



# How can we support students towards more sustainable costume realisation practices?

Action Research Project by Florence Meredith

# Who am I?



## **Costume Practitioner and Educator**

Specialist costume technician at Central Saint Martins

Supporting performance students to realise costume outcomes

Costume designer and maker

Specialism in dance

An interest in sustainable practices

White, middle class, university educated woman

I am a Costume Practitioner and Educator. I have worked at Central Saint Martins as a Specialist Costume Technician for just over two years, but I have worked in Higher Education throughout my career. This academic year I also began to work part-time as an academic tutor.

In my role as a technician, I work almost exclusively in an open access studio space, supporting performance students across multiple courses and a variety of skill levels in the physical realisation of their costume design ideas. This includes the delivery of skills workshops, technical tutorials, and the production of learning resources.

I am also a costume designer and maker, specializing in dance costume. I have a personal, professional and artistic interest in sustainable practices - particularly the work of Tanja Beer

# Why this research question?

- Unethical purchasing, wasted resources
- Mirroring of industry hierarchies
- Missed critical thinking
- Stress
- Climate crisis issue
- Feminist, anti-racist issue
- Student attainment
- Student experience

*“The climate emergency is the most serious challenge humanity has ever faced”*

Theatre Green Book, 2024

## **My interest in this question stems from:**

A recurring issue that myself and my colleagues have observed in the costume studio, in which students often **leave the realisation of their costumes until the last moment**. Without enough time to make a costume from scratch themselves, this leads them to make last-minute purchases of cheap garments from fast fashion vendors. These purchases often turn out not to be fit for purpose, and are wasted or discarded.

## **This leads to:**

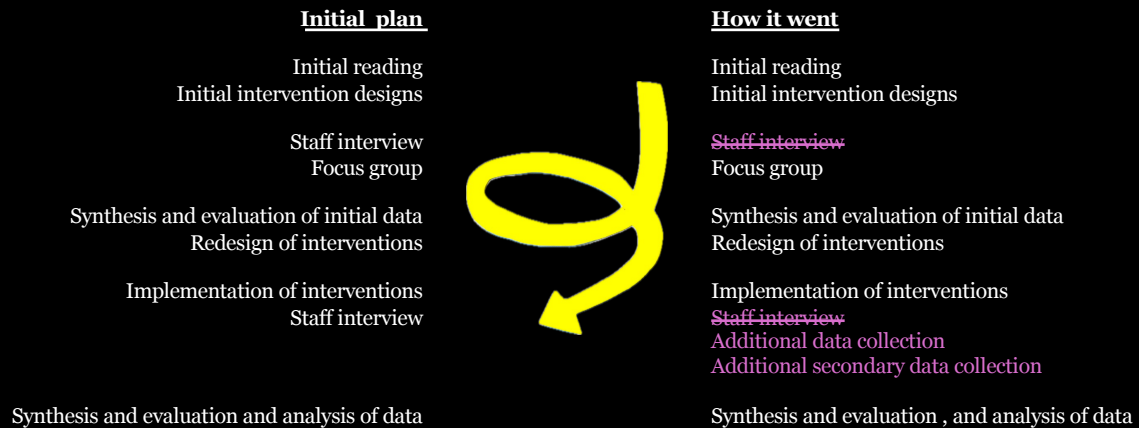
Contribution to carbon intensive consumer systems, and needlessly wasted garments and fabrics, making this a climate justice issue.

Engagement with the fast fashion garment industry, in which 80% of workers are women, and the majority are in the global south, makes this a feminist and anti-racist issue (Helm, 2024)

This mirrors the status quo of the performance industry, which prioritises artistic vision over the climate crisis and social equality.

This also means that opportunities for rich learning experiences and critical thinking-through-materials during the realisation process is missed out on.

# Action Research Plan



Action Research Cycle, McNiff (1995)

- My initial action research design involved two cycles, as displayed here;
- To review the literature and current support systems already in place in the studio
- Design four intervention ideas
- Gather initial qualitative data in response to these design from a student focus group and a staff interview
- Evaluate and assess these results
- Develop one or two of these interventions
- Implement these interventions
- Gathering data on student engagement with them
- Evaluate and analyse
- As you can see from the right side of the slide, my plan did not go to plan, so I have to evaluate and respond accordingly along the way.
- In this, the design of my research was arguably misjudged. I ended up with too much data to manage in the time-frame I had and ended up disregarding data from two interviews that I planned and carried out. I spent quite some time reading and assessing the current support in place,



and creating initial design ideas, when it may have been more in keeping with the action research approach to just get going!

