

Partners in Practice

• Lorraine Behnan •

Résumé: Le cours "Théâtre pour jeunes auditoires", offert par le Département d'art dramatique de l'Université de Guelph, permet aux étudiants de créer et de présenter des oeuvres originales à des élèves des écoles élémentaires des environs. Cette expérience est rendue possible grâce à une entente avec les milieux scolaires de la région. L. Behnan met en relief les avantages qu'offre une telle entente pour les enfants et les futurs praticiens du théâtre pour la jeunesse.

Summary: Theatre for Young Audiences (35-240) is a twelve-week semester course offered by the University of Guelph Department of Drama. The program teaches the theory and practice of theatre and drama in education. The students learn how to structure and present the performance of plays and accompanying drama workshops to children of the elementary school panel. The experiential component of the course is possible through a partnership with local elementary schools. This paper addresses the origin of the partnership, course objectives and content, challenges of implementing the partnership, and benefits to the university students and school children.

The course is 35-240, Theatre for Young Audiences. The buzz among the students is that the curriculum is challenging and applicable to a range of educational and professional endeavours. There is always a waiting list to be one of the twenty-four students participating in this Limited Enrolment Course at the University of Guelph. Over the years, the course has gone through a series of significant changes. Presently, the course structure revolves around a partnership between the Drama Department and three local elementary schools.

The Transition Years

When I took over the course in 1987 I undertook some ambitious changes. The Department of Drama had hired me on the basis of my expertise as a drama instructor and professional actor working with the techniques of both Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and Drama in Education (DIE). I had worked as an actor and drama workshop instructor with The Citadel and Catalyst Theatres in Edmonton, The Grand Theatre Young Company in London, The Theatre Hour Company, and Young People's Theatre in Toronto. I discovered that the combination of TYA and DIE can provide a powerful and valuable learning experience. TYA offers a presentational format that is both beneficial to the student actor and entertaining for the young audiences. I felt, however, that the equally valuable component of DIE needed to be given more focus within the 35-240 course

structure. For instance, if prior to seeing a performance, a child is effectively prepared for the themes, objectives and synopsis of the play through a series of drama activities, she is more likely to understand the purpose, plot and characterization. Then, following the performance, the play itself can then become a springboard for activities that allow the child to extend the theatre experience by exploring the various facets of the production through subjective role-play and drama structures. For example, if in preparing an elementary class for the performance of Carol Bolt's "My Best Friend is Twelve Feet High," a play about the power struggle among a small group of children as they distribute the responsibilities in their newly-founded clubhouse, I would develop drama activities that explore the importance of cooperative play, the power of imagination, and the qualities of leadership. "Bedtime and Bullies" by Dennis Foon is thematically geared to exploring the inappropriate labelling and judgments of children, the reasons for bullying behaviour, and facing fears.

I was excited by the notion of transferring my professional knowledge to the academic forum but felt concern that such a course might not succeed within the constraint of a twelve week semester with only four hours of scheduled class time per week. It took a few semesters of experimentation before a workable course emerged. Throughout this process, the students themselves became partners in developing the course content. These early students assumed a heavier assignment load than the subsequent groups who reaped the benefits of their pioneering.

Developing the Method

My first goal in the classroom was to prepare my students for the actual encounters with young people. I wanted them to understand the behaviours of primary, junior, and intermediate children. Thus I encouraged the class to make brave and uninhibited attempts to approximate the antics and dialogue of young people. The goal was to try to capture the essence of the over-zealous six-year-old or lanky, self-conscious pre-teen. I spent a lot of energy trying to explain the difference between behaving child-like and behaving childish. However, I knew nothing could compare to the experience of working with real live children. I came to see that I needed some kind of partnership between my students and real children. In 1993 I was presented with such an opportunity.

Christine Lenssen, a student enrolled in my Theatre for Young Audiences course became so enthusiastic over what she thought the program could offer to teachers and students in the elementary classroom that she urged her husband, who was Vice-Principal at St. John school in Guelph, to investigate the possibility of integrating drama into the curriculum at his school. When Will Lenssen contacted me, asking if I would be interested in facilitating drama classes for his teachers, I began to visualize all kinds of creative options. Instead of providing him with one instructor — me — I would offer him twenty-four — my students! Will suggested that we investigate The Guelph and Wellington Career Education Council Partnership Program. The Career Council's Mission statement is "To provide students with the information and experiences necessary to make realistic career decisions." Part of its mandate is to "bring all the educational resources within a community together" and "to serve as a system-wide umbrella

for co-operative projects of business, labour and education." The chair of my department, Ric Knowles, was enthusiastic about the project and its benefits for both the Drama Department and the wider community.

This partnership combines many of the training tools and objectives of the other Drama Department courses. The students use the performance techniques taught in the acting courses, and skills learned in Script Analysis prepare them to analyze text in order to interpret and communicate the intent of the playwright to an audience. Finally, theatre requires an audience to be fully experienced. The young people at the elementary schools fulfilled the audience role for our TYA plays.

