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Theater study and the power of possibility

by

Jill Rafferty-Weinisch

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE

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Readers: Carolyn Anderson and Sheldon Solomon

Abstract: *My experience as an Arts Educator, working with a particular group of at-risk students has led me to question the manner in which the Arts are primarily utilized in K-12 education. Specifically, their use as a delivery system for academic curriculums, while highly effective, may be at the expense of, and ultimately may limit, other far more significant benefits. In my experience as both a student and a teacher of theatre, I have observed a correlation between certain habits of mind developed through theatre work and modes of thinking, which are widely believed to support healthy adolescent development. This paper discusses the relevant processes of acting in the theatre and psychological theories, which might explain how and why those habits of mind are developed, and how focus on academic benefit alone may diminish the potential value of Arts in the classroom.*

I have spent more than fifteen years working in the field of Arts Education, during which time I have had the opportunity to work with many thousands of young people in projects that spanned the gamut from audience appreciation to literary analysis of theatrical material, to playwriting, directing and acting to projects that used the Arts expressly as a delivery system for curriculums in other academic areas. During this time, most of the programs in which I participated followed prevailing trends in my field in that they were designed and assessed for their impact on academic goal attainment, literacy and pro-social behavior. As a field, Arts Education has made significant progress documenting the academic and social benefits that may be gained through experiences in the Arts during students' K-12 education. Much of the current assessment of the

impact of Arts programming for K-12 students has focused on the manner in which Arts programs influence the realization of academic goals, and particularly on how the Arts can increase scores on standardized achievement tests in reading and math. This may be, in large measure, due to the impact of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* and the ensuing diversion of resources to rote test preparation. While there is consensus in the field that these findings are authentic, many express concern about the idea of Art being reduced to the secondary role of service to other domains.

There is inconsistency and ambiguity in use of terms in much of the literature about the impact of the Arts. Some refer to programs which use Art as a means to support engagement and learning in other academic areas, often called “Arts in Education”. Other sources refer to programs which instruct students in the basic concepts and skills needed to participate in a particular Art form (painting, sculpture, ballet, bassoon), often called “Arts Education”. Many texts consider both together or fail to distinguish between the two. For the purpose of this paper, I will use Art, with a capital “A” to indicate Arts programs in general and the collective effects that may result from instruction in theatre, music, dance or visual art or the incorporation of any of these for the purpose of teaching other academic content.

According to the literature, programs which expose school-aged children to the Arts have been shown to yield, greater attention to schoolwork (Baum & Owen 1997; Taylor & Walls, 1990), an increase in perseverance, positive risk-taking, school preparedness

and responsiveness to feedback (Baum & Owen 1997). Greater Arts participation was also correlated with higher scores on standardized tests (Catterall, 1998; Catterall, 1999), less television viewing, less reported boredom in school (Catterall, 1998) and greater likelihood of performing voluntary community service (Catterall 1998, Heath 1998.) Regardless of socioeconomic status, students who were regularly exposed to the Arts both in and out of school earned better grades and scored higher on standardized test than their peers who had few Arts experiences (Catterall, 1998). Children with greater Arts exposure were likely to identify Arts programs as their motivation for not dropping out of school (Taylor & Walls, 1990). Arts participation is also correlated with awards for academic achievement, engagement in creative writing, community service and school attendance (Heath, 1998). When compared with their peers, children with greater Arts experience are more likely to have participated in math and science fairs, to have been elected to class office, to read for pleasure and to aspire to attend college (Heath, 1998). Children with a greater degree of Arts exposure showed higher scores on measures of creativity (Burton, Horowitz & Abeles, 2000; Moga, et al, 2000). A study by Goor & Rappoport (1977) found that a group of inner-city children who spent time engaged in creative activities in a summer camp made significant gains in creativity. These heightened levels did not show extinction over time, suggesting that enduring positive effects may result from relatively short term and discontinuous experiences.

Dance programs improved reading skills (Rose, 1999; Keinanen, Hetland & Winner, 2000) as well as non-verbal reasoning, (Keinanen, Hetland & Winner, 2000) originality,

flexibility and elaboration, (Kim, 1998), independent thinking skills, motor coordination, body and spatial awareness, verbal and physical expression of thoughts and feelings (Mentzer & Boswell, 1995). Ross (2000) suggested that dance may be particularly adept at fostering positive self-esteem and social development in youth at risk.

Music instruction improves spatial-temporal reasoning (Graziano, Peterson & Shaw, 1999; Hetland, 2000A; Hetland, 2000B; Rauscher, et al, 1997; Rauscher & Zupan, 2000), is correlated with higher reading scores (Butzlaff, 2000) and performance on standardized mathematics tests (Vaughn, 2000). Visual arts are correlated with students' higher evidential reasoning abilities, including responses to non-Arts problems, demonstrating evidence of transfer of cognitive skills from Arts learning to other areas (Tishman, MacGillivray & Palmer, 1999).

Theatre instruction with young children has been linked to increased reading comprehension (Parks & Rose, 1997; Pellegrini & Gaicia, 1982; Podlozny, 2000; Wagner, 1986) increased development of pre-literacy skills (Pellegrini, 1980; Podlozny, 2000) and enhanced ability to use language in storytelling (Moore & Caldwell, 1993). Utilizing dramatic play in storytelling, as opposed to passive listening, increased comprehension of dramatized material (DuPont, 1992, Page, 1983), as well as recall of other material not acted out (DuPont, 1992), Older children engaged in theatre activities demonstrated increased self-esteem (Horn, 1992; Kassab, 1984; Wolf, 1998; Siedel 1998), gains in pro-

social behaviors (de la Cruz, 1995, Horn, 1992) and the development of greater oral communication skills. (Kassab, 1984.)

I am confident that participation in theatre, dance, music and visual arts programming confers real academic benefit and that these Art forms can play a particularly effective role in engaging students in academic endeavors. However, my first hand experience indicates that academic advantage is only one major benefit of Arts participation. We in the Arts in Education field, have pursued the measurement of academic impact, because it is relatively easier to quantify and is well aligned with the current test-centric culture of education, to the possible detriment of deeper, more elemental benefits.