Intervention idea 1: holding workshops or events unrelated to costume, that highlight sustainable practice and bring students into the space

## CLOTHES SWAP

J107  
02/11/24

Calling all Performance Program students!  
Bring your old (clean!) clothes,  
and exchange them for something new to you

This clothes swap is being organized as part  
of this year's goal towards zero sustainable  
costume practices.

For more information, email: [fitz@corvillatopics.org.uk](mailto:fitz@corvillatopics.org.uk)

## CLOTHES MENDING WORKSHOPS

J107  
09/12/24

Calling all Performance Program students!  
Bring your old (clean!) clothes,  
and learn to hand sew a hem, replace a button, or  
mend moth holes with Fila.  
No sewing experience needed.

This clothes swap is being organized as part  
of this year's goal towards zero sustainable  
costume practices.

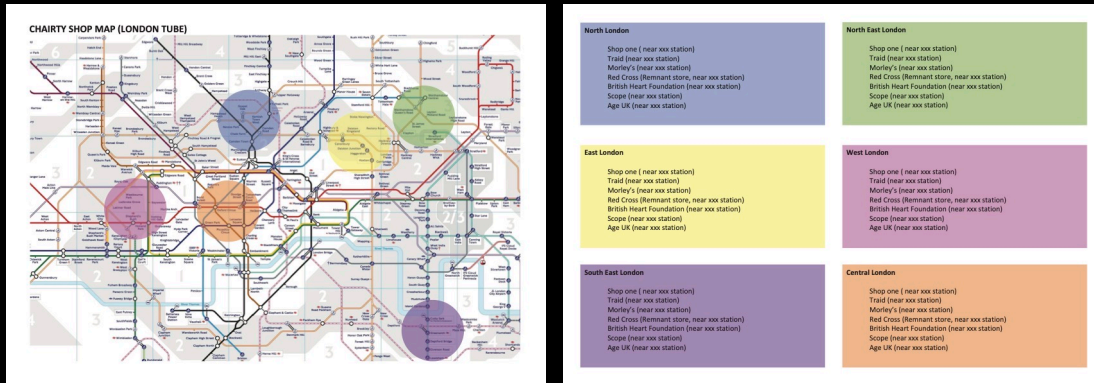
For more information, email: [fitz@corvillatopics.org.uk](mailto:fitz@corvillatopics.org.uk)

*“Eco-efficiency has traditionally been focused on a quantitative approach to measurement and procurement (mechanistic worldview) without activating social, cultural and environmental potential (ecological worldview)”*

Beer, 2021

Design number one, was holding workshops in the costume space, which would introduce sustainable skills, and encourage thought around garment life cycles, without the pressure of a curricular outcome.

## Intervention idea 2: creating sustainable suppliers lists which are more visual and accessible



*“This emphasis on the new and disposable in theatre practice has largely mirrored the consumptive habits of the modern era”*

Beer (2021)

Design number two was the creation of more accessible, usable sustainable supplier's resources, which had previously been long, unengaging lists

Intervention idea 3: the production of variety of project planning sheets to be used at templates within a planned or unplanned tutorial

Monday 4th November	Tuesday 5th November	Wednesday 6th November	Thursday 7th November	Friday 8th November
Planning Take performers measurements	Fabric/materials sourcing	Initial costume store pieces selected Find rehearsal items for performers	Charity shop shopping	Pattern cutting
Monday 4th November	Tuesday 5th November	Wednesday 6th November	Thursday 7th November	Friday 8th November
Making for first fitting	Making for first fitting	Final costume store pieces selected Making for first fitting	First fitting	Alterations Last charity shop shopping
Monday 11th November	Tuesday 12th November	Wednesday 13th November	Thursday 14th November	Friday 15th November
Final fittings	Final alterations	Install	Get-in	Dy Tech

Design number three looked to help students avoid a last-minute dash to a deadline, in supporting them further with the planning of their costume realization process by providing time planning templates.

