

Joseph M. Shosh and Jennifer A. Wescoe

Making Meaningful Theater in the Empty Space

As teacher-facilitators, Joseph M. Shosh and Jennifer A. Wescoe emphasize the educational value of theater. To promote student leadership of a production, students audition for roles on and off stage and contribute to the technical aspects of the production through “crew days,” from which they build community and develop a sense of respect for the complexity of production. Additionally, Shosh and Wescoe implement writing activities to help students understand and develop their characters.

In order for something of quality to take place, an empty space needs to be created. An empty space makes it possible for a new phenomenon to come to life, for anything that touches on content, meaning, expression, language and music can exist only if the experience is fresh and new.

—Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre*

Theater is our greatest teacher—or at least it has the potential to be. The ancient Greeks understood this so well that during their great dramatic festivals, even prisoners were released to attend and experience a communal catharsis in the theater. Just try telling your principal, though, that you want the kids in the in-school suspension room to form your audience or join the thespian troupe, and someone else in your department will surely be assigned to direct the school play. In most schools, drama is an extracurricular activity provided as a reward for those who behaved and want to stick around after the final bell has sounded. We have come to believe that the best teaching of English happens in the otherwise empty spaces of schools where we facilitate learning in ways that help students slow down the frenetic pace of their lives long enough to make meaning of the present moment.

Students are often forced to be passive learners in school, memorizing and regurgitating information without creating meaning for themselves. John Dewey, the pragmatic American educational theorist, and Peter Brook, arguably the most important stage director of the twentieth century,

have helped us to rethink how we direct the school play and, in turn, how we teach English classes before play rehearsal even begins. Dewey’s critique of traditional education is analogous to Brook’s disdain for what he calls the “deadly theatre.”¹ Each is characterized by a lifeless conformity to tradition, where a form is often preserved without a thoughtful regard to its function. Educative experiences, such as a living, breathing theater, occur when “actors” as self-directing agents work within a community of fellow learners, including the teacher-director, to collectively negotiate the meaning of each moment. As Brook explains, “Theatre is always both a search for meaning and a way of making this meaning meaningful for others. This is the mystery” (76).

Selecting a Text for Performance

When we ask students about how they most often experience works of dramatic literature in their English classes, they generally don’t talk about the quest for meaning that matters so much to Dewey, to Brook, and to us. Instead, they talk about how empty the experience seems compared to what they

do after school. Andy explained it to us this way: “Many kids get bored by just sitting there reading a play. No one is following along. Most are just looking ahead in the book trying to find where their character speaks next.” Mike adds, “To me, reading a play in class is one-dimensional. You read the plot, search for the characters’ information, describe their actions and words. Performing, on the other hand, is as three-dimensional as someone can get. It may be the same story, the same plot, all the same characters, but a new element arises when you step foot on that stage and enter your character’s environment.”

Andy and Mike, like most students with whom we have worked in class and after school, much prefer preparing a dramatic text for an authentic performance to conducting a round-robin cold reading. Hence, the most important initial decision we must make as educators is selecting a text for performance that is worthy of students’ serious study and prospective audience members’ time and money. We encourage students to join us in reading and seeing as many plays as we can, knowing that the selection we make sets the parameters for the learning that will occur. Our suburban high school of nearly 2,000 students lies just outside of the city of Bethlehem, allowing students to attend college, community, and professional productions staged at nearby Moravian College and Lehigh University. With midtown Manhattan and the Broadway theater district only 83 miles from our eastern Pennsylvania campus, the TKTS discount ticket booth just north of Times Square is a popular destination for our students and for us.

We examine plays written in a range of styles and from different historical periods—from a Shakespearean comedy such as *Much Ado about Nothing* to a modern American tragedy such as *All My Sons* to a Christopher Durang farce, a Neil Simon comedy, or a Stephen Sondheim musical. In any given four-year cycle, we want students to experience different acting techniques and to learn invaluable life lessons from the master playwrights in the English language. Dewey asks, “How shall the young become acquainted with the past in such a way that the acquaintance is a potent agent in appreciation of the living present?” (23). One answer is that we must engage with the best texts our culture has produced and ultimately select the

one to put on the stage that has the most to say to us and to our audience.