The Price of a Focus on Academic Benefit Alone

While the evidence of impact on academic achievement has brought attention, credibility, and much needed funding to Arts programs for K-12 students, the implications of an “academic only” model of Arts evaluation are problematical. When Arts programs are justified by their support of higher test scores or graduation rates, they can be at risk for elimination if those desired results do not manifest. In my experience, Arts programs are considered indispensable in wealthy school districts (where they are valued for their own sake) but programs in poorer districts (where the expectation of direct academic benefit is much higher) exist in a state of steady defense of their existence. The constant focus on “justification by achievement” diverts valuable and limited resources from the actual implementation of Arts programs and, draws

focus from the far more valuable benefits inherent in Arts participation, particularly for youth at risk. Believing as I do that the Arts are an essential element of what it is to be human, I am uncomfortable with the notion that those less privileged must justify the Art they receive.

Ellen Dissanayake, an anthropologist and lecturer on the role of art in human society makes a case for art-making as a necessary and vital human behavior. Art, she suggests, is not a cultural phenomenon, as is believed by many theorists, but an essential part of the development of the human species manifested in every society on earth, since its beginnings. Because evolution works by preserving the traits that confer advantage to a particular species, Art would not be so universally prevalent, throughout human history and around the globe, she proposes, if it did not offer significant survival benefits to those who participate in the behavior of Art (1992 p. 36).

Dissanayake describes the human drive to make artwork as a process of “making special”. Through practices like ritual and adornment, she explains, human beings convey significance to objects and events of importance to their survival by engaging in art-making behavior (1992 p. 39-49). This emphasis has the effect of focusing attention, ensuring participation, building community and conveying vital knowledge and understanding to otherwise “ordinary” parts of life. By constructing ritual dances around the harvest for example, early peoples conveyed “specialness” to the tasks which were required of them in order to guarantee bountiful food sources and survival

of a long winter. This quality of “specialness” ensured that the community came together in fellowship, shared labor and understanding of the tasks that needed completion, focused their energies on those tasks, and, in so doing, made it more likely that the offspring of that community would survive. In this way, communities which practiced the behavior of art would have been provided an evolutionary advantage.

If the behavior of Art-making can be linked directly to human survival, than to limit Arts engagement for any particular group, or to make access to it contingent on specific results, would be as unethical as deliberately denying that group, nutritional food, clean water, protection from disease, or any of the other human needs considered fundamental. One can argue that current human society is not balanced in its meeting of these most basic needs. It may be appropriate, however, to consider access to opportunities for Art-making among the most basic human needs we must strive to meet for all people. This evolutionary perspective of Art illustrates the short-sightedness of valuing Art for its potential contributions to academic success alone.

Of all the student groups with which I have worked, one group in particular, has had the most enduring impact on my desire to better understand the role, beyond academics, that the Arts might play in supporting human development. My work, in my capacity as Director of Education at Capital Repertory Theatre, with the adolescents at Harriet Gibbons Alternative High School in Albany, NY, from 2000 to 2006, presented predictable challenges, unexpected and elusive successes and haunting failures.

Harriet Gibbons High School

Harriet Gibbons High School (HGHS), a small alternative high school for the City School District of Albany, designated of “high need in relationship to district resources” (NYS Department of Education Website) was a troubled place. Students were referred there when they had proven “unsuccessful” in Albany’s one large urban high school.

Rationale for referral included truancy, failing grades, problem behavior, lack of basic academic skills (the average student read three years below grade level), teenage pregnancy and parenthood (25% of student were parents), unmanaged chronic illness (HIV, Sickle Cell, severe Asthma & Diabetes etc.), emotional disturbance (including PTSD), learning disabilities, and instability at home. Daily attendance was low (around 65% daily), with a constant turnover (due to illness, incarceration, truancy, childbirth or school drop-out,) which made continuity of instruction a tremendous challenge (only 40% of students who had been present in September would still be enrolled in June). As soon as one student left the program, another would be referred by Albany High which maintained a backlog of students it wished to “place”. Graduation rates were well below 50% of eligible cohort. Outsiders were rarely admitted to the building because students were often disengaged and disrespectful. Class trips were limited to small numbers of hand-picked students and had nonetheless been historically disastrous in terms of student behavior. The largely minority student body relied heavily on the social welfare system for financial and social supports with the entire population of the school qualifying for the federal free/reduced lunch program. The legacy of generational poverty was evident. Many students lived in transitional or substandard

housing. Interaction with juvenile justice and child welfare authorities (as both victims and perpetrators of abuse) was common. Drug and gang activity and violence both at home and on the street were daily realities for the 205 students at the school.

The Community Partnership Project (CPP) was founded through an initiative of the *New York State Council on the Arts* (NYSCA), *Arts in Education* program called *Empire State Partnerships* (ESP), with funding from that entity as well as the GE Fund (General Electric's philanthropic arm). The intent of the ESP program is to provide funding support to "cultural organizations that work in partnership with schools to create programs that focus on a deep exploration of the Arts and the artistic process, as well as the intersection of the Arts and other areas of study and the role of the Arts in the world in which we live." (New York State Council on the Arts website) The GE Fund was interested in the ways in which Arts could be used specifically "to increase academic performance". With that directive, I led a team of teachers and members of the theatre staff in the structuring of a year-long, school-wide partnership with the express purpose of using the study of theatre to increase student academic achievement and social behaviors which would in turn, allow for greater likelihood of high school graduation.

Because attendance and student turnover made traditional sequential instruction nearly impossible, the team crafted a series of individual, free-standing Arts/curriculum-based lessons themed around a chosen production at the theatre. Students would read the script as part of English class, and attend a school-day performance of the play at the

theatre in addition to participating in multiple lessons in the classroom. All lessons were designed to address both educational and artistic content without requiring student participation in previous or subsequent classes. Students who attended school regularly might receive several lessons in each of their classroom subjects. Others, who were in school rarely, or only for a short time, would still benefit from whatever exposure they received, as units would not rely on prior activities they might have missed. Every teacher in every subject would structure units as made sense for his or her classroom, students and curriculum.

In all cases, the lessons were collaboratively developed and collaboratively taught by a teacher, myself and often a third member of the theatre staff (depending on what area of artistic production was involved).