## Intervention idea 4: the display of sustainable decision-making resources

The last design looked at the display of resources which could help students in their decision - making processes, such as this poster, which is sourced from the theatre green book (an openly accessible guide to sustainable theatre practices)

(Maisie Bidwell, 2024)

# Focus group

12/11/2024

In person

Semi-structured, localist, romantic style

Approximately 32 minutes

Participants - 2

*“...elicit a greater, more in-depth understanding of perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and experiences”*

## Focus group coded data

Intervention idea 1: Holding workshops or events unrelated to costume, that highlight sustainable practice and bring students into the space

Response type	Phrases used	Number of remarks
Positive	So interesting Love it Great People would show-up Get my friends to come It would be nice Good	7
Negative		0
Ideas	Bring in people from different courses	1
Feelings about the underlying issue	Daunting Am I welcome?	2

*“...focus, capture, and distill meaning”*

(Vaughn et al, 2013)

(Gray & Malins, 2007)

I presented these interventions to students in a focus group, in order to gain their opinions and perspectives

Having had a conversation with Saffie Pluck, an MA academic practice student at CSM, I decided to targeted specific students. Although I initially gained the agreement of five students, only two turned up to the focus group on the day.

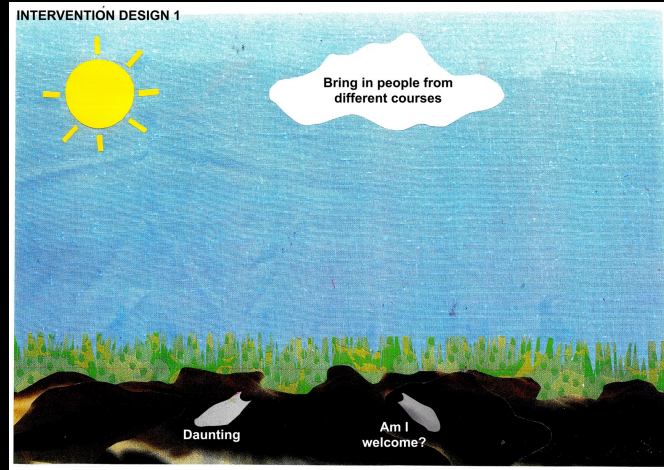
In preparation for this, I contacted the course leader before proceeding.

I chose to conduct a focus group for this data gathering because it aligned with my need to acknowledge the specificity of the context, and the 'insider' status of both participants and myself as the interviewer – and to elicit a greater, more in depth understanding of” students perceptions.

To “focus, capture and distill meaning” from my qualitative focus group data, I started my coding it responsively, highlighting my transcript to pull out positive and negative remarks, ideas, and feeling about underlying issues. I used colour categorization to organize this selection, which I then quantified numerically.

I visualized this data in order to evaluate it.

Intervention idea 1: holding workshops or events unrelated to costume, that highlight sustainable practice and bring students into the space



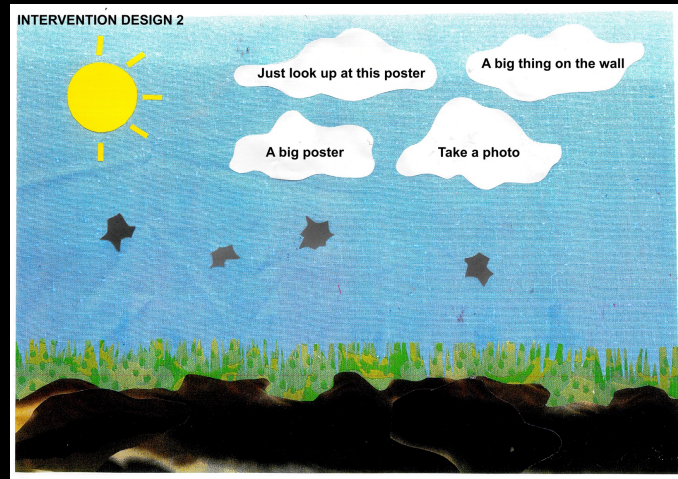
This took the form of the analogy of a garden – the tending of a garden or a landscape paralleling the creation of an environment in which students are able to blossom in to more sustainable practitioners.

