is understood by all as a situation in which an object can be negotiated, a complexification by thematizing emotional reactions makes sense. In my practice, especially now in the time frame of writing this essay, I encounter not only my affective reaction to a discursive teaching event, but also more or less strong emotional reactions on the part of the students. In one module, for example, I encounter students who react emotionally to the statement made by an expert connected via ZOOM at the end of an input on sacrality and theater. His theoretically derived thesis led three students to a desire to talk again about what had just happened while I am surprised that anything should have happened at all. What situation do we find ourselves in? To what extent does the concept of complex logic make sense at that moment? As a lecturer, I realize that I am getting nervous. I think I perceive anger, disappointment, restlessness, perhaps fear in the students. This perception takes up a lot of space for me. It also triggers fear that the situation could escalate emotion-

ally. How do I remain capable of acting at that moment? Freely adapted from Henschel, I recognize a (moral) logic of the binary from the students: what just happened here was wrong, the content presented is off the mark. This opens up new questions. What was not good or wrong? In conversation (the situation of a discussion quickly arose, I can't describe exactly how this happened in words) we formulated quality criteria for a legitimate and non-legitimate object in this context, i.e. theses: on the one hand, the thesis is legitimate if its derivation is comprehensible for the audience; on the other hand, a more or less calm presentation was desired by the students. We also came to realize that the setting of the ZOOM lecture had triggered a certain feeling of powerlessness among the students as only very indirect feedback could be given. We did not come to a substantive discussion regarding the question of the sacrality or profanity of theatrical spaces. In some situations, the questioning of binary (evaluative) assessments of what has just happened or of the object in the room is a first step towards being able to turn together again to more substantive aspects of the seminar. I think if the thematization of affective reactions makes the discourse structure more complex at this point, I could welcome the 'use' of the emotional component. For this level to be accepted as making things more complex, it needs to be practiced in the classroom community and a grown understanding of the extent to which such a further element in dealing with a problem could suggest new spaces.

An intermediate way to promote such a practice in a "community of practice" (cf. Alkemeyer et al.: 2015) is to understand discussion and joint thinking around an object as a kind of trial action, as action in play. Weaving strands of argumentation whose logics we adopt as a group or as individuals without framing them as our/my opinion. The legitimization of the speech-act lies in the task, founded in the joint teaching-learning setting. What is said is not regarded directly as true, correct, good, but as something that can be placed in relation to. What is said, the emergent argumentation logics, theses can be viewed as objects that change again and again through observation and reflect possible positions back to the observer. These different relationships to the changing object can be thematized, i.e. the in-between: between positions and the

object, between me and the various positions and position-object relationships taken up⁴.

World-relations in play and reflection

This text describes a crisis and has set my relationship to public discourse and theater pedagogical work in motion again. At the beginning there was great discomfort. The transfer and connection of my own perception of a 'dysfunctional public discourse' with Henschel's concepts did not lead to a resolution or calming of the crisis. But it has given me some breathing space and opened new areas of thought. A reassembly of the thoughts surrounding this crisis is still in full swing and will not find a clearly tangible intermediate stop until the conclusion of this text. The various elements cannot be related to each other in a congruent system. Nevertheless, here is an attempt to challenge my insecurity and my lack of formulation with the assertion of clarity and certainty.

If theater performances in all their contemporary forms are moments in which people are in the same place at the same time, and we also understand theater pedagogical work as framing, then theater pedagogical evenings and rehearsal processes represent a great creative potential in playing with world-self relationships. Playful action as a mode and framing of these meeting spaces opens up a distance to one's own actions and also to the emergent practice of these temporary communities.

From this perspective, theatrical rehearsal and performance spaces can be described as discursive, heterotrophic experimental spaces. Care and openness towards complex world-self-other relationships invite the

4 In the field of school theater, I have explained the concept of the "practice of play": in the context of Hans-Christoph Koller's (2018) normative-transformational "education on conflict" [trans by A.B] (*Bildung zum Widerstreit*), I am looking for an orientation of theater work in schools that enables the classroom practitioner community to try out new negotiation actions between play and non-play and to keep conflict open for longer (Bürgisser 2022).

exploration of new ways of dealing with and exploring positions in relation to current crises, conflicts and friction with actual social structures. They invite us to adopt supposedly different positions, to experience ourselves in difference to everyday positions. The theatrical arrangement of the intermediate space of play and non-play enables the endurance and observation of paradoxical and complex constellations. The spaces should leave room for contingency so that dynamics can be pursued that can accommodate the complex element for the respective context of a specific occasion. It takes courage to make circumstances more complex. What kind of voices, what kind of perspectives, what kind of situations does research, a rehearsal or a performance require to enable indissoluble relationships in the respective context? What practices will emerge in the rehearsal communities in order to be able to meet the ambiguities and uncertainties with playfulness?

What has emerged for me as a relatively new (didactical) focus is one's own and situational emotionality as a source and point of allusion for a complexification of binary discursive structures. It is in this area that I would like to observe my practice following this text. I would also like to emphasize the challenge in teaching that I and other colleagues are confronted with perceiving student's strong emotions and first having to find ways to be able to work together again on formal content. Distancing oneself by questioning the binary logics that often lie behind this does not describe the full range of situational work that the lecturer and the entire community of practitioners perform in such moments.

The above considerations are often related to subjective educational processes. The social integration of subjects in communities of practitioners, such as that of a performance or rehearsal, is also considered in passing. At the level of public discourse, my considerations remain very vague. They are intended to inspire me to look further and are more in the tonality of a silent manifesto: theater performances should offer a resonance space to all those who long for communal spaces for negotiation outside of their collective. Furthermore, the perception and imagination of current public discourse spaces as battlegrounds for attention should be challenged performatively through alternative framings.

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