

Live theatre in the age of digital technology: 'Digital habitus' and the youth live theatre audience

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Abstract:

This article applies Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to the results of a two-year qualitative study of high school students' responses to live theatre. 'Digital habitus' sheds light upon the ways in which teenagers more accustomed to 'networked publics' (boyd and Marwick 2011) respond to live performance and provides a way to understand students' embodiment of digital culture during these 'uncertain times for audience research' (Couldry 2014 p. 226). Through the voices of student theatregoers the article proposes three findings that point to how learning to recognize, understand and negotiate the digital habitus is an important task for audience researchers, educators and theatre administrators keen to 'build bridges' (Hosenfeld 1999) between the 'dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1990) of the smartphone-toting teenager and the stage.

Keywords: theatre, technology, digital culture, youth audience, habitus, Bourdieu

I teach high school English and drama at an independent school in Ottawa, Canada, and every year I take over 150 students to a series of four live plays at the National Arts Centre (NAC), which presents an eclectic mixture of classic and contemporary plays in English and French across two stages, and the Great Canadian Theatre Company (GCTC), which produces contemporary Canadian plays in a new theatre in the city's Westboro neighbourhood.

Five years ago my students, aged sixteen to eighteen, told me that so many people were online during our evenings out that the back row glowed blue (Richardson 2012). This suggested that the 'radical reconfiguration and cultural re-articulation now taking place in educational and social life' (McCarthy et al 2003 p. 462) due to digital technology had

arrived in the theatre. I launched a qualitative study asking, 'How do young people raised in the digital era experience live theatre?' (Richardson 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b).

Much has been written about how young people are 'digital natives', while older people are 'digital immigrants' (Tapscott 2008). The thinking goes that digital natives are fluent in technology and capable multi-modal multi-taskers, and that unless schools, universities and theatres cater to their learning styles, the digital natives will grow restless (Alvermann and Hagood 2008; Lankshear and Knobel 2003). Digital immigrants are those who may enjoy using information and communication technologies (ICTs) in fairly sophisticated ways but whose ways of thinking were formed in earlier, analog times.

While it may be tempting to turn to the concept of the digital native to turn up the light on the blue glow in the back row, the concept of digital natives and immigrants has recently been critiqued as too reductionist (Davies and Eynon 2013), some suggesting that young people are not actually 'digital natives' at all but rather 'digital naives' (boyd 2014). While adults may assume that young people are deeply conversant with technology, studies suggest that the figure of the savvy manipulator of multiple communication modes, eagerly adapting to the latest apps, really only applies to around 20% of young people (Davies and Eynon 2013 p. 26). Socio-economic divisions exacerbate the differences between young tech users, while many adults have been using technology for years and their skills are highly developed. The terms break down upon closer examination.

A better means of understanding the mindsets of youth theatre goers may lie within sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1984, 1990; Wacquant 1989). In this article I will outline Bourdieu's notion of habitus and propose a less familiar phrase, 'digital habitus', to describe the ways in which many teenage theatre audience members come to the theatre experience with digital predispositions in place. I will consider the literature around youth engagement with digital culture, which I am defining as 'the activities, relationships, artifacts and experiences shared through digitized forms'. Finally, I will apply Bourdieu's ideas to the results of my two-year study in order to hear from young people about questions of live theatre and how being raised digital may impact the experience of watching a play.

Bourdieu and 'Habitus'

Through his concept of habitus Bourdieu was attempting to come up with a theory or 'thinking tool' (Jenkins 1992 p. 40) to help explain human behaviour. He wanted to move away from structuralism, the belief that human behaviour is derived from the constraints imposed by external rules that are often embodied by language (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), which he saw as too rigid. He also wished to displace the notion of free will, the belief that people can make up their minds independent of external determinants, which he felt did not adequately acknowledge the power of history and other social forces upon a person. Instead, he moved structuralism *into* the person—Jenkins calls habitus a kind of 'genetic structuralism' (1992, p. 8)—in order to shed light upon the ways in which people embody not only social mores but also years of history.