Facilitating Student Leadership and Responsibility

Once students have helped us to select the right piece, we help facilitate *their* leadership of *their* production. Members of the high school theater company elect a company manager, a business manager, a program manager, a publicity manager, and a Web site manager. During the organizational meeting, each officer also takes responsibility for doing research on one aspect of the play and its production history.

Students audition not only for the roles on stage but also for key positions behind the scenes. The production stage manager takes charge of rehearsals and performances, maintaining attendance records, compiling and updating the promptbook, and calling cues during performance. Other key posts include the scenic designer, lighting designer, sound designer, costumer, box office manager, house manager, properties master, set construction crew, set painting crew, shift crew, and dance captains. As teacher-facilitators, we attempt to create the conditions in which the greatest amount of learning will occur—guiding, suggesting, attempting to elicit meaningful action from students, and working hard to teach through questioning rather than telling.

All students participating in the production attend a series of Saturday morning “Crew Days” in which they contribute to the technical aspects of production. Having cast members involved in all facets of play production helps them to care more about the success of the company as a whole and develops a sense of respect for that which they might otherwise take for granted—

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namely, their costumes, props, sets, and even their fellow students who work backstage. Becky, a student with extensive community theater experience, explains, "I have worked at some theaters where different cliques of people don't converse much, but here we really become a team. We know how important each piece is to the others, and we always appreciate each other's work. Parents who come in and help with costumes and sets on Saturdays even become part of the team. It's amazing because there aren't many things teenagers do where they want their parents to get involved, too, but working on the show becomes a family affair." Jon, another company member, adds, "Everyone is equal in the theater. It doesn't matter if you are white or black, gay or straight, man or woman. Can you believe that is what theater can do for our civilization?"

Building Community and Preparing to Act

The egalitarian sense of community we desire evolves only over time and takes much conscious planning. We begin each rehearsal with some form of ensemble-building activity. At initial rehearsals, we tend to focus on trust and teamwork. We often begin with a three-partner pass, whereby students allow themselves to gently fall back into the arms of one partner and then to be passed back, only to fall forward gently into the arms of the third partner. When students are ready, we move to the group partner pass, where one student stands with arms crossed in the center of a tight circle of peers, allowing himself or herself to be passed as students work together to guide the volunteer forward and backward.

As much as we might be tempted to move right into scene and character study, we must first ensure that students are warmed up and adequately prepared to tackle the challenges they will face in rehearsal. Students take turns leading one another in a series of physical and vocal warm-ups that they have learned in the drama classroom, in their community theater activities, or through the modeling that we have done.

Students must retain ownership for their work as we continue to model new possibilities and empower them to develop extensions and use resources such as those we include within the sidebar. We participate in the activities students lead, and we follow Dewey's advice about the special nature of our role as teacher-facilitators: "I do not know what

RESOURCES

Trust, Relaxation, and Imagination

Bernardi, Philip. *Improvisation Starters: A Collection of 900 Improvisation Situations for the Theater*. Cincinnati: Betterway, 1992.

Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Trans. Adrian Jackson. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Johnstone, Keith. *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1979.

Novelly, Maria C. *Theatre Games for Young Performers: Improvisations and Exercises for Developing Acting Skills*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether, 1985.

Spolin, Viola. *Theater Games for the Classroom*. Ed. Arthur Morey and Mary Ann Brandt. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1986.

Play Production and Character Development

Allensworth, Carl. *The Complete Play Production Handbook*. Rev. ed. New York: Harper, 1982.

Boagey, Eric. *Starting Drama*. London: Harper, 1986.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space: A Book about the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate*. New York: Atheneum, 1968.

Daw, Kurt. *Acting: Thought into Action*. Rev. ed. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004.

Rodgers, James W., and Wanda C. Rodgers. *Play Director's Survival Kit: A Complete Step-by-Step Guide to Producing Theater in Any School or Community Setting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

Effective Drama-in-Education Practices

Booth, David. *Story Drama: Creating Stories through Role Playing, Improvising, and Reading Aloud*. 2nd ed. Portland: Stenhouse, 2005.

Booth, David, and Jonathan Neelands, eds. *Writing in Role: Classroom Projects Connecting Writing and Drama*. Hamilton: Caliburn, 1998.

Courtney, Richard. *Play, Drama, and Thought: The Intellectual Background to Dramatic Education*. 4th ed. Toronto: Simon & Pierre, 1989.