After four years, elementary school teachers like Ann Larsen and Allan Assellin who have participated in the partnership since its inception now use drama routinely in their classrooms. They testify to the benefits of TYA and DIE in various areas: (1) timid children emerge (2) children with behavioural problems increase their attentiveness (3) all children enhance their retention of facts and figures through active play and (4) most children develop their social skills through interactive communication and problem solving. Teachers like Ann and Allan understand that drama need not be an isolated subject, but rather is one that is integrated into every aspect of the curriculum. For example, teachers in other partnership schools have used drama to activate poems in English class or to time-travel back in history in order to role-play specific politicians, scientists, and explorers. Children take imaginary journeys to other parts of the world to learn about the cultures and peoples of different countries: a classroom is temporarily turned into a mock courtroom to augment the study of the judicial system, or conflict resolution is practiced through role-playing and forum theatre. Drama in the classroom can be spontaneous and requires few or no materials.

At the post-secondary educational level the interest in drama also appears to be on the rise. Guelph's Drama Department is seeing a shift from students who take acting classes as preparation for a professional theatre career to those who take classes to build confidence in presentation skills and creative development. They want to adapt the skills developed in acting classes to those needed for seminar presentations and other areas such as job-searches.

In the Theatre for Young Audiences course, I have noticed an increased enrolment of students from the department of Family and Child Studies. The interaction between drama and the child and family study majors provides an opportunity for both groups to exchange their talents and thereby enhance their areas of expertise. For instance, in the rehearsal and performance component of the 35-240 course, drama majors coach their peers in the art of acting. Conversely, when the focus is on the interactive drama workshop, the Family and Child Studies students share their experience of working with children. It is an integration of departments which provides a cooperative environment where the students can take ownership of the learning process.

The Course Structure

Presently this course is a combination of lectures, discussions, seminars, practical drama and theatre sessions, and it leads to the rehearsal and presentation of a contemporary script.

1. The Observation Project

Each student attends and observes a primary, junior, and intermediate class at one of our partnership schools. Information about the behaviour, interests, and comprehension skills of each age group is incorporated into the workshops, seminars and performance presentations. The students are given a specific guideline for observation:

(a) The Teachers

- how do they maintain attention of the class?
- what motivational techniques do they use?
- what is their delivery style and vocabulary for teaching instructions?
- does the classroom set up / environment enhance the learning process?

(b) The Children

- what are the distinguishing characteristics at primary, junior and intermediate levels?
- how do they respond to different teaching styles?
- what factors affect their attention span
- what topics interest them? (favourite idols, music and TV shows)
- what popular phrases and jargon do they use?

2. The Drama Workshop

The university class is divided into groups of five or six. Each group researches a playwright who has written for young audiences. One play by that writer is studied in depth and becomes the foundation for their drama workshop. The group collaborate in the development and presentation of a thematic workshop. The purpose of the workshop is to explore the main themes of four plays that are examined in the 34-240 class. Each workshop group develops a series of drama activities that incorporate the themes of the play and at the end of the semester the workshop is presented to a group of twenty children who actively participate.

The workshop immediately follows a performance of one of the four plays examined in the 35-240 course. Each play is targeted to a specific audience: primary, junior or intermediate. The length of the workshop is approximately forty-five to sixty minutes, depending upon the grade level. Primary attention span is usually limited to forty-five minutes whereas junior and intermediate are capable of sustaining focus for the full hour.

The university workshop leaders may choose to team-teach the drama activities with the school children or they may present them individually just as long as each leader has equal facilitation time over the duration of the workshop. All leaders are responsible for the overall structure of the workshop which includes the process of choosing a diverse selection of activities such as movement, mime, role-playing, storytelling and tableaux. They are encouraged to augment the workshop with audio visual aids that may include taped music, musical instruments, photos, picture-books, news articles or cartoons. In the workshop these activities are used as vehicles for the practical exploration of the themes identified in the play. The workshop is introduced to the children by presenting open-ended questions and comments that will help set up the activity

and themes of the play. At the end of the workshop, the process is summarized by recapping the themes once again by using open-ended questions to determine what the children have understood from the process.

In preparation for the development of the workshops, as the class instructor, I hold a brainstorming and planning meeting with each workshop group. The groups are given two weeks to plan and structure the workshops. The workshops are first presented to the 35-240 with the university students acting as the school children. These trial presentations allow the university students to determine if the workshop is sound and workable. The instructor and the other university students offer constructive criticism concerning the inventiveness, presentation of content, and the facilitation style and skills. Each workshop group has about three weeks to make the necessary adjustments before presenting the finalized workshop to the elementary school children.