Bourdieu defines habitus as:

dispositions acquired through experience, thus variable from place to place and time to time. This ‘feel for the game’, as we call it, is what enables an infinite number of ‘moves’ to be made, adapted to the infinite number of possible situations which no rule, however complex, can foresee. (1990 p. 9)

Bourdieu’s writing is notoriously opaque, but in a moment of particular clarity he helpfully compares habitus to the ‘impulsive decision made by the tennis player who runs up to the net’ (Bourdieu 1990 p. 11), years of practice, training and instruction intuitively brought to bear in that one moment. The action is impulsive, the product of deeply inculcated dispositions that drive, shape and limit his or her actions. Habitus is ‘the social game embodied and turned into second nature’ or ‘the society written into the body’ (Bourdieu 1990 p. 63), and through which behaviour becomes a set of internalized intuitions. Jenkins writes that for Bourdieu ‘the body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical taxonomies of habit, are imprinted and encoded’ (1992 p. 46). In this way, habitus is:

not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. (Bourdieu 1984 p. 170)

Habitus is a means of inhabiting, understanding and responding to the world, while also a means of adding one’s own structure to the world beyond the self.

Critics of habitus point out a number of its failings. Jenkins writes that, despite all of its references to improvisation and fluidity, habitus is ultimately ‘a celebration of (literally) mindless conformity’ (1992 p. 61). People can be seen as helplessly gripped by the forces of history and society. Bourdieu also underestimates the power of subjectivity: ‘actors must know more about their situation, and that knowledge must be more valid, than Bourdieu proposes’ (Jenkins 1992 p. 61). The role of deliberate decision-making and rational choice is also underestimated, although one could point out that even when a person is making what they think to be a rational evidence-based decision, they are really acting in accordance with their inchoate dispositions.

Turning to questions of technology, Sterne (2003) describes habitus as ‘the methodological cornerstone of a social “praxeology” of technology’ (p. 376) that allows researchers to ‘obliterate the long-imagined distinction between technology and society’ (2003 p. 386) and to move away from viewing technology as ontologically special:

Understood socially, technologies are little crystallized parts of habitus. At a basic level, technology is a repeatable social, cultural and material process

(which is to say that it is all three at once) crystallized into a mechanism or set of related mechanisms. (2003 p. 376)

Technologies such as those used by the theatre-going students do not have an existence independent of social practice. 'They are embodied in lived practice through habitus [...]. As part of habitus, technologies and their techniques become ways of experiencing and negotiating fields' (Sterne 2003 p. 385). There is little point in studying technology without studying the ways in which it is used. Likewise, it is increasingly important to acknowledge the small screens that glow, vibrate and pulse in the hands, pockets and purses of spectators.

Other writers similarly apply habitus to the fields of technology and education. Harper (2010), for example, writes about the habitus of communication and the way it is shaped by technology. Moje et al. (2009) write about building student habitus through exposure to a variety of texts, and Zevenbergen (2007) describes the digital habitus young children bring with them into the classroom when they first start school. But just how affected are young live theatre audience members by digital technology?

Youth as Networked Public

For students, the digital habitus is the internalization of an intense, ongoing engagement with digital technologies. In the United States, for example, the 2013 Pew Teens and Technology Report suggests that nearly all American teenagers have access to the Internet, mostly via portable devices (Madden et al. 2013 p.3). More than 80% of American teenagers sleep with their cellphones next to them (Madden et al. 2013), 81% check their phone for messages even though they do not hear it ring (Smith 2012), 75% use their phones at night when they should be sleeping (Osborne 2012), and FOMO – 'fear of missing out' – drives many to check social media sites frequently (Bosker 2014). The Pew Research Center reports that teenage girls send a median of 100 texts per day (Lenhart 2012), leading the American Public Health Association to coin the term 'hyper-texting' (APHA 2010). In the United Kingdom, 75% of youth report that they could not live without access to the Internet, and 45% report that they are happiest when online (Hulme 2009). Canadian results are similar (Steeves 2014), with the Internet 'a dominant place for social interaction and creative expression, particularly for youth and young adults' (Zamaria and Fletcher 2007).

'Constant engagement in networked technologies has become the norm for most young people in the developed world' (Davies and Eynon 2013 p. 2), with students living for extended periods in what boyd calls 'networked publics': spaces 'constructed through networked technologies and [...] the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology and practice' (2014 p. 5). Driven by the desire to spend time with friends away from adult supervision, the new techno-practices are taken for granted by teenagers and can seem disconcerting to adults (boyd 2014; Ito 2010).