Neelands, Jonathan, and Tony Goode. *Structuring Drama Work: A Handbook of Available Forms in Theatre and Drama*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

O'Neill, Cecily. *Drama Worlds: A Framework for Process Drama*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995.

the greater maturity of the teacher and the teacher's greater knowledge of the world, of subject-matters and of individuals, is for unless the teacher can arrange conditions that are conducive to community activity and . . . communal projects" (59).

Developing Character

While director Peter Brook stresses the importance of thought, emotion, and body being in harmony for the intentions of an actor to be clear, he notes that even with professional performers, “The main work, day after day, was wrestling with the words and their meaning” (111). Most of what we do as teacher-facilitators is to help students make meaning of the words they encounter textually. Hence, we always set aside rehearsal time to read, discuss, and improvise scenes from the play we will be performing. Brook reminds us, “What must be avoided is the director demonstrating the way he himself would like the part to be played and then forcing the actor to assume and stick to this alien, imposed construction. Instead, the actor must be stimulated all the time so that in the end he finds his own way” (112).

As students take on the voices of their characters for the first time, we frequently pause to discuss the types of people we are playing and how they would present themselves physically and vocally. Where appropriate, we stop the action and improvise to reveal the subtext. Plays and musicals often move forward a day, a week, or even longer, as they progress from scene to scene. It is beneficial for actors to improvise what happened right before the scene begins and right after the scene ends, so they understand clearly what their character wants and will do to achieve that objective. Students often enjoy an improvisation in which they attend a New Year’s Eve or birthday party in character, which helps them to figure out who they are as well as how their character relates to other characters in the play.

Andy explains the importance of these activities: “It’s during the rehearsal process of the play that I learn the most. I have to develop a character. I have to find out how that character walks, talks, and interacts with others. During a show, the audience doesn’t see what work I’ve put in, but they do see what that work has done to enhance my character. Rehearsal is where I grow most as an actor. It’s there that I learn to take risks and make choices.” Brook adds, “The mediocre artist prefers not to take risks, which is why he is conventional. Everything that is conventional, everything that is mediocre, is linked to this fear” (23). Only by playing in role during rehearsal can students such as Andy explore a wide array of dramatic choices and come to experience the

freedom to make choices that are anything but mediocre or conventional.

We also facilitate writing-in-role activities. While students often resist five-paragraph essays or standardized writing prompts, not one has complained about using writing as an authentic tool to help develop his or her character. English educator James Moffett explains, “It is amazing how much so-called writing problems clear up when the student really cares, when he is realistically put into the drama of somebody with something to say to somebody else” (12).

We ask all cast members to pen a brief autobiography stating where they are from, what they are like in the play, and describing their relationships with other characters. Then students shoot and print digital headshots of each cast member in character and post character autobiographies next to the appropriate photos. This is particularly effective for large cast productions to help students see that each person has a story to tell even though not every character in the play has lines.

In another writing activity, each cast member must determine his or her character’s motivations, objectives, strategies, and obstacles throughout the play. We often have students complete this not only for the play as a whole but also for each scene. We ask students to return to the script to mark beat changes as well. Using action verbs, cast members explore each line they say and decide when and why there is a change in motivation. This leads to a role-scoring activity in which students mark the text to indicate changes in intensity, tone, register, and volume. As students’ respective and collective understandings of characterization within the play grow, they are ready to compose a one- to two-minute monologue that allows them to say something their character does not get to say in the action of the play or musical.

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Cast members can choose to write this as a message to the other characters or can speak directly to one other character in a letter that is read aloud.

Becky explains the importance of this process:

As you work on your character, you begin to see them as a real person. Their story becomes your story and you enter into a whole new world when you are doing the show. Whether you enjoy reading or not, no character becomes as real to you without your fellow cast members to help you put the play together. When you read in class, it is a solo venture, but in the process of building our shows we learn better than anything else I have ever done that you cannot do it without the rest of the team.

Clearly, in attempting to construct a character for public performance, Becky is engaged in an even more important process of building character—her own.

