

Teaching Philosophy

Applied Drama | Theatre for the Young | Drama in Education

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“Education, for most people, means trying to make the child look like the typical adult of their society. But for me, education means making creators. You have to make them inventors, innovators, and non-conformists.” Jean Piaget

“I will use [Jenny’s] easy going personality and contagious energy in my own classroom to push students to be their most creative when working. I cannot wait to apply all the wonderful knowledge I have learned into my own classroom...” Integrated Arts/EMU Undergraduate student sharing her experience participating in my experiential learning classes/master’s project.

I view teaching and learning as a reciprocal, symbiotic process. As a tapestry requires both the warp and weft threads intertwining to create its woven imagery, students and teachers depend on one another to co-construct the moments when learning takes place. In much the same way a tapestry unveils its design, the meaning of the experience, which is as diverse as its participants are, reveals itself through personal expression, social engagement, inquiry, observations, and written and verbal reflections. As we devise stories, engage in drama, apply the arts to curriculum, examine self, seek connection, and share what we know with others, leading and teaching them through a scaffolding of ideas and skillsets, the meaning of the experience gains value as it serves a deeper purpose. This other purpose is the underlying fabric of my teaching philosophy and the reason why I feel called to teach in the first place—to help students become critical thinkers and lessen internal barriers to learning by increasing self-efficacy and strengthening student social and emotional well-being.

*“What is desired is that the teacher cease being a lecturer, satisfied with transmitting ready-made solutions. His role should rather be that of a mentor, stimulating initiative and research.”
–Jean Piaget*

“The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator, not content provider.” –Lev S. Vygotsky

While the path of least resistance may be to lecture, the best gift I can give my students (and me) is to guide with inquiry, shaping the direction of my student’s learning with their *own* inquiry, answers, anecdotes, accomplishments and challenges. For this reason, I weave classes with opportunities to share—either anecdotes from outside the classroom (‘checking in’) or reflections and critical thinking about what is happening within it. During educational drama/Mantle of the Expert types of experiences, I often ‘freeze’ the drama so that participants can ‘step out of role’ and reflect or comment on what is happening. I use the 5 Ws (plus ‘H’) of inquiry (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) provoking the development of critical thinking skills. I also find that as students engage in this process, they take greater ownership of their learning and a deeper interest in content. I will point out, however, that through the improvisational nature of this style of teaching, there is a risk of derailing the lesson. I have found that along with trusting my instincts, it demands a strong framework towards the objectives and an ability to be present in the fluidity of the moment accompanied by careful and thorough preparation and organization. It has been a process for me, as I refine my skill at doing this—my clipboard of notes, both written and visual, at one time creating a barrier to adapting to this type of organic flow, has now become a guiding reference and a gateway for enrichment.

“[Jenny] had so much knowledge and was so organized. I think overall she really connected art to learning about oneself, through the puppet project....working with an artist...can bring an additional perspective to the learning process...” –R.T. Integrated Arts class, EMU

Undergraduate student sharing her experience participating in my experiential learning classes/master's project.

As a teacher, I strive to initiate opportunities for engagement and to stimulate a student's desire for participation and learning, understanding that this time of co-constructing the experience leads to 'success' both with academic goals and for social and emotional target areas. That this is true is evident in every drama experience that I have ever participated in with students. The solemn and celebratory act of creating a peace treaty with settlers and natives would not have born much weight, had it merely lived on paper. Rather, as it came to life, sprung from the minds and hearts of fifth graders, intense emotions awakened in them as they played in role and improvised their very real experience. In fact, one year later, students remembered me when I came back into their school—remembered Standing Bear, a broken peace treaty, the courtroom and the very real tears.

In another drama, as coal miners and their families navigated a life in poverty and the crushing work in the mines, a funeral ensued following the mine's collapse and participants in role offered up prayers, hymns, and remembrances to those who lost their lives. These emotional experiences created in the play world alter the fabric of reality as each student connects with the story through emotional and physical engagement. Following this particular semester-long unit, students brought their 'expertise' and history as coal-miners to the stage as they performed in and toured my original play adaptation of a book about a coal-mining community at the turn of the twentieth century. I witnessed these students' metamorphoses as they embodied their characters and 'lived' through the curriculum content. Through written and shared reflections, I learned that the depth and breadth of the year had a powerful effect on each of them.