The suns indicate positive remarks, the clouds indicate ideas that emerged, or suggestions made

The slugs in the earth indicate underlying issues

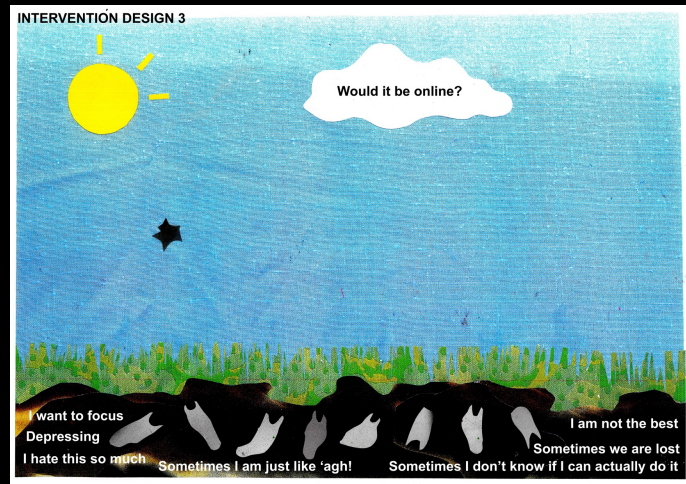


Intervention idea 2: creating sustainable suppliers lists  
which are more visual and accessible



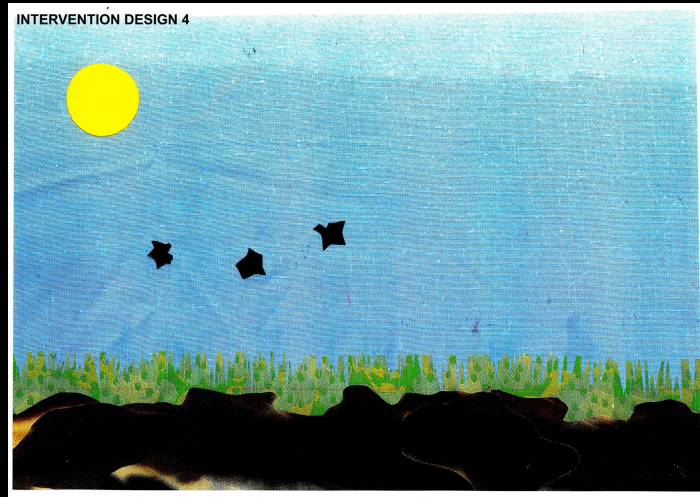
The grey lumps indicate the negative remarks – they are supposed to be pollutants!

Intervention idea 3: the production of variety of project planning sheets to be used at templates within a planned or unplanned tutorial



(This intervention was particularly slug heavy)

Intervention idea 4: the display of sustainable decision-making resources



So, by comparing these data gardens, I was able to assess which intervention designs to take forwards with the little time I had left.

Looking at the data, intervention one was the most popular, and number two was received well, but generated lots of further ideas for ways it could be developed. Number three brought up lots of interesting underlying issues but was not received well (and so might be suited to further future investigation with more focused time and attention), and number four was not neither received well, nor did it generate any ideas.

# Workshops

## Clothes Swap

2/12/2024

No data collected

Participants - 0

## Easy Clothes Repairs

10/12/2024

1.5 hours

Questionnaires

Interactive display

Participants - 2

## EASY CLOTHES REPAIRS & ALTERATIONS

J107

10/12/24

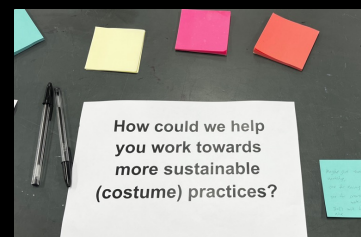
17:30 - 19:00

CALLING ALL PERFORMANCE  
PROGRAMME STUDENTS

*Does that jacket still have a loose button?  
Does that top have a tear?  
Keep tripping over your trousers?*

Learn some basic repair and alteration techniques - feel free to  
bring clothes that need work along with you!  
NO EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