Within the field of audience studies, scholars have written extensively on the ways in which ICTs challenge traditional notions of 'audience' (Sandvoss 2014). Referring to how

commonly teenagers can reach audiences through posting mash-ups, memes and other digital artifacts online, Baym and boyd write that 'there are more layers of publicness available to those using networked media than ever before; as a result, people's relationship to public life is shifting in ways we have barely begun to understand' (2012 p. 321). Today, 'everyone is immersed in media' (Butsch 2014 p. 163) and the traditional dichotomy between the public and private spheres has been dissolved as new audiences configure around the 'fourth screen' (Goggin 2013 p. 134) and online searching (Nightingale 2014). This has led scholars to debate whether traditional audience theory is up to the task of understanding 'the diversity of relations between humans and media technology' (Carpentier 2014 p. 207). Others have proposed a focus on the processes of circulation and appraisal (Green and Jenkins 2014), and have advocated for 'an open-minded, practice-based approach to whatever it is that people are doing with, or around media' during these 'uncertain times for audience research' (Couldry 2014 p. 226).

Within that changing field, digital habitus emerges as the human embodiment of the attitudes and dispositions of the digital game we all play, but that young people have been playing their entire lives (Kuksa 2009). But how does digital habitus manifest itself in the actions of 'the people formerly known as the audience' (Rosen 2006)? How might it impact the young audience's ability to 'actively and imaginatively work to complete the evoked illusion of the stage' (Reason 2007 p. 11)?

The Study

My two-year study of student responses to our school's annual, four-play theatre series consisted of focus groups and individual interviews with students from Grades 11 and 12 (sixteen to eighteen year-olds), who are required to attend the theatre as part of their English courses, as well as two annual, anonymous online surveys. In conducting this research, I occupied a composite role. Working within the guidelines of my university's research ethics board, I was a teacher, a researcher, a fellow theatregoer, and something of a theatrical gatekeeper, organizing the program in the belief that every student should experience live theatre as part of her or his education. One of the great joys of high school teaching is being able to share with students' activities or texts that can open minds or even change lives. Working in the belief that theatre has something unique and valuable to offer people as they embark on their adult lives, I am fascinated by how the digital revolution may help to inform their experience.

Each of these conversations began with me asking the students to draw a picture to communicate their experience of the plays we had seen together. This drawing and their accompanying comments provided the jumping off point for our discussion. The use of drawings provided an often highly illuminating pathway into participants' experiences (Feldman 1973; Harper 2005; Reason 2006, 2008; Morawski 2008; Leavy 2009; Gauntlett and Holwarth 2006; Awan and Gauntlett 2014) and contributed to the atmosphere of trust and openness. Focus groups and in-depth interviews have a long and established history in qualitative research and audience in particular (Creswell 2007; Kamerelis and Dimitriadis

2005; Morley 2003; Radway 1991) and allow participants to share, articulate and build upon their ideas and experiences.

The survey data and interview transcripts were analyzed according to the qualitative research methods described by Saldaña (2013), as well as Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014). This method sees qualitative research as a process of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During First Cycle Coding, the Eclectic method – including In Vivo, Initial, Emotion, Value and Judgment Coding (Saldaña 2013) – was followed. During Second Cycle Coding, a Focused Coding approach was taken in order to consolidate First Cycle codes into broader themes. These were displayed in tables, expressed as analytic memos, and then as assertions.

The plays that we saw during 2012/13 and 2013/14 were chosen to be varied and of interest to high school students, with unusual settings or engaging themes. They included the Great Canadian Theatre Company's (GCTC's) *The Number 14*, a play styled after Commedia dell'arte and set on a bus. An adaptation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, written and directed by Mary Zimmerman, featured on-stage swimming pools and frolicking, diving, swimming actors. GCTC's production of *Proud*, by Michael Healey, attempted to make sense of a man few people in Canada find funny: our Prime Minister, Stephen Harper. Their production of *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* by Ann-Marie MacDonald saw a young scholar disappear into a waste paper basket within the gender-bending world of Shakespeare. *Kim's Convenience*, by Ins Choi, produced by Toronto's Soulpepper Theatre at the National Arts Centre (NAC) and the hit of their previous season, related the struggles of Korean corner shop owners in Toronto, and a revival of UK playwright Lucy Prebble's *Enron* at the NAC exposed the malfeasance that led to the corporate giant's downfall.

This article focuses on the written comments from the anonymous online survey, and the results of a focus group that consisted of four representative students. Cathy, Melissa, Katrina and Jack (all pseudonyms) were in Grade 12 and looking forward to graduating from high school in just a few weeks. Cathy and Katrina were from overseas and would soon leave Canada to attend university in their home countries, Cathy for social work and Katrina for engineering. Melissa was staying in Ontario to study business, and Jack had plans to combine studying with teaching skiing in the Rockies. All from upper income families, educated within an academically challenging school, the students owned a variety of devices, inhabited technology-rich environments, and therefore possessed all manner of capital (Bourdieu 1984). They had lots to say, and our free-wheeling discussion lasted nearly an hour.