As I scaffold learning strategies through instruction and hands-on activities, I've witnessed firsthand how this builds confidence and puts students on a pathway to success. When possible, I also engage students in experiential learning opportunities to reinforce learning and add value to their experience. One project involved undergraduates in an integrated arts class whose capstone project was an opportunity for them to teach young children what they had learned throughout the semester. Some of their reflections follow:

"On the first day, I noticed [he] was a shier student, so I gave him a compliment and he just looked at me then walked away...on Wednesday, he sat next to me in the puppet circle and was having his puppet play with mine, just this small gesture made me think deeper. He was comfortable with the arts and using what he created to interact with others even though he himself was not comfortable with it...integrating arts can truly help students in ways that we might not originally think or realize." –R.S.

"Jenny has made me realize that you can essentially combine not only arts, but any subject with one another and create something out of it...by doing this project, I know I can find ways to account for the emotional well-being of my students..." –R.W.

In relation to building a drama or devising new work, I begin with establishing a basic understanding of the experience and create a structure for it to occur. For example, before a drama involving worlds colliding and aliens needing refuge, we first needed to explore physical, cultural, and structural elements of a society. Following this explanatory and brainstorming process, the drama began and citizens examined their values and beliefs as they came together to determine what was left of their culture, redefining the laws of the land and discerning available resources. Out of their imaginations, students—led by myself as a side coach—created a new society. By integrating fine and performing arts processes in combination with problem solving, journaling, and social engagement, the student experience comes to life. They hold a town hall, participate in verbal and actual tug-of-war and tackle very real issues for their new world. During each class, I keep an eye out for disengaged students, personality conflicts, or other signs that a student is out-of-sync. When this occurs, I work to respond appropriately and meet the student where they are so they feel supported, included, and ultimately, successful.

“The biggest mistake of past centuries in teaching has been to treat all students as if they were variants of the same individual and thus to feel justified in teaching them all the same subjects the same way.” Howard Gardner

When I teach, direct, produce, prepare my own work or work for others, I expect to do my best and strive for excellence. Some will say that I expect perfection, but that isn't so. I believe that if I set a high standard for myself, I will feel better about myself. I enjoy pushing to learn new things and want to increase my knowledge, understanding and skillsets. The value of this journey and its rewards are immeasurable and I wish for my students to experience the same rewards, therefore I hold them accountable to a high standard, expecting them to be prepared, participate, and turn in their work. I also believe in fairness and structure so that students know what to expect throughout a semester. Large projects are broken into manageable elements and papers may be turned in as drafts for students to receive feedback prior to turning in for a grade. There is no one cheering more for my students to succeed than I am and I do all I can to provide tools and resources they need to be successful.

One success story involves students painting replicas of modern art for a production (using transparency projectors and tracing). Each was faced with a challenge they had never experienced before. A particular student applied herself to the task with persistent diligence, taking care to do excellent work. She finished well ahead of everyone else and I asked her the favor of doing a replica of a WWI poster. With her prior success behind her, she agreed and did a wonderful job. Prior to doing any of the painting, she nervously told me she wasn't artistic. Following the experience, she became the props master, constructing and painting props for subsequent shows, eventually going to culinary arts school and specializing in and excelling at cake decorating. In essence, she found the artist (and confidence) within during that first assignment and it grew and flourished during the years that followed.

I continually strive to embed tools and resources within my lessons that create a natural pathway for a student to gain a level of self-efficacy that will serve them well as they continue their journey. So, I must warp with care the loom that is the classroom, in preparation for the participant weavers who will create the tapestry of our season together—whether for a short workshop, semester course or longer. My threads provide the framework for learning, not the resulting design. Each participant co-constructs through a rich experience of learning, doing, and reflecting, until, finally, the course is finished and the last thread tied. As a leader I must carefully take the tapestry off the loom, guiding our community as together we unravel its meaning through thoughtful writing, presentations, inquiry, reflections, and informal sharing. As the group disperses into the world, my hope is that each participant remains connected to this tapestry, weaving strains of its design into future experience, adding its rich legacy to the tapestry that is life itself.

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“The play of children is not recreation; it means earnest work. Play is the purest intellectual production of the human being in this stage...for the whole man is visible in them, in his finest capacities, in his innermost being.” Friedrich Froebel