Learning in Performance

We are always somewhat surprised when we send out invitations to classes to join us in the school auditorium or black box theater for our school-day performance and one of our English department colleagues declines the offer, citing too much material to cover to give up a class

period to enjoy a play. While we empathize with every teacher's need to foster student achievement, often with too little time and too few resources, literacy educator David Booth's eloquent plea echoes in our ears:

I need for students of all ages to be shocked and surprised by ideas that can only be shared in the safety of the theatre frame; I need the sounds of powerful language filling their impoverished word world; I need for them to sense how they and those on stage breathe simultaneously as

one; I need to witness the struggle of students of every age participating in drama work, listening to each other as they interact, so that they begin to see that everyone matters if the fiction is to become real; I need to know that my students can

read the conventions of theatre as proficiently as they can a Friday night film. I know that theatre can help them to enter their worlds more fully, to see more clearly, and feel and think all at once. I need theatre that will continue to teach them for all their days. (21–22)

We have been fortunate to see the power theater has to educate, and we want to ensure that the young people in our schools have the opportunity to find this out. Of course, we believe that writing to learn is as important for students in the audience as it is for students on stage. Hence, we ask classes in attendance to write about their experience in the theater in a variety of ways, from personal response in a journal entry to fully developed character critiques and theater reviews. When elementary school students attend a performance, we have them write letters to the characters in the play and then forward the children's letters to the cast so that they may read them and write back to each student in role.

Taking the Show on the Road

While what we have described articulates the vision we have tried to enact for an extracurricular theater arts program in secondary schools, we believe that such structures can and should be part of the classroom curricular experience whenever appropriate. Within our individual English and drama classes, we have endeavored to work with students to make meaningful theater in empty spaces throughout our community. Sometimes we work with scripted dramas; at other times, students write their own scripts based on fairy tales and children's books and take their productions on tour to local elementary schools. Sometimes students develop a theme such as "cooperation" and write an interactive play in which all audience members can participate. This has worked especially well with preschool and primary-age children, who, with the help of their teachers and parent volunteers, create "costume" pieces in school and join us for participatory theater.

Sometimes, our high school students serve as storytellers and teacher-facilitators as they travel to elementary schools and middle schools to engage in dramatized buddy reading or to share their love of acting with younger children in workshop sessions. Sometimes, students produce their own plays, an

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evening of published one-act plays, or scenes from full-length dramas. Sue, the after-school theater company's properties master, explains: "Every show I do presents different challenges and I learn a new way to problem-solve every time. Working within budgets, managing time and people, making decisions, searching high and low for the perfect prop—the process becomes quite interesting and somewhat consuming. Making mistakes, and I've made my share, is one of the best learning tools, and it's truly rewarding on opening night to know I've overcome these challenges and goofs."

Directing Future Teacher-Facilitators

Even though we have been fortunate to study acting, directing, and play production as part of our professional development as educators, we continue to find that students offer the best advice—if only we will listen. Brook reminds us, "What [the director] needs most to develop in his work is a sense of listening. Day after day, as he intervenes, makes mistakes or watches what is happening on the surface, inside he must be listening, listening to the secret movements of the hidden process" (119). While we hope that our English-teaching colleagues will join us by helping students to make meaning in empty spaces across the nation, we find students' words of wisdom for new teacher-facilitators most worth hearing:

Take risks. The only way you can learn what is good on stage is to simply try it out. We all do that as actors and the same must be true for teachers. (Andy)

If there's no teacher to direct the play, there's no play, and that would kill a culture. For some kids

this is all they do. This is where they belong. Out there in the harsh world of high school, kids might not fit in. The theatre may be the only place they call home. (Jon)

I think the advice I would give to a new drama teacher is that they can't do it alone. Just as the kids learn teamwork is important, I would tell a new drama teacher to form a team. Get the parents involved right away. Have a meeting and tell them how much you need their help. I would also tell them to be patient with the kids. They are just teenagers and a lot of them know nothing about drama so you are going to have to work with them step by step. (Becky)

Be brave, yet benevolent. Take charge. If you have a vision stick to it, but don't automatically negate any suggestions others make to add to the life of the play—even if it is a high-school student. If the teacher treats you as an equal, not as an underling, magic can happen! (Mike)

Editor's Note

1. Although it is *English Journal* style to use the American spelling of *theater*, we retain the British spelling when it appears in quotations and titles.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Shosh and Wescoe invite their students to take on the persona of a character or reconsider the piece from another point of view. "Happily Ever After? Exploring Character, Conflict, and Plot in Dramatic Tragedy" invites students to consider how the plot of the story can change if the key characters make a different choice at the turning point. Students identify the turning point, alter the decision that the characters make, and predict the characters' actions throughout the rest of the now-altered play. http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=374.