Each lesson contained:

- A thematic or practical link to the central play (either connected to an element of the story or an activity undertaken by the theatre to produce the work itself)
- An element of participation in a creative process
- An example of how skills learned in the classroom could be applied in the 'real world of work'
- And an address of specific, required, testable subject area competencies

Lesson content and format varied widely depending on the subject matter and the comfort level of the teacher in embracing alternative teaching methods. Some examples included:

- A Math class, learning ratio and proportion by building scale models of a theatrical set, in the same manner as the set designer for the play, *Crumbs From the Table of Joy*
- An English class, writing first person monologues inspired by photographs taken during the Soweto Student Riots after reading *The Syringa Tree*, a semi-autobiographical play about the personal impact of Apartheid on the playwright
- A Social Studies class, developing a DBQ (document based question, the chief method by which Social Studies understanding is assessed) about ‘Jim Crow Laws’ using primary source material from the text of the play *Driving Miss Daisy*, which contains scenes dealing directly with racial segregation laws
- A Health class, re-writing and role-playing family argument scenes from *A Raisin in the Sun*, using newly studied conflict resolution skills
- An Art class, using visual imagery, symbolism and metaphor to design theatre posters for a production of *Inherit the Wind* they would later attend
- A Science class, using the recently studied scientific method to analyze a murder that takes place in the script for *The Syringa Tree*

On my first day in the classroom, I expected to be confronted by angry, recalcitrant students who would be resistant to our project and difficult to engage. As a middle class teenager whose needs were mostly well-met, I had been angry and oppositional and had disrupted the order of things whenever possible as an expression of my dissatisfaction with the world. I anticipated that these students, who had so much more to be angry about, would be overtly hostile. What I encountered on that first day in the classroom at HGHS was a docile and disengaged population. I sat observing in the back of a classroom for three class periods before a student was curious enough to inquire as to who I was and why I was there. There were occasional bursts of unrest or animation, but for the most part, the students at HGHS were passive, detached and without any apparent motivation.

As our “Art inclusive” lessons were implemented, there was an observable difference in student demeanor. An ever increasing portion of students were excited by the CPP, willing to participate and insightful about the work they were doing. Engaged students spoke enthusiastically and personally about the characters in the play they were studying (Emily Mann’s *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First One Hundred Years*, based on Amy Hill-Hearth’s interviews with two spirited African American sisters who lived past their hundredth birthdays). Teachers expressed a feeling they were reaching students they had previously been unable to reach. Some truly impressive and perceptive visual and literary artwork was produced. Absent the middle-class need to ‘please the teacher’, with which I was so familiar in other contexts, students were more

thoughtful and original in their analysis and their creative output. They engaged in meaningful and insightful discussion, which demonstrated great intellectual capacity and critical skill. An unprecedented number of students attended performances at the theatre and were engaged, spirited and respectful. They seemed to the team like entirely different kids. Their passivity diminished and interest in doing well in school increased. Students expressed greater motivation to graduate and in finding success beyond high school.

In addition to partial funding, the GE fund provided experts in assessment from its local research and development center who volunteered their time to assist in the crafting of an assessment model for the project. With such a high rate of persistent failure evident and so many outside factors contributing to student dysfunction, the volunteers struggled to find measures that they anticipated would show incremental growth. The first year's assessment measured "on-task behavior", evidence that students were engaged in the assigned task, in project vs. non-project lessons as observed by the classroom teacher. The reasoning was that students who were actively participant in a lesson were far more likely to receive academic benefit from it, and ultimately increase test scores, and the likelihood of high school completion. Data was provided by multiple teachers across subject area, school day and school year and analyzed for both project based and non project based lessons. The results revealed that student engagement in partnership lessons that was 14% higher than in standard lessons. In subsequent project years, students were divided into active (engaged in the program and regularly

participant in lessons) and passive (not engaged, either by choice or because student was not present in school at the time of most project lessons) cohorts which were then compared. The active group achieved dramatically higher marking period grades in English, Math and Social Studies. Additional analysis of individual lessons suggested that students learned and retained content better in project based vs. conventional lessons, that their community involvement and attendance at the theatre increased exponentially, and that students' attitudes about the program were overwhelmingly positive. These measures were correlational rather than causal, but still pointed to the likelihood that the project was having positive academic impact.

The thrill of this documented success was superficial, however. Despite the academic accomplishments recorded at HGHS, students continued to fail in the long term when it came to their life circumstances. One at a time, they succumbed to the very forces and behaviors that were evident at the start of the initiative. Even bright students who exhibited great aptitude seemed to inexplicably falter at critical moments. Students who showed marked improvement in demeanor and skill, would disappear into drug or gang activity, get arrested, become pregnant or puzzlingly fail to show up for a vital test they were newly well-prepared to pass. Grades and graduation rates, the measures by which we had chosen to define success, showed steady improvement— but beyond those figures, students continued to assume exactly the lives they had been statistically destined for before the program was implemented. They seemed sometimes more like ghosts than children, so electrically present at one moment – vanishing into vague

memory the next. Students continued to rise far beyond our wildest expectations, then fail before our eyes as if those transformations had never existed.

In retrospect, this is not a surprising phenomenon. However promising this project may have seemed, it represented a small amount of actual time (less than 20 contact hours per student over the course of a school year on average) in lives that had experienced more than a decade of poverty, abuse and neglect. Furthermore, there was consensus among all the stakeholders (including students who, by that time were serving on the project's planning committee) that while the measurements of academic achievement taken by the assessors were accurate, and represented arenas being directly impacted by the project, there were additional benefits being imparted that were far more significant and useful, that were not being fully explored or supported by the project design. Discussion of these qualities centered on the vague ideas of "hope", "connectedness", "possibility" and "future" but, was never quantified to anyone's satisfaction.

The CPP achieved exactly what it was designed to do but, along the way, two things became clear to me. First, radical academic intervention would not be sufficient to make lasting difference in the lives of students who had already sustained such systemic trauma and deprivation. Academic failure may have been the most obvious and seemingly addressable symptom, but it was only one manifestation of a far greater constellation of problems, and treating academic failure in isolation had little overall

effect. And secondly, I came to believe that there was a benefit inherent in Arts participation, one that was only touched on in the CPP that could, if further developed, support students in changing the way they thought about themselves and their potential. Properly wielded, these abilities might have the ability to foster resilience, defined as “positive adaptation despite significant life adversity” (Luthar 2003 p. xxix) where academic intervention alone fell short.

As I reflect on my experience at HGHS I have the sense that the habits of mind that were lacking in my students, the ability to conceive of a future beyond one’s present situation and the inclination to take an active role in shaping it, could be cultivated through the process inherent in the theatre work with which I was familiar.

The Nuts and Bolts of Theatre Participation

Participation in theatre supports the development of many specific skills; critical analysis; thoughtful research; expanded use of language, public speaking and presentation capabilities; self-discipline, leadership and group cohesion; and the ability to think on one’s feet. Of the many, more fundamental benefits that may be gained by participation in the Arts, I am particularly interested in the impact of theatre participation on individual empowerment and perceptions of the future. In my review of the literature pertaining to adolescent development, and the building of resilience in youth at risk, I have found a correlation between the habits of mind that are developed through theatre study, and the kinds of perceptions that are believed to foster the

development of a strong identity and constructive response to adversity. It is possible that, had the CPP been specifically designed to immerse students in a theatre process, instead of raising test scores and graduation rates, some of these critical habits of mind might have been better cultivated.

