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What is tertiary theatre production education (TPE) in the post-humanist digital world? How might it meet the needs of stakeholders in the evolving theatre-making industry?

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What is tertiary theatre production education (TPE) in the post-humanist digital world? How might it meet the needs of stakeholders in the evolving theatre-making industry?

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the contemporary landscape of tertiary theatre production education (TPE), and its continuing fitness for purpose and relevance in our digital post-humanist society. It will examine existing signature pedagogies within undergraduate TPE, an area 'for which there is currently very little academic scholarship in existence' (Malik, 2016, p.13). Qualitative data is drawn from detailed primary interviews with established English-speaking sector TPE academics, alongside existing academic articles, and the author's extensive applied and TPE profile. To protect anonymity, interview responses are presented as a summary.

Findings will help to consider how existing TPE signature pedagogies may need to be refreshed and renewed to respond to the contemporary requirements of digital tertiary learners, and consider how some areas of TPE skills, knowledge and learning environments could be redesigned and reframed to give stronger relevance and alignment to student, academic and industry stakeholders in the post-humanist digital era.

Keywords: Theatre Production Education (TPE), Signature Pedagogies, Digital posthumanism, Contemporary tertiary learners, Curriculum Innovation

Theatre Production Education in the Post-Humanist Digital World

The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson once observed that if you wish to understand a culture study its nurseries. There is a similar principle for the understanding of professions: if you wish to understand why professions develop as they do, study their nurseries, in this case, their forms of professional preparation. (Shulman, 2005, p. 52)

Signature pedagogies are designed to produce graduates for careers in very specific and often highly vocational professions. Signature pedagogies will inform curriculum design, delivery, learning environment and faculty profile. Their appropriateness can be justified through comparison with medical training, where surgeons are educated within a signature pedagogical framework that deliberately combines theory with intensive, closely supervised practical experience across a prolonged period of apprenticeship.

Shulman (2005) further highlights that signature pedagogies lead to strong similarities between different programmes within a discipline. This can be clearly evidenced when considering the existing signature pedagogies of TPE, where the expectations of programmes of study are of a high contact hour, and face-to-face experiential learning environment, where students learn to produce shows, by producing shows. This enables a “culture of ambiguity that students must learn to negotiate through live project work, problem-based learning and replicating the experience of being a practitioner” (Malik, 2016, p.164). The author of this paper was a TPE student in the late 1980s. These existing TPE signature pedagogies are largely unchanged from that time. Are we really future-proofing theatre production education by offering these same signature pedagogies to our contemporary TPE learners — Gen Z and beyond?

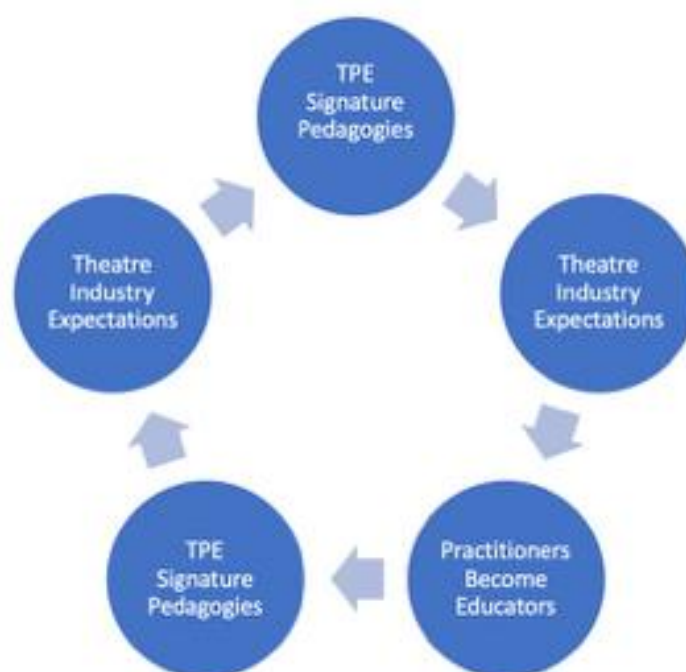
To take a litmus test of current thinking on these topics from within the TPE sector, and also as a response to the scarcity of available academic literature on TPE signature pedagogies, the author has conducted a series of nine primary interviews with established academics, chosen as a representative demographic from across the English-speaking TPE sector. With one exception, all identify as *‘practitioner turned academics’*. Whilst gathering their perspectives, my own position as a TPE educator requires consideration of the possibility that such views may be shaped by what I have previously defined as the *closed cycle of theatre production pedagogy*, which is illustrated in figure.1. TPE signature pedagogies produce graduates with recognisable skills, practices and beliefs. When some graduates subsequently become educators themselves, these values and attributes are then perpetuated to their students. Within this cycle, there appears to be no obvious space for the generation of new ideas and processes within TPE.