Any study features limitations and delimitations and this one is no exception. It could be said, for example, that the study is skewed because students were required to attend the theatre and because they tended to come from upper-income families. Most were new to theatre, however, and the quality of written and spoken comments suggested a range of direct, honest responses from interested, open-minded teenagers. Although they inhabit highly enriched technological environments, their access is broadly in keeping with societal trends in the US, UK and Canada, as the data above indicates. It may be also worth

considering that the students' socio-economic demographics reflect those of North American theatre audiences (NEA 2008): from this point of view, these are future theatre series subscribers. Finally, it should be acknowledged that the study featured traditional plays presented in traditional theatres, and the results may have been different if students had seen more avant-garde productions. Every city offers a range of theatre offerings between September and May of each year, and my colleagues and I made the most of what was on offer. Further research with students from a broader range of backgrounds, exposed to a greater range of plays, could offer valid extensions to the work presented here.

Findings and Discussion

Finding One: *exposure to digital culture is a major contributor to the 'digital habitus' of many teenagers and a significant factor in how they respond to live theatre.*

In keeping with the popular discourse surrounding the shortened attention spans allegedly caused by frequent use of technology (Carr 2008; Small and Vorgan 2008), one of the themes that quickly emerged in the focus group was the fear of getting bored in the theatre. 'When you're on Netflix and you don't like the movie after ten seconds you change it', Jack said. 'When you're going to the theatre you don't—you can't leave the room and go to another room for another play'. Katrina agreed:

When you're online and stuff, you get bored with one website and you just have all these other options. With smartphones now, if you're getting bored with one game you just download another. I think that we're so used to having things at a fast pace.

Evoking Jenkins' notion of 'convergence culture' (2006), the students are accustomed to the ebb and flow of movies, videos, social updates and other Internet activities across multiple platforms and locations. The theatre, with its fixed bricks-and-mortar structure, uniformed attendants and specific modes of behaviour, is for them an unusual eddy within a torrent of communication.

The digital habitus expects variety, control, and spectacle. 'Maybe it all goes back to the lack of special effects', Cathy said, 'because we're kind of used to, I don't know, some action kind of thing. You can't really explode something on stage...' Steeped in the hyper-reality of film, the students felt that theatre was necessarily going to be of less interest to young people, including themselves. This evokes Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality, in which a 'flood of signifiers in everything from megabytes to TV advertising diminishes our ability to either find meaning or engender passion for commitments' (Steinberg 2011 p. 25). Artful deaths, with red ribbons signifying blood, for example, can seem incongruous to young audiences more accustomed to the hyper-realism of such films as *Edge of Tomorrow*, with the tagline 'Live. Die. Repeat' (*Edge of Tomorrow* 2014); or TV shows like *Game of*

Thrones, whose graphic scenes prompted the headline ‘Has Game of Thrones Gone Too Far?’ (Reporters 2014). The opportunity for young audiences to enter ‘into complicity with the stage illusion, implicating them with the performance’ (Reason, 2006 p. 238) is made more problematic as computer-generated imagery grows in sophistication and prevalence.

Comments by online respondents generally support those of the focus group, with the occasional exception:

Some people get distracted by their phones, but we’re not all digital addicts who are too tech-obsessed to watch a play. I believe people have a negative idea of this generation, expressing that we can’t go two minutes during a play of all things without our phone. Sure, some can’t, but it’s prejudice to assume that everyone in this generation can’t last without a digital device.

Most, however, agreed with the focus group while making some heartfelt additions to the conversation. For one student, digital technology provides a portal to the world in all of its pulsating, glorious excitement—against which live theatre can’t compete:

Unless the play is undeniably enthralling, everyone will have the urge to check their cellphone or even leave. There is a world out there that is real, the people are not actors, the love, jealousy, and adventure portrayed in theatre is just outside the doors of that building so unless what I’m watching is extremely captivating, I’d rather be out there.

This student’s comments provide an interesting counterpoint to Tulloch (2000), who found that students tended to place value in theatre because, as opposed to film, it was ‘real’. Here, it is the cellphone that is the conduit to the real.

Other comments reflect on the shift that has taken place within the habitus of digital users, suggesting a general awareness of how this generation may be differentiated from their parents and echoing popular discussions around ‘digital addictions’ (Waugh 2012):

The digital lifestyle shortens my attention span and patience and I don’t think that a play is geared to this mindset at all.