My own theatre training began when I was as a high school student, and continued in University where I studied “the method”, a philosophy of acting developed by Constantin Stanislavsky, in Russia, the early twentieth century. My teacher, Deborah Novak had been a student of Stella Adler, who was a member of the Group Theatre, and a prominent student of Stanislavsky himself, so my experience with this system is “fourth generation direct” and quite undiluted. While philosophical writing on the subject can be dense and difficult to navigate, the system itself works on some very basic principles that can be easily understood; chief among them, “You are always doing something.” (Rafferty 1987 p.3)

Actors are instructed to break time spent onstage down into segments called “beats” and to assign to each, an infinitive verb, which best represents that particular moment’s activity. Verbs, called “actions”, are chosen because they are “the language of doing” (Rafferty 1987 p.7) and, unlike adjectives or nouns, are inherently active. *Actions* should be “do-able, simple and precise” (Rafferty 1987 p.11) Hence a scene in which an individual buys a loaf of bread might include, “to examine”, “to compare”, “to consider”, “to disdain the soft, squishy loaf”, “to savor the crunch of the crusty French loaf”, “to

bargain”, “to reconsider”, “to relent”, “to decide”, “to anticipate, the ecstasy as the crust is dredged in the rich béarnaise”, “to hurry home”, and so on. Actors are encouraged to be very specific in their choices as each verb has its own subtle impact on the resulting life created onstage. According to Sonia Moore this process of delimitation is used, “because it is much easier to understand an immediate purpose than a distant one.” (1960 p. 46) She goes on to describe the technique thus, “Every art has its own means of expression. Poets have words, musicians have sounds, painters have colors. An actor’s means of expression is the human action.” (1960 p. 55)

This practice of assigning actions is repeated and refined throughout rehearsal, during which *actions* are altered, inverted, substituted and debated. The focus on intentional action is the polar opposite of the paralysis I observed in many of my students. The actor experiences the subtle changes to the outcome each time she makes a different choice of *action*. An actor playing Kate, in the final monologue of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* may choose the *action* “to surrender to convention,” which would create a particular reality in which, beaten down by the expectations of her time, place in society and her new husband’s erratic behavior, Kate relinquishes her fierce independent spirit to docility and compliance. Alternately, an actor may choose the action “to conquer” whereby Kate gains an understanding of how she can leverage her particular social role to find fulfillment and happiness in an otherwise restrictive culture. Every single word of Shakespeare’s script remains the same, but the outcome for the character, as informed by the choice of *action*, is radically different.

Through repetition, experience of result, and further revision, the actor develops a sense of the role her choices play in affecting the ensuing outcomes, and her ability to deliberately alter those outcomes by further adjusting those choices. “The creative process of an actor’s work is choice of actions” (Moore p. 56) and the choice of *actions* is “entirely within the actor’s power of imagination” (Rafferty 1987 p.9) Anne Bogart, Artistic Director of SITI Company, a well-regarded experimental theatre company in NY; and Professor of Directing at Columbia University addresses the importance of carefully chosen words, “When we use the wrong words, or weak words, or abusive words, or assume that the words we inherit are good enough rather than embarking upon a close examination of the vocabulary, we are cheating ourselves of a wide range of experiences and expressivity (2007, p. 24).” Within this method, actors are both empowered to make choices and responsible for their results.

While the method allows for great variation and openness of choices for the actor, Stanislavski draws a specific distinction between imagination and fantasy.

“Imagination”, he says, “creates things that can be or can happen, whereas fantasy invents things which are not in existence, which never have been or never will come to be” (Stanislavski, 1936, p 60). In discussing the power of imagination in this creative process, he explained that an actor cannot believe that the events taking place onstage are actually real, but he can believe in the possibility that they could be real within the circumstances of the world created onstage. “*If*, carries the actor into imaginary

circumstances. In asking, “*What would I do if I were...*” an actor can create problems for himself, and his effort to solve them will lead him naturally to inner and external actions. *If* is a powerful stimulus to imagination, thought and logical action” (Moore 1960, p. 25-26.) Peter Brook, a British theatre director responsible for some of the most innovative productions of the Royal Shakespeare Company says, of the concept of *if*, “In everyday life, *If* is a fiction, in the theatre *if* is an experiment. In everyday life, *if* is an evasion. In the theatre, *if* is the truth. (1968 p. 126)

Participating in theatre encourages expansive thinking and consideration of possibilities, but it does not provide a limitless canvas. While certain work may encourage unbridled creativity and limitless experimentation, most of the work student actors encounter comes with fairly rigid parameters attached. Scripts, for the most part, must be respected as written. The input of a director shapes many performances - and while one can influence the behavior of others onstage, their behavior cannot be reliably controlled. Nonetheless, the young actor is empowered to make choices within these boundaries and those choices can have dramatically differing results.

Similarly, students are not immediately empowered to change many of the realities of their daily lives. They cannot, for instance, choose to move to a better neighborhood, or change the family circumstances in which they’ve been raised. They can, however, change the way they focus their time and make better choices about schoolwork, substance use, criminal involvement, sex, and with whom they spend their time. They

can change the way they think about their futures while living within their current circumstance just as they have learned to make their own artistic choices within the rigors of a production.

During my career in the Arts, I have often been called upon to speak to a variety of audiences about the nature of Arts work. I always begin by characterizing the process of Art-making, in any medium, as “storytelling”. The medium of transmission may be markedly different from painting, to film, to theatre, to music, to dance, to literature, but I believe the fundamental mechanics remain constant and that all convey essentially the same result. Because theatre is so closely linked to literary art, its direct relationship to narrative is perhaps a bit more apparent and therefore more easily discerned.

Jack Zipes, an expert of folklore, and authority on the work of the Brothers Grimm suggests that, properly wielded, folklore and fairy tales have the power to make social commentary and spur action (Zipes 2002, 21). He describes a process where folktales, “part of a pre-capitalist people’s oral tradition which expresses their wishes to attain better living conditions through a depiction of their struggles and contradictions” (Zipes 2002, 10) became a communal forum for airing and grappling with a given society’s challenges. Zipes suggests that through regular dynamic oral re-tellings, in which both audiences and story-tellers contributed suggestions, improvements and divergences, communities were able to explore and consciously embrace the possibility and practical realities of radical societal change (Zipes 2002, 50.)