“Only the most radical of new conditions, such as sharp changes in the organization or economics of professional practice or in the technologies of teaching, are sufficient forces to redirect that inertia” (Shulman, 2005, p.56). The Covid-19 pandemic provided the radical

conditions that Shulman describes. Disruption can lead to innovation. The pandemic demonstrated that TPE signature pedagogies can indeed be challenged and refreshed. The face-to-face learning environment became either virtual or blended, almost overnight. The closed cycle of theatre production pedagogy was broken. Pedagogical change was inevitable, as circumstance provided no alternatives. Both theatre-makers and TPE sought digital solutions to fill the void where face-to-face productions no longer sat, with the disruption providing new forms of producing, sharing, and consuming theatre, in forums where theatre, media and gaming increasingly converged.

Figure 1

Michael Budmani / Closed Cycle of Theatre Production Pedagogy / 2010



Interviewees described numerous effective strategies for developing digitally accessible asynchronous tools that empowered students to learn independently at their own pace. These tools also facilitated stronger group work, enabling collective engagement after individual asynchronous activities and thereby optimising the effectiveness of synchronous online contact time.

Students utilised new skills in the creation of 3D virtual scans of venues, thus helping to enable digitally collaborative online productions. However, interviewees have largely reported back that, notwithstanding the advances of technological production advances, TPE signature pedagogies post-pandemic remain largely unchanged. Some interviewees were of the view that despite the potential to renew TPE signature pedagogies in the pandemic, momentum has been lost, with pedagogical business as normal resuming relatively quickly. Many interviewees

highlighted the challenges posed by the evolving skills, attributes, and expectations of the contemporary Gen Z student body.

Growing up in a very different world than the one in which we were raised, the young generations are exposed to the technology at a very young age that pushes them through a gateway into another world of infinite imagination. The new technology invites students for experimentation. (Ularu, 2020, p.2)

Gen Z now populate the large majority of tertiary student cohorts. They are true digital post-humanists, with digital skills and preferences that were the most prized by those seeking immediate pandemic production solutions. Interviewees reported back on the values and drivers that now exist within their TPE student demographics, including inclusivity, sustainability, and a culture of wellness assuming a much higher priority. This trend can also be clearly evidenced across the wider higher education student body. The impact that contemporary student characteristics are having on the TPE environment was heavily evident in the emerging themes drawn from the TPE interviewees.

They want it to be relevant, inclusive, and even transformative. Unlike previous generations, who may have seen education as a straightforward path to employment, many Gen Z students are driven by a desire to create meaningful change, both in their careers and in society. (West, 2025)

Interviewee Findings

Interviewee findings lead to the conclusion that TPE and its traditional signature pedagogies must adapt to current learner and societal realities within the ongoing digital workplace revolution. “A post-humanist approach would produce an environment that can now be shaped by the inclusion of digital learning” (Kaur, 2022). Outcomes that have emerged from the interviewee responses have been organised under three thematic headings, with figure.2 showing a mapping for each heading:

- Sustainability and accessibility
- Skills and Employability
- Post-humanism

Interviewees reported that to improve accessibility, TPE must attract both a greater number and wider demographic of student applicants, and to achieve this within the current climate of undergraduate TPE study no longer being the sole choice for the aspiring theatre production professional. The post-pandemic theatre industry environment has seen a significant reduction in the availability of skilled theatre production labour, leading to many theatre-makers creating their own bespoke apprenticeship schemes. “There are various

apprenticeship pathways available — some sector-specific to the theatre industry and others with transferable skills. They include: technical theatre, costume making, scenic metalwork and carpentry” (Ahmet, 2025).