The age of the Internet has changed humanity in such a profound and inescapable way, that it is inevitable that the overall experience of seeing live theatre is going to be less appreciated by many.

I feel weird without my phone and keep feeling the need to check it often.

Although young people may watch plays in ways informed by their digital habitus, it would be wrong to assume from these comments that the young people surveyed were against the idea of live theatre. Quite the opposite is true.

Finding Two: *Students were enthusiastic about theatre because it was live and therefore so different from the digital media to which they were more accustomed.*

At times, the digital habitus appears to be an incubus and the students could seem trapped by their constant connectivity. Melissa took up this theme with particular clarity and I found the introspection and the emotion behind her comments both moving and illuminating:

There's some nights where I'm literally just cycling through a range of, like, 10 websites every few minutes even though nothing has changed. It's just like a cycle. I'm just so bored that I keep going. It's, like, I don't know why, I just can't... I don't just get up and [laughs]. It's stupid.

I'm always doing stuff on my laptop [laughing], but it's nice to not do stuff on my laptop. I almost wish I grew up in not a laptop era because... Then I don't know. I enjoy it. I don't, I just don't understand. I actually asked my parents the other day. I said, 'I really don't understand how you got through high school, university, grad school without social media'. I can't even see a world without it now. Sometimes I wonder, 'What if I had actually grown up in the '60s or the '70s or the '80s or something and I didn't have that? If you experience a good production or a good musical or something like that it's just so much more rewarding.

Melissa's comments suggest that she enjoys using technology and can barely conceive of life without it – technology has helped to define her world as well as her understanding of it. Reaching uncertainly for the words, trying hard to articulate a sense of loss of a time she was never even part of, she appears to feel that something is missing from her life because of her digital preoccupations.

Other students wrote in the survey about how the quality of liveness made the experience of seeing a play particularly meaningful for them. The topic of liveness is much contested amongst a range of scholars (Reason 2004), with Auslander (2008), for example, arguing that distinctions between live and mediatized productions are overstated. Here, the comments give special value to liveness and reflect Bundy's assertion that a live theatre event 'is valued by young people because it offers the opportunity of strong emotional response' (2014 p. 116):

Attending a live play, like attending any other live performance or sport, really envelops you in the experience. You don't feel as if you are in it, but as if it is really happening in front of you.

Echoing the comments made by audience members in Barker (2003) concerning the 'immediacy' of the live experience, students wrote about the 'respect' they felt for the actors, the 'connection' they perceived between themselves and the performers and, often, the sense of responsibility they personally felt for the success of the play:

I enjoy [theatre] because I like to connect with actors and when they are right there on a stage it is easier for me to do that. I also feel for the actors so I am always hoping they do not make a mistake because I truly want them to be happy with their performance.

Similarly, Reason (2006) found young audiences were captivated by the idea that something might go wrong on stage. Echoing the work of O'Brien (2014), students mentioned that a night out at the theatre felt special and worthwhile and gave them the opportunity to spend time with friends. In the focus group, Cathy commented:

Whenever I'm doing whatever on my laptop I feel often like I've just wasted [laughing] a few hours of my life... even though both [laptops and theatre] are sources of entertainment, you feel a little bit more good about yourself after one over the other. It's just a more rewarding experience and it's obviously more cultured. You feel like you've done something.

The ability to focus calmly in the theatre was also a recurring theme online:

While im on my computer i am often distracted by the many different sites that I have open. While at the theatre I am only distracted by my thoughts but am engaged with the actors and the events unfolding in front of me on the stage.

The theatre made me feel more alive and less stressed. When I'm online I tend to be all over the place and stressed.

Not all comments were positive, a minority noting that performances were 'very boring and time consuming', and some suggesting that the disconnect between their habitus and the mindsets required of the live theatregoer was impossible to bridge:

I usually feel nervous when going to a live theatre because I feel like I don't belong there. I think this is because people of my generation have been raised in a world where live theatre isn't particularly cool or interesting, and who can

access these things (and much more) through their fingertips at speeds up to like 20 Mbps (or something like that). I also always assume that live plays are going to be boring.

For most, however, the experience was largely positive, with feedback suggesting that, in keeping with Donelan and Sallis (2014), my colleagues and I had accomplished something meaningful and valuable through the theatre series:

It was remarkable. i had never been in my life to an actual play, the idea that anything can happen while the act is going on make me personally more focused and intrigued into the play.