Theatre work is also dynamic, dealing expressly with an individual's conception, manipulation and alteration of story for the purpose of positive evolution. Acting study may, therefore, provide students with the skills necessary to appraise their own circumstances, imagine improvements, envision the results, and then work toward fundamental change, in the same way that pre-literate societies explored options for societal change through application of the oral tradition.

Although I have performed on stage only rarely since leaving college, I have personally found the basic dynamics of Stanislavski's method to be quite effective in a number of circumstances. In writing and public speaking, I reflexively assign *actions* to segments of my work. A grant application might begin with "to describe", move on to "to impress", "to assure" and "to engage" then close with "to beseech" and "to motivate". I find, on a practical level, that it helps me to focus my language and direct my intentions forward toward my ultimate goal. I regularly break larger tasks down to smaller more manageable pieces so they can be more effectively addressed, just as I became accustomed to doing with beats in a theatrical text. I am aware of myself instinctively analyzing my perspective on events and sometimes shifting viewpoints to accommodate an outlook with which I am more comfortable. I am most frustrated when I can't construct a series of *actions* through a problem can be solved.

There are certainly actors who do not embrace this method of Acting preparation literally, and others who never receive training in its specific mechanics. However, I

believe the fundamental elements; the recognition that one is always active at something; the capacity to consider multiple potential realities; and the understanding that the specific choices one makes will impact the reality that will ultimately come to pass are inherent in all authentic theatre work, on a conscious or unconscious level.

During the same period of time that I worked with the students from HGHS, I led a summer camp program for adolescents the goal of which was to engage young people in an authentic theatre process (not to enhance academic competence).

Theatre Study in a Different Setting

The STAR (Summer Theatre at the Rep) summer program was a five week, intensive project in which a group of thirty adolescents engaged in collaborative playwriting, then staged and performed their original work. During its decade-long run, just over 200 students participated, many for several years in a row. I asked some of them, with whom I am still in contact, specifically what advantages they thought being involved in theatre had afforded them. Their answers included:

“(Theatre) gives you a place to fit in during those formative years when you're trying to decide who you are...Being in theatre means opening your eyes to a plethora of different worlds and stories that you may have never heard of” - Liz

“This was the best education I have ever gotten...literally life changing. Seeing how different people could collaborate... and being taught how to collaborate was the first seed of building a career in theater” - Brendan

“(I learned) modes of expression that allowed me to take on affectations and personas when I was a little (well, a lot) afraid to be myself” – Ariel

“...participating in the arts slowed my thinking... meaning that I took more time to flip through all the possibilities of how I felt about a certain situation before I

reacted. (Theatre)...taught me to truly think through how I feel about things before I react to them.” – Carrie

“It really helped my confidence with people.” – Elizabeth

“Completely tears down borders and encourages friendships between people (particularly with adolescents) that would never occur under "normal" circumstances....I find that many teens who have found this confidence through theatre are able to keep out of trouble because they are secure enough in themselves to do their own thing.”– Kate

“(Theatre) made me more outgoing and willing to try new things - It let me see the options I had...it allows you to perceive life in a different way.” - Martha

“... theatre experience in general made me comfortable in front of various audiences. I think being in the creative/productive process gave me trust in my own opinion and the initiative to make projects my own.” – Jessalyn

“My involvement in theatre in my teens definitely had a strong impact on my confidence level and self-esteem. I do think theatre forces you to be self-reflective and improves your self-awareness....I guess, more often with theatre than other forms of artistic expression, it's one of the most "human" and mundane/accessible means of expression (in terms of art imitating life)--and that does develop our capacity for empathy and personal sensitivity. Also, it certainly improves your creativity and ability to think outside of the box and being open to "stream of consciousness" brainstorming...That heightened sense of empathy and awareness of others in relation to oneself that we learn in theatre exercises is also key in innovation/business development....People who do theatre are willing to put themselves out there, take risks and take on personal responsibility and group accountability (a lot like being on a sports team). But I think the personal-risk level is kicked up a notch in theatre.” – Laura

“Being taught to look inside myself to figure out how to portray multiple characters helped me learn who I am both as an actor and as a person, and it was awesome being able to watch twenty-something of my peers going through the same thing” - Allie

The answers of my former students from STAR suggest the same patterns of thinking that I suspect may prove beneficial to young people studying theatre; an empowering forum for developing an understanding of possibility and the existence of multiple

options; and a secure space in which to develop a sense of self. In my own experience as a student of theatre and in my observation of student's participation in theatre, I have identified the following habits of mind that are developed through theatre study, which appeared to be lacking in my HGHS students and which could have a positive impact on students like them:

- An inclination toward active participation
- The understanding that it is within one's power to change the shape of events
- The ability to recognize and evaluate multiple perspectives and possibilities
- An appreciation of the implications of subtle choices on ensuing outcomes.
- This capacity to manipulate and consciously shift perspective on past, present and future events

By enhancing competency in these areas, it may be possible to specifically address the kind of enduring passivity and disempowerment that I observed at HGHS.

A Profile of Youth at Risk

The inner city of Albany represents a textbook case of urban poverty. The fact that my HGHS students sustained damage as a result of the environment in which they'd grown up is no surprise. The impact of abuse, neglect and poverty on children is well-

documented. A constellation of negative risk factors, which can be detrimental to any child, are far more likely to occur in the lives of poor, inner city children by virtue of their socio-economic status and the attendant circumstances it conveys. In 2000, 17% of children in the US were identified as living below the poverty line with an additional 39% existing near that point (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 345) Crime in urban centers like the area where the HGHS students live is 74% higher than in rural communities and families with incomes below \$7,500 annually are twice as likely to report crime victimization as families with higher incomes. (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.347) Risk factors associated with neighborhood violence are particularly salient for adolescents because they are more mobile and autonomous than their younger peers and therefore less shielded from the impact of the streets (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.346.) Adolescents are victimized at a rate that is twice the national average with youth between the ages of 12 and 15 accounting for the most victimization of any age group. (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.348.) One study found that 75% of a group of inner city students reported having been beat-up, shot or stabbed on at least one occasion (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.348.) Another observed that 50-90% of urban children had been exposed to violent events (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.394)

Childhood maltreatment is associated with depression, anxiety, anti-social behavior, delinquency, poor self-esteem and difficulty developing relationships. (Bolger & Patterson in Luthar 2003 p.156-157) Children who grow up in circumstances of enduring poverty experience poor physical health, lower intellectual attainment, and an

increased likelihood of social, emotional and behavioral problems. (Owens & Shaw in Luthar 2003 p.268) Exposure to violence has been linked to compromised cognitive functioning, lower academic achievement, lower school attendance and a high drop-out rate. (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.348)