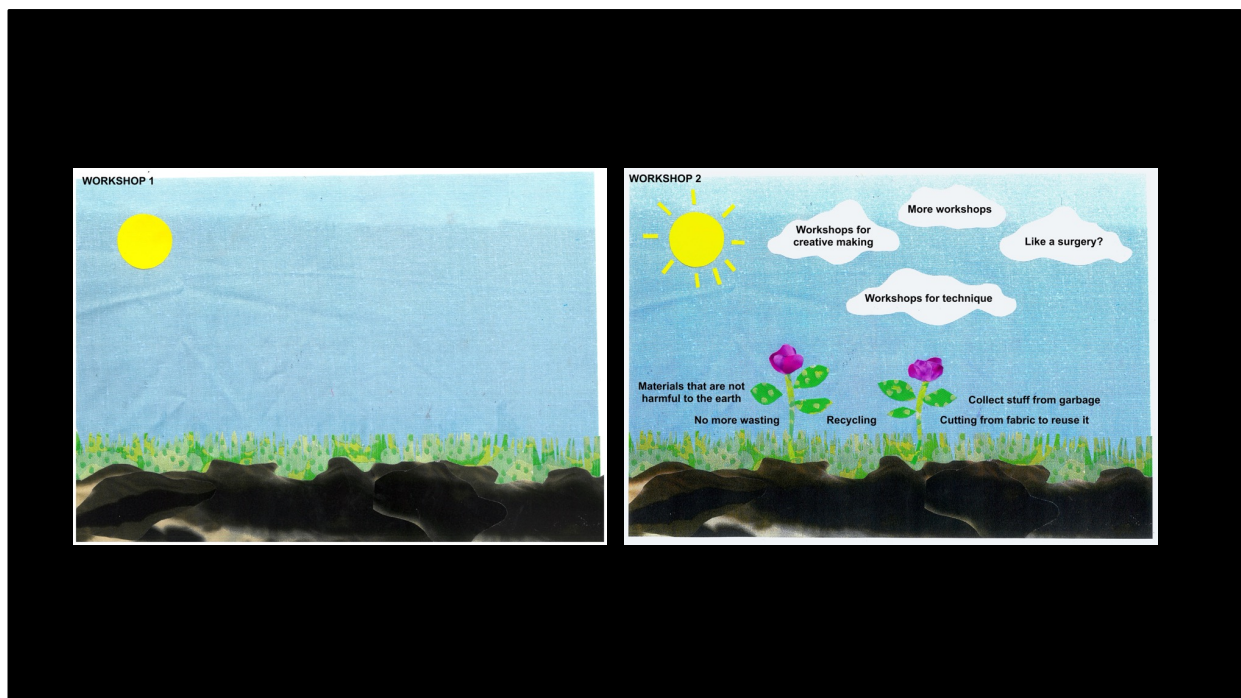
This is being organised as part of Phil's  
post-grad research into sustainable cos-  
tume practices. For more information,  
email Phil at [Lnwoodth@cam.ac.uk](mailto:Lnwoodth@cam.ac.uk)



Due to the strongly positive response from students in the focus group, I planned and advertised two workshops, during which I would collect data through interactive means, as a way of exploring alternative ways of gathering data in this participatory setting, as well as questionnaires, using post it notes in different ways in each.

Despite such a positive response from the students who took part in the focus group, and interest from students in response to posters and moodle advertising, no students attended the first workshop. I speculate that this was due to the timing, it falling too near to the term's deadlines.

Only two students came to the second workshop, again, despite interest expressed to me. Again, this calls into question the validity of this research, as the participant numbers were so small.



Using the data from my questionnaires, and additional data gathered through interactive display post-it notes, I used a similar means of processing this much smaller amount of data to my first round of data coding and visualization.

In addition to the existing symbols, I added flowers to represent student attendees, and leaves to represent active engagement with the topic of sustainable practices.

Although this data cannot be compared to anything, it is evident that the first workshop, presented here on the left side, was unsuccessful.

The data gathered from the second workshop could be used to develop the design to some extent, but its validity is questionable.

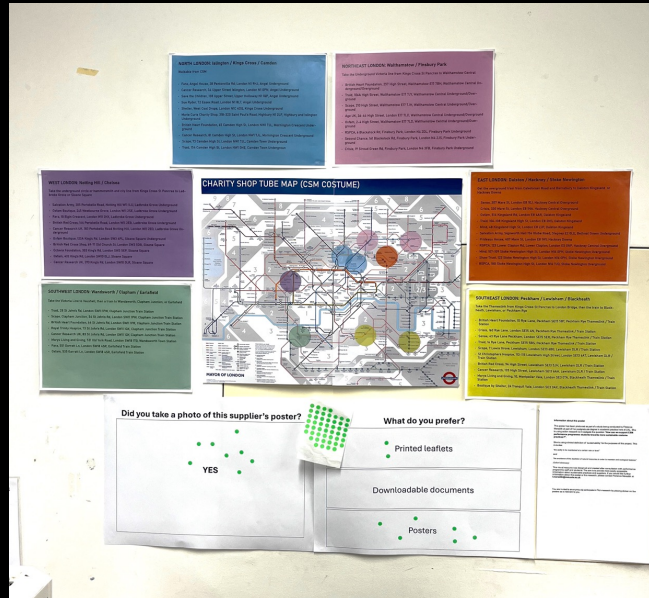
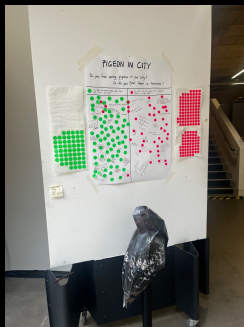
This visualization could work well cumulatively over time, in that there is a space for a response to the intervention, but also specific detail of ways it could be improved.