Figure 2

Michael Budmani / Mapping to Thematic Headings / 2025

	Sustainability and Inclusivity	Skills and Employability	Digital Post-humanism
Curriculum to include sustainable theatre-making (including carbon literacy)			
Curriculum to include ethical theatre-making			
Pedagogies that include a blended learning environment - to include face to face, remote and asynchronous learning			
A technology-led experiential learning environment using a wide variety of digital tools			
A learning environment that prioritises work/life balance, mental health and well-being			
Adaptability to new practices and technologies			
A curriculum that incorporates both global and local perspectives			
Regular and manageable contact hours			
A learning environment with infrastructure that allows students who identify as having physical disabilities to be fully engaged			
A culture that promotes a diverse and inclusive learning and working environment.			
Creation of an environment that promotes the strongest representation of societal demographics (race, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, disabilities) amongst both students and faculty			
Pedagogies that incorporate a high degree of practical subject-specific technical skills			
Pedagogies that promote and encourage a motivational, highly collaborative and team orientated approach and ethic			
Pedagogies that incorporate a strong emphasis on transferable skills			
Pedagogies that foster adaptability and flexibility, enabling the ability to function across various scenarios and contexts			
Pedagogies that cultivate a high degree of emotional intelligence and self-awareness			
Pedagogies that promote an ability to both work within an environment of change, and to lead and manage appropriate workplace change			
Pedagogies with a strong emphasis on creativity			
Pedagogies that enhance personal resilience and motivational skills			
Pedagogies that promote transition into positions of greater responsibility			
Pedagogies that are aligned to the preferences of Gen Z theatre-makers and audiences			
A framework that incorporates a lifelong learning model			
Pedagogies that promote digital future-proofed skills and tendencies			
A learning environment that is designed for the skills and preferences of the contemporary tertiary learner			
Pedagogies that promote digital collaborative skills			
Pedagogies that include the creation of digital performance-making			
Pedagogies that have a wide variety of digitally transferable skills			

Every interview respondent reported that sustainability was a key theme for their contemporary student demographic, with a large majority of institutions now employing production sustainability benchmarks such as *Theatre Green Book*. 'Theatre Green Book' began as a collective initiative by theatre-makers in the UK, and has grown to involve the performing arts industry across the world” (TGB, 2025). The term sustainability also carries a further resonance in this context—the continued viability of TPE provision itself. Significant challenges lie in the high delivery costs for institutions and the relatively small student cohorts, both of which are compounded by the changing and increasingly complex needs of contemporary students. Many now balance multiple jobs alongside their studies and, unlike earlier generations, no longer have the capacity to commit to extended periods of face-to-face learning.

A wider embedding of interactive asynchronous learning would align with improving TPE diversity and inclusivity. To future-proof curriculum, the new TPE could include core components in both sustainable/ethical and digital theatre-making. To promote greater inclusivity amongst the volume and breadth of applicants, TPE signature pedagogies should review and limit the current explicit contact hours expectations, thereby contributing positively to the culture of wellness within TPE, the increasing needs of which were identified by all interviewees.

While these methods have been celebrated for their rigor, they exclude those with caring responsibilities, disabilities requiring time flexibility, or the need to support themselves financially. This isn't just a financial issue — it's a fundamental inequity in how time is valued in training (Farrier, Whittaker, 2025).

The experiential learning environment should be re-aligned to a digital post-humanist context, where technological and future-proofed skills are embedded and championed, alongside the more traditional TPE practical skills. This could widen both educational and industrial partnerships, and the possible spectrum of career destinations for graduates.

The pandemic demonstrated that skills learning can be delivered online. Interview respondents reported that in some cases (e.g. CAD learning), an online or asynchronous approach was actually more beneficial. Some stage management educators (including the author) utilised bespoke stage management software to be able to deliver strong show calling learning online. Although some practical disciplines clearly remain best suited to face-to-face learning, the live and asynchronous online environment could increasingly be optimised to deliver specific skills classes.