Children exposed to violence show signs of Post-traumatic stress disorder (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.394 & 395) some react by becoming aggressive or showing greater behavioral problems (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.398). These students manifest; difficulty concentrating, impaired memory, anxious attachments to caregivers and aggressive behavior (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.394.) Exposure to violence has been linked to anxiety and depression (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.395), associated with drinking alcohol, carrying weapons and using drugs (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.395). Children who have witnessed violence may manifest neurological damage which can affect their ability to appropriately react to stress (Gorman-Smith & Tolan in Luthar 2003 p.396). Fear elevates aggressive behavior and is correlated with anxiety disorders and maladjustment. (Rasmussen. Aber & Bhana 2004 p. 61). Adolescents who witness violence are more likely to perpetrate violence themselves (Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone 2005 p.917) Gorman-Smith & Tolan (in Luthar 2003, p.398) note that “profound and perhaps permanent brain changes can occur as the result of violent trauma within the first three years of life”.

Learned Helplessness

The net effect of these kinds of experiences and deficits in the lives of my HGHS students is almost certainly evidenced in a condition called “Learned Helplessness” (Overmier & Seligman 1966 p. 33; Miller & Seligman 1975 p. 235-238), a phenomenon whereby an organism “learns”, through a persistence of dis-empowering life experiences, that he is unable to affect or change the things that happen to him, and therefore ceases efforts to do so. This cessation of effort persists; even when an individual is presented with circumstances he is capable of changing (Seligman, 2006.) This model posits that when an organism is faced with uncontrollable outcomes, it comes to believe that its actions and the outcomes it will experience are unconnected. The organism then forms beliefs about its inability to affect future outcomes. (Garber & Hollon 1980 p. 56)

Overmier & Seligman (1966 p. 33-36) conducted a series of experiments with dogs in which they were subjected to painful electric shocks which they were unable to avoid. After repeated shocks over time, the dogs no longer attempted to escape the shocks and instead passively endured them. Their passivity continued even when they were provided with circumstance that would have allowed them to evade the shocks. They continued to endure being shocked when options were presented to them which could have alleviated their suffering. The fact that Seligman’s dogs “learned” that their efforts at self-preservation were futile and responded by no longer trying to protect themselves

brought about a watershed understanding in behavioral science which had previously believed this kind of understanding beyond both dogs and humans.

The concept of Learned Helplessness was further demonstrated to exist in rats, cats, mice, goldfish and, eventually, humans (Garber & Hollon 1980 p. 58). Human subjects in a laboratory setting were exposed to unpleasant noise. Some were presented with a means of pressing buttons in sequence to stop the sound; others were unable turn off the noise regardless of what they tried. When the subjects were presented with a different task relating to another noise stimulus (which, for all, could be ended by pressing buttons in sequence), those who had been able to successfully end the first noise, actively attempted, then discovered a method for disabling this new sound. A control group who had not been previously exposed to noise was also able to turn off the second sound, but a large number of the human subjects who had been exposed to the uncontrollable, uncomfortable pitch in the first experiment made no attempt to turn the second sound off and instead passively endured it (Miller & Seligman 1975 p. 229).

Garber and Hollon conducted an investigation into the nature of helplessness in depression (1980 p. 56). They explored whether the helplessness which was displayed by the human subjects in Seligman's experiments was related to belief in their own helplessness or in universal helplessness (a belief that all persons are generally helpless). Subjects were divided into depressed and non-depressed categories and were given a skilled task to perform. While both groups accurately appraised the likelihood that

others would be able to perform the task successfully, depressed patients were inordinately negative about their own chances of success. The results imply that depressed subjects are able to accurately judge the challenges and skills of others but are specifically, inordinately pessimistic about their own capabilities (Garber and Hollon 1980 p. 63.)

Like the animals and the human beings in these studies, my students at HGHS had been conditioned by their environments and experiences to expect their needs to go unmet, their efforts to be thwarted and their striving to be of little consequence. It would appear that combating this hopelessness would be a necessary and fundamental intervention for these students. If confidence in the future can be preserved, even in the face of a bleak present, these individuals may be able to recognize and respond to situations in which they have the ability to undertake positive action on their own behalf.

Instances of Resilient Functioning

Data indicate that some documented factors appear to support resilient functioning, even in the face of the kinds of life adversity described herein. Striving to enhance these qualities may contribute to an intervention strategy for these children, however, in many cases, these factors are tied to early life, genetic advantage, strong parenting or other circumstances which are beyond the control of the students themselves or those who wish to intervene on their behalf once they have reached adolescence.

A stable home life, caring, emotionally healthy, competent parenting, intelligence and a good natured personality, convey advantages and may ameliorate the emotional peril of living in systemic poverty (Luthar 2003; Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone 2005; Hammack et al. 2004). Owens & Shaw (in Luthar 2003, p. 283-285) identify incidence of secure mother/child attachment at 18 months as conveying later benefit for impoverished children. Securely attached infants manifest fewer psychosocial and behavioral problems later in life (Owens & Shaw in Luthar 2003, p. 272). Higher intelligence scores and an agreeable temperament have both been associated with successful refutation of adversity (Owens & Shaw in Luthar 2003 p.72) Interventions in early childhood, according to Reynolds and Ou (in Luthar 2003. p. 455) may have the greatest effect: because they set the stage for school success; because they are more likely to engage families, and thereby extend protective factors to multiple realms of the child's life; and because they come at a critical time in cognitive development, the start of formal schooling. Hart & Risley (1995 p. 4) suggest that the even the start of school may be too late, pointing to the relatively short term benefits conveyed by programs like *Head Start*. They suggest that expansiveness of vocabulary development, and quality of language interaction between parents and children, prior to age three, is directly correlated to socio-economic status, and has lasting impact on a child's future success (1995, pp178-180)

Positive and accepting parenting behaviors and maternal responsiveness have been linked to favorable adjustment (Owens & Shaw in Luthar 2003 p 273). There is also evidence that parents who provide a structured, but caring home environment with clear expectations, even in the face of limited means, can confer benefit to their children (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p 355). Parents can also help to support their children by cultivating a circle of friends and family to whom a young person can turn (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p 353). Average and high levels of maternal support have been correlated with dissuading adolescent boys who have witnessed violence from committing violent acts themselves (Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone 2005 p. 925.) Parental support factors may help to moderate risk for students with low or medium exposure to violence but may lose their effectiveness among students who are at extreme risk (Hammack et al. 2004 p. 450).