The digital habitus, the evidence suggests, may be the product of the digital age, but at a time when film-makers strive to impress audiences with ever more spectacular special effects, live theatre's capacity to present people instead of pixels can be seen as a major advantage.

Finding Three: *Students appreciated the unique behaviours expected of live theatre audiences, with cellphone etiquette a lively and contested topic of debate.*

The topic of live performance and cellphone etiquette was hotly contested amongst the young people in the focus group and in the survey. Some were adamantly against the practice of going online during a performance, some admitted to succumbing to the pleasures of texting and surfing, and some said simply that, as smartphones function as watches for most teenagers, they are inevitably going to keep checking them. From there, it is easy to get drawn into checking messages and updates. How often that happens, Melissa said, 'kind of depends on how bored I am'.

Katrina said that she never checked her phone during a play: 'I never do... not because I didn't want to, because I did want to check my time, but I find that my iPhone screen is just so glaring that I really can't'. People checking their phones is one of her 'pet peeves', and the idea that she or someone else might do so has become a major distraction to her. 'I've become so paranoid about it that it ruins my viewing experience', she said. 'I don't want to ruin that viewing experience for other people. It's just sort of this thing that I have constantly in the back of my head'.

Cathy was more sanguine about going online. For her, the biggest impediment to continuing her digital lifestyle in the theatre was poor reception. 'I'm not a big texter or anything', she said. 'I always read news articles, and I read my email. I'll do that – articles, just one of them... [but] our phones are limited by a lack of reception'. A seasoned theatre goer raised on trips to Broadway productions, she was unimpressed by the local offerings. 'When you know the play's not going to get better, that's when you give up and you check

your phone’, she said, laughing. ‘I fought for ages and I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to be disrespectful though.’

Survey respondents distinguished between the movie watcher, who is ‘a consumer only. He expects, even demands, to be entertained’, and the theatregoer, for whom ‘the experience is almost a two-way relationship’. Live theatre, one student wrote, ‘requires a much more respectful audience’, while a classmate commented, ‘It is disrespectful to be obnoxious, therefore people have more etiquette at a live play’. As in the work of Barker, who found in audience members an ‘*obligation to do some hard work of interpretation*’ (2003 p. 25), students responding to this research were often aware of the greater responsibility of the live theatre audience member. ‘I have to be watchful for my actions because the actors can see me’, wrote one, articulating a sense of reciprocity between audience and stage. ‘My good moves can motivate them to do a better job.’

The digital habitus embodies a set of behavioural expectations born of movies (Reason 2006) and digital culture, and as it encounters live theatre there is considerable scope for students to learn alternate ways of being and to gain in what Sinclair and Adams call ‘theatre confidence’ (2014 p. 129). The newness of the situation is itself an advantage. Faced with people on stage, students are often very much aware of their responsibilities as audience members even as they work out smartphone protocol, providing teachers and theatre administrators with an opportunity to educate young audiences around what Bell terms ‘theatre literacy’ (2014 p. vi), and Reason calls learning the codes (2006 p. 240).

Conclusion

Educators often speak about the need to build bridges between the knowledge and experience of the learner and the subject (Hosenfeld 1999). Digital habitus is a helpful thinking tool that allows for bridge-building between the experience of consuming or producing digital content on a handheld, and the experience of watching a play. It takes into account the dispositions that result from students’ experiences and the new possibilities offered by the stage, allowing researchers, teachers and theatre administrators to understand more clearly some of the ways in which young people raised and steeped in digital culture experience a play. My study suggests a deep sophistication in the thinking and attitudes of young theatregoers in terms of their cultural expectations. There are also insights around ontological questions, the perceived importance of live culture, the strengths and weaknesses of ICTs within a popular discourse often focused on the dangers of ‘hyper-texting’ and compulsive social media checking within what has been described as the ‘digital deluge’ (*Budget Helps to Deal with the ‘Digital Deluge’* 2010), and ways of behaving in a variety of settings. The ontological sophistication is reflected in a number of comments such as this one from the survey:

I think that many people probably consider live theatre to be at odds with the age of the internet, the latter having rendered the former an obsolete and archaic concept. But I don't think that this is the case, I think that changing

expectations and stimulating the brain in search of the values and themes of a play in the light of fast moving digital lifestyles is incredibly important.

As this and many other contributions suggest, the 'system of conditions' (Bourdieu 1984) inscribed within the digital habitus may paradoxically suggest that, for young people growing up digital, live theatre has the potential to be more important than ever.

Biographical Note:

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