Accompanying this workshop are handouts of the activities. All students in the group write a paper explaining the purpose and method of their activity. The content of the paper includes the following topics: main themes, targeted age group, name of the activity, materials required, opening statements & questions, procedural instructions, summary statements & questions.

3. *The Play Presentation*

The same 35-240 workshop groups continue to work together on the presentation of the play that they explored for the drama workshops. Using *Story Theatre* style, unless the play is under forty minutes and may be done in its entirety, the group selects scenes from the script that best reflect the themes of the play. Whenever necessary, scene transitions and narration will be written and delivered by a member or members of the group. Once again, the entire group is responsible for creating any production materials: props, set pieces, costumes, and soundscapes. Approximately ten class hours are allotted to each play for rehearsals under the direction of the course instructor. All other preparations and rehearsals have to be scheduled apart from class.

The culmination of the two components, the drama workshop and the performance presentation, take place in the partnership schools during the last week of the semester. One of the most complicated parts of the course is to match the time-tables of the university students with the school hours of the elementary schools. After a lot of juggling and compromising, we manage to succeed in devising a workable schedule.

At the end of each semester, as I observe my students interacting with the partnership youngsters and their teachers, I am always struck by how we manage to put this all together in such a short period of time under such challenging circumstances. Never, however, do I doubt the value of the effort and the ambitious goals that we all set for ourselves.

The Benefits of the Partnership

The partnership program provides many opportunities for the students of 35-240 (Theatre for Young Audiences) by letting them obtain

- exposure to elementary schools where they have direct contact with a diverse group of children, including those with special needs,
- first-hand observations of teacher and pupil interaction,
- performance and leadership experience,
- practice with problem-solving skills when the unexpected occurs, and
- the opportunity to evaluate their interest in pursuing a career involving young people.

In preparation for their interaction with the youngsters, I advise my students that despite thorough preparation and the belief that, "you have seen it all," there will always be a new dilemma to confound them. They will have to think on their feet without letting the students catch on. Some of the more memorable experiences of my previous students become part of my present class lectures. For instance, one primary workshop activity involved the creation of a powerful magic potion. As the circle of little wizards tasted their imaginary concoction, one young fellow captivated his mates by apparently dying of poison: he gave one of the most convincing death scenes I have ever witnessed on stage. Of course, all the other little wizards thought this was terrific fun and the copy cat 'actors' all began enacting the most melodramatic forms of expiration. With his class out of control, the immobilized student leader turned to me for help. I suggested he ask the few remaining wizards who elected to 'live' for a solution to this problem. Although he was shaky and sceptical, he complied. No sooner was the question posed than an excited voice responded, "Why don't we make another potion, sprinkle it on them, and bring them back to life?" The student teacher broke into a Cheshire smile and shouted, "Brilliant!" Indeed. The lesson the student teacher learned was that the facilitator does not need to have all of the answers, nor should he. The objective is to allow the children the opportunities to problem-solve and more often than not their solutions will be innovative and pleasantly unpredictable.

Performing to their 35-240 classmates pales in comparison to the experience of performing to an audience of young people. I see the excitement of my students as they enjoy the immediate and unexpected responses from the children. At these moments they truly begin to trust the impact of the text. At the end of the performances wide-eyed children fall over themselves to make contact with actors and deliver a battery of innocent and charming questions. Such occasions are a powerful testimony to the value of theory tied to practice.

Many of my previous students stay in contact with me, giving updates on the subsequent benefits of having taken this children's theatre course. Some have been accepted into teacher's college, others have found summer employment involving young people, still others have been cast in companies that produce Theatre for Young Audiences.

How do the schools feel about our partnership? Each year a new school asks to be added. For now, however, I have set the limit to three. Principals and Vice-Principals, local Boards of Education, and the parents enthusiastically endorse the program. The same teachers volunteer to participate every year. The children who participate remember the experience and their student teachers.

I recall that at one of the official partnership ceremonies I quoted Albert Einstein's famous line, "Imagination is more powerful than knowledge." A child in the junior level piped up "E=MC²." I quipped "Good for You ... you get the prize!" A full year later as I walked down the hall of the same school the child stopped me and asked what his prize was. He also noted that I was wearing the same vest that I had worn the year before. Much to my chagrin, this child had clearly benefited from the aural and observation drama concentration exercises!

The partnership program has grown beyond the Theatre for Young audiences course. Children from local elementary schools are often cast in our Drama Department Inner Stage productions on campus. We have provided assistant directors for local school plays and most recently 35-240 students have even had the opportunity to exercise their play-writing skills as well as their directing and teaching talents. Drama department students plan and teach their own drama workshops in after-school and lunch hour programs. Senior students from the elementary schools and high school students attend acting classes to foster their interest in theatre arts. This semester we received a request for volunteers to judge an elementary school public speaking contest. I expect that the partnership will continue to find new and different ways to utilize this system in order to enhance the learning experience.

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