There is some evidence that certain factors which may be within the control of adolescent caregivers may have an impact on student resilience. Pro social cognitions supported in girls seem to provide a unique protection against committing violence after being exposed to violence (Brookmeyer, Henrich & Schwab-Stone 2005 p. 926) Churches, youth organizations and neighborhood groups have also been found to positively influence youth by enhancing social competence and reducing problem behaviors (Cauce et. al. in Luthar 2003 p.350).

There is also strong evidence that perceptions of safety and control may be of greater benefit than actual safety and control for children growing up in persistent poverty (Rasmussen, Aber & Bhana 2004.). Exposure to violence that is viewed as controllable produces less fear than violence that is regarded as uncontrollable. It is, therefore, not the threat itself but the individual's appraisal of her control over the threat that informs her reaction to it. In a study of African-American and Latino adolescents in low, medium and high crime neighborhoods in Chicago, Rasmussen, Aber & Bhana (2004) studied the interaction between exposure to violence, coping mechanisms and perceptions of safety. Their findings suggest that in high crime neighborhoods, none of the coping methods studied reduced the students' actual exposure to violence. In all cases, they continued to live in circumstances which placed them in equal levels of peril. The development of coping skills did, however, provided those students with a greater *perception of safety*, thereby decreasing their stress levels. These findings suggest that it may be possible to divert adolescents at-risk from the condition of Learned Helplessness if they can be prevented from feeling disempowered and endangered, even if their current level of empowerment and danger remains the same. In the absence of immediate societal remedies, endowing young people with the positive perceptions that will keep them from despair may preserve their abilities to make positive choices on their own behalf when the opportunity arises.

If students can be provided with arenas in which they can learn that their actions have the ability to affect outcomes, their personal "theory" of helplessness might be

invalidated. The task at hand then, appears to be to assist young people, like those at HGHS, in maintaining hope, becoming aware of the areas in which they have control, and crafting a vision of the future they can believe is attainable.

Disputation and Positive Response to Adversity

If participation in theatre activity can enhance the ability of the individual to develop perspective on the past, imagine a more promising future and embrace an active role in a present that can bring that future about, some significant advantages may be inferred. Seligman suggests that perceptions of helplessness can be affected by developing a "positive explanatory style" (2006 p. 40.) He notes that pessimistic people tend to define adversity in terms of permanence (the belief that bad circumstance will persist), pervasiveness (the belief that negativity extends to all aspects of life) and personalization (the belief that misfortune is linked to one's own inherent deficits) (Seligman 2006 p.44). Those with a negative explanatory style are more likely to be depressed and less likely to enjoy good physical health or attain life success (Seligman 2006 p. 53). According to Seligman, "pessimistic explanations set-off passivity and dejection, whereas optimistic expectations energize". (Seligman 2006 p. 216) He advocates a process where the individual learns to reframe her thoughts through "disputation," a process whereby an individual consciously examines her internal scripts, recognizes negative perceptions, and reframes them in a more positive manner (Seligman 2006 p.219.) For example, upon losing a job, an individual with a pessimistic explanatory style might think to herself, "I've lost my job because I'm not good at it and

they don't like me there. I'm not good at anything and I'll never get another job.

Everything in my life is a mess.", whereas a more positive individual might think, "The economy is bad and the company is laying people off. I was the most recent hire so naturally, I'm the first to be let go. I might not be great at this job, but there are lots of things I am good at and lots of other things in my life are going great. I'm bound to get another job soon and maybe it will be a better one."

This kind of shift in perspective is very similar to the reframing of circumstance that takes place during rehearsal. Just as actors consider, reconsider and experiment with different combinations of actions in their creative process, individuals must analyze and re-frame their perceptions of the misfortune they experience and the possible futures that can exist as a result of how those experiences are perceived. Those who have had theatre training become adept at making choices about, and controlling perceptions, and then observing how those choices affect simulated life on the stage – or real life as it is experienced. The process of empowered and aware choice-making could quite likely be applied to the process of understanding and disputing negative explanatory response.

In addition to re-framing negative perceptions, new positive perceptions of the future must be built if an individual is to overcome adversity. Taylor et al. (1998) studied the process by which mental stimulation, a process of vividly imagining the steps necessary to achieve a goal, affected goal attainment. Unlike haphazardly fantasizing about the

future, which can be unrealistic and random, mental stimulation combines self-regulation and coping behaviors with imagination, allowing an individual to use his goals to motivate him to follow the steps necessary to achieve it. Acting process requires a similar step-by-step (action by action) process in the manner in which scripts are broken into beats. The tension inherent in Stanislavski's "magic if", in which the imagination considers the broad possibility of what "can be" but, rejects the outright fantasy of what "can never be", is also similar to the careful goal-setting and visualizing of mental stimulation. It is possible that Adolescents may gain these important self-regulatory skills from engagement in theatre in this manner.

Identity Development and Synthesis of Prior Experience

Research suggests that Arts experiences may contribute to a young person's sense of belonging, an important component of identity development (Noam 1999). Erik Erikson theorized that "human beings have a need to integrate and synthesize past and present experiences" (Berzonsky in Adams 2000 p. 19). Erikson's developmental theory describes eight stages of identity development of which the fifth stage, "Identity and Diffusion" is most important (Berzonsky in Adams 2000 p. 19). During this stage, which typically takes place during adolescence, the individual forms a stable sense of self by analyzing, drawing conclusions about, and integrating the experiences which have gone before. A view that one has successfully navigated prior adversity can convey a sense of self as capable, successful and secure. A negative assessment of one's prior experiences can lead to a view of oneself as powerless and incapable. (Berzonsky in Adams 2000 p.

20) In a sense, at this stage, an individual tells herself the story of her life, up to the present. Her perceptions of who she is within that story can have a lasting impact on the self-concept she develops. An individual who has had experience with theatre process may be particularly adept and effective at telling a story, at evaluating the factors that can be changed, and at managing her perceptions about the things that cannot be. She may have developed a clear understanding that multiple endings to that story are possible and that she has power over what that outcome will be. If she has, through theatre work, become skilled at manipulating the elements of a story in order to ensure the outcome she prefers, she may be particularly effective in forming a strong and resilient identity, despite adversity she may have experienced.