Were there lots of attendees, I would have to reconsider how this is visualized.



# Poster Display

**Poster display**  
9/12/24 – 13/12/2024  
Interactive stickers  
Participants - 8



The students in the focus group suggested this intervention design could be something that they could photograph, rather than download or take as a physical handout.

So, I responded to these idea clouds by creating a big physical display in the costume studio, which mapped out sustainable supplier locations visually, with colour coding.

I posted the display in the studio for one week, with a poster below that read “did you take a photo of this suppliers map?” with some bright stickers available next to it so that students who interacted with it could self-report. This method of data collection was directly inspired by a display I saw on the ‘street’ at CSM a few weeks earlier, pictured on the left. This seemed like a more realistic way of collecting this data, which could easily be missed if observation alone was relied on.

To contextualise this data, I collected further data within the same display, asking students which of three modes of resource they prefer – a printed leaflet, downloadable documents, or posters.

I posted information about my research next to the display too.



## Additional Data

### Digital resources

9/12/24 – 13/12/2024

Interactive stickers

Interactions – 1.7



### Handouts

9/12/24 – 13/12/2024

Interactive stickers

Interactions - 0



### Poster display

9/12/24 – 13/12/2024

Interactive stickers

Interactions - 8



In order to have data to compare the poster display interactions with, I sought additional primary and secondary data.

This took the form of moodle data, shared with me by the technical moodle manager at CSM. She was able to provide the number of visitors to the costume resources page, where digital suppliers' lists could be found, across one term. The average visit rate was 1.7 per week, compared to the observed data I collected regarding physical handouts, which was none that week, as exemplified in the isolated sections of the data gardens here.

Although through these visualisations of student interactions with the different modes of resource show a clear preference, the comparability of these three data sets is questionable. Two were collected across one week, and another is an average across a term, so conclusions from this must be drawn tentatively.

What is of interest is the disparity of preferences when compared to the additional data collected by the poster, which shows a preference for handouts over moodle visits.

Again, though these data sets are too small to draw any solid conclusions from, there is a clear preference for poster displays over nay other mode of resource.

# Key findings

1. Students are (probably) more likely to engage with a sustainable suppliers poster or display than physical handouts or digital downloads of sustainable suppliers lists.
1. Students reported interest in and enthusiasm for practical sustainability skills workshops
2. Students who attended sustainable practices workshops expressed positive engagement with sustainable costuming practices
3. Students reported a lack of confidence in their own skills and abilities, which may prevent them from entering the space, and/or accessing technical support in sustainable costume realisation processes

These are my key findings, summarised

# Evaluation and moving forwards

Data overwhelm  
Participation



Time management  
Planning

*“Action research is open ended”*

McNiff (1995)

In this research process I struggled with data overwhelm, a lack of participation. Were I to continue this research, I would re-evaluate my time management in relation to data collection and processing, plan for research activities to occur at more suitable times of the academic year (i.e. not the end of term!) during which students may be more available and under less time pressure. I could also reconsider participant motivations and explore co-collaboration.

# References

Beer, T (2021) *Ecoscenography : An Introduction to Ecological Design for Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central (Accessed on: 24 October 2024)

Gray, C and Malins, J (2007) 'Interpreting the map: methods of evaluation and analysis' in *Visualizing Research : A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon, Oxon. pp.1349 – 158. Available from: ProQuest Ebook Central. (Accessed: 05 December 2024)

McNiff, J. (1995) *Action research for professional development* (pp. 137-151). London: Hyde Publications. Available at: [https://kaye.ac.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/McNiff\\_Action\\_research11.pdf](https://kaye.ac.il/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/McNiff_Action_research11.pdf) (Accessed on: 10 November 2024)

Renew Culture (2021) *Theatre Green Book*. Available at: [https://theatregreenbook.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/TGB\\_v2.pdf](https://theatregreenbook.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/TGB_v2.pdf) (Accessed: 30 October 2024)

Vaughn, S. Schumm, J. S. Sinagub, J. (2013) Focus Group Interviews in Education Phycology in *Sage Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, Sage Publications, Inc

Thank-you