If partial skills training were to be delivered online, it would open the possibility to widen student participants to become part of an international cohort. This would give a truly global context to TPE learning, and the strongest and widest possible faculty demographic available for learners. Students would still practice on traditional collaborative productions within their geographically local context. However, they would also be able to collaborate online internationally to create fully realised digital productions. All projects on which students participate, could be sustainably created.

Post-Humanist Production for Performance

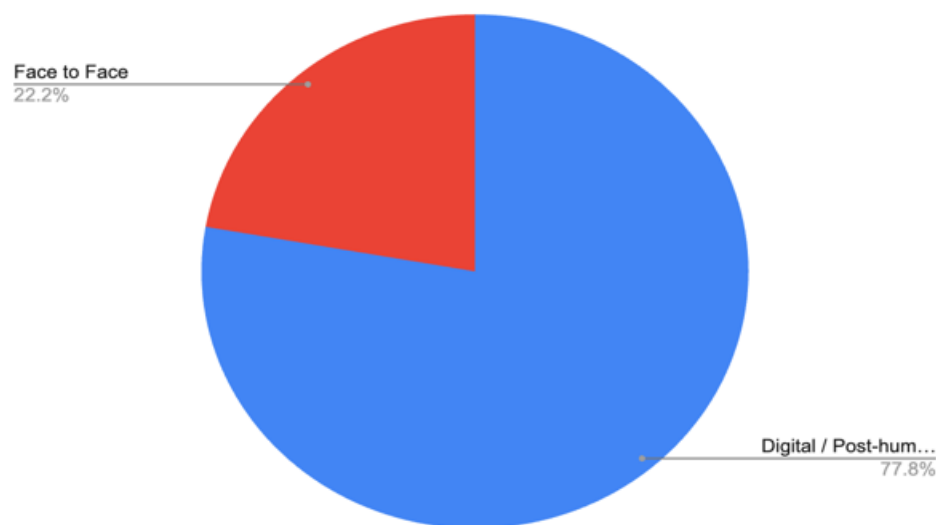
The findings outlined in the previous section, and summarised in Figure 2, inform the development of a provisional draft framework for a future-proofed TPE, provisionally titled here as *Post-Humanist Production for Performance*. This structure is presented as an exploratory touch-point, intended to provoke discussion and to hopefully be an aid to guide future research and debate.

- *TPE Skills* - Disciplinary skills learning could be delivered within a fully blended learning environment to a multi-location cohort — both online as a single cohort, and in face-to-face practical classes and workshops for smaller groups at each partner institution. The learning environment would be fully inclusive of a wide range of interactive digital asynchronous tools, further expanding the scope for inclusivity. As a programme which promotes and embeds concepts within post-humanism, ethical and sustainable theatre-making would be core components.

- *Live Studio* would involve student practice on traditionally mounted collaborative theatre/event productions, delivered within the geographically local context for each group of students. All projects/productions in which students participate would be sustainably and ethically created.
- *Digital Studio* — All students within the multi-location cohort would collaborate online to create fully realised digitally collaborative theatre/event productions. All projects/productions in which students participate would be sustainably created.

Figure 3

Michael Budmani / PPP Indicative Delivery Model / 2025



Note. Figure. 3 shows the indicative weightings that represent the relative balance of delivery modes within the PPP model.

Conclusion

This paper sought to critically examine the contemporary landscape of TPE and its signature pedagogies by drawing on qualitative data from detailed primary interviews with established English-speaking sector TPE academics, alongside existing academic articles, and the author's extensive applied and academic TPE profile. Findings have identified the contemporary issues that TPE signature pedagogies need to respond to, and have led to a draft PPP framework.

This draft PPP model reconfigures traditional TPE signature pedagogies into a genuinely blended, multi-platform framework. This model enables the development of an international theatrical learning experience, whilst fostering highly transferable and industry-relevant competencies. PPP aims to produce graduates who are not only practical and digitally proficient contributors to theatre-making, but also ethically grounded project and team-oriented professionals, prepared for a world of work defined by constant change and for careers that may not yet exist.

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