Csikszentmihalyi & Larson (1984, p. 3) also recognize the period of adolescence as providing “opportunities for fresh starts and new directions that are not predictable from the events of childhood...” They contend that the nature of adolescence, when individuals gain the freedom to move through multiple domains (home, school, community, friends, career, etc.), affords new and varied input which can be marshaled to the task of developing a strong self in relationship to the broader world (1984, P. 221)

Feelings of autonomy and self-efficacy, at the time of adolescence, may allow young people to forge a positive sense of self. If adolescents pass through this period in a state of fear and uncertainty, the identity to which they commit may be prone to self-doubt and fear. If interventions at this stage can assist them in framing prior adversity in

terms of their strengths, they may be able to forge a sense of self that is resilient.

Describing the impact of Arts opportunities on personal development, The Arts Education Partnership says. "These experiences have the potential to help students develop a positive sense of identity in two ways: one, students envision a positive future for themselves and two, they develop an identity for themselves as individuals who can contribute to the cultural life of their communities. Given the critical nature of identity formation and personality development that occurs in adolescence, it is especially important to understand these processes as they take place in middle school and high school settings." (Arts Education Partnership, 2004 pg 11). By participating in theatre work during adolescence, "(young people) hone their skills for exploration and analysis and direct them inward, to develop a positive self-identity and understanding of themselves in relation to the world around them. In addition, the Arts often include a strong component of self-assessment, which may support identity development". (Arts Education Partnership 2004 pg 11)

Otto Rank, who began his career as a disciple of Freud, differs radically from Freud in his belief that human beings are capable of transcending their past experiences through conscious choice (Menaker 1982 p. 7). According to Menaker (1982 p. 36) "when interpreting the nature of individual personalities, "(Rank) would place emphasis, not so much upon the history of past experiences as upon the strength of creative will, which is accessible to each individual in the task of assimilating those experiences." (Menaker 1982, p. 36)

For Rank, the creative process was evident both in the formation of personality as well as in the artists creative output. He believed, “Creativeness lies equally at the root of artistic production and life experience” (Menaker 1982 p. 29). According to Rank, the primary human conflict lies in the tension between a wish for uniqueness and individuality, and the guilt derived from the rejection of one’s social group inherent in that yearning (Menaker 1982 p. 80). Artists, we are told, are able to resolve that conflict in that the act of creating feeds the desire for individuation and separates him - but because he uses elements of his own culture to create a work of art, and because his own culture is enriched by the work itself, he assuages his guilt over rejection of his social group (Menaker 1982 p. 32). Rank’s ideas suggest that it may be well within the power of at-risk youth, like those at HGHS, to transcend their circumstances and create a self that is reflective of their own conscious creative will if they are afforded the ability to see beyond their current experiences and understand their power to change them.

Cognitive Development

Piaget submits that adolescence is a time when “concrete operational thinking”, a cognitive form that allows for basic problem solving but not abstract thinking, gives way to “formal operational thinking”, a manner of reasoning which allows for understanding of cause and effect and for considering multiple possibilities and solutions to challenges (Berzonsky 2000 p. 23-24). Theatre work is also characterized by an examination of

cause and effect relationships through the constant exploration, embrace or rejection of “what if” scenarios, as well as the invoking of multiple perspectives.

Through the rehearsal process, student actors repeatedly analyze circumstances, consider alternate outcomes, experience the results of different combinations of choices, and select the scenario that reflects their chosen outcome. In this way, students who are engaged in theatre may be supported in the development of this higher order of critical thinking. This advantage may, in turn, provide an expanded arsenal of cognitive processes with which to better analyze the past, develop creative solutions and imagine a future that reaches beyond their current realities.

Development of Possible Selves

The work of Markus and Nurius (1986) refers to the development of “possible selves” and the manner in which their existence may serve as a motivation to action for individuals as they seek to lay claim to who they are and who they can become.

“Possible selves” refers to a multitude of potential selves that exist simultaneously within the conception of an individual. They include both “selves” that an individual strives for and wishes to become (thin, rich, a successful writer, a beloved parent) as well as “selves” they dread and avoid becoming (lonely, unattractive, unsuccessful). The desire for, or repulsion against a particular self can drive the behavior of an individual as they seek to achieve or avoid a potential future (p. 954).

Possible Selves also exist along continuums of time, including “current selves” (the self who passes or fails a test) and “future selves” (the self who either works in a high status job or the self who bags groceries for a living). “An individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual’s particular socio-cultural and historical context and from models, images and symbols provided by the media and by the individual’s immediate social experiences” (Markus and Nurius 1986 p. 954.) An individual’s “collection” of possible selves is in a state of constant change. The failure of a test may have the effect of making the “High School Dropout Self” or the “Unemployed Self” more prevalent and may completely eclipse the “Doctor Self”, while being elected class president may for a time, completely eliminate the “Unpopular Self” and bring about the birth of the “Self who achieves great life success”.

Possible selves are not simply a collection of beliefs about one’s potential. Those beliefs can form the stimulus that drives individual behavior. Steps may be taken to increase the likelihood of a wanted possible future self, or to avoid a dreaded negative one.

(Markus and Nurius 1986 p. 960.) “Beyond their role as incentives, possible selves function to provide an evaluative and interpretive context for the now self” (Markus and Nurius 1986 p. 962). The impact of positive or negative life events is regulated in part by the existing collective of positive and negative possible selves. Misfortune is likely to have a more negative impact on self-concept if it appears to increase the possibility of an avoided possible self. Alternately, achievement is more likely to have a lasting

impact on pro-active behavior if it stimulates the perception of a potential future success which is desired (Markus and Nurius 1986 p. 963)

Significantly, Markus and Nurius note that individuals considered multiple and varied possible selves to exist in the conceivable future (1986 p. 958-960). They studied respondents who had recently experienced challenging life events, the subjects expressed equally negative conceptions of their current selves, but perceptions of potential future selves were divergent. Those who felt they had navigated trauma successfully were able to conceive of positive future selves, even though their current selves did not reflect that positive outlook. Those who felt defeated by their current trauma presented a much more negative array of future potential selves (Markus and Nurius p. 962)

The theory of Possible Selves offers several implications for my students from HGHS. Their consistent exposure to adversity and infrequent encounters with success likely resulted in a group of possible selves which included many negative outcomes (prison, addiction, abuse, school failure) and severely limited the scope of positive outcomes (high school completion rather than college, minimum wage job instead of stimulating career). With each disappointment or failure, negative possible selves would become more likely. Believing in such limited possible outcomes and crippled by Learned Helplessness, HGHS students would lack the motivation to actively pursue the few positive selves of which their socio-cultural experiences would allow them to conceive.

Inaction would make the negative selves more likely – perpetuating a cycle of decreased potential.

The experience of experimentation, assumption of different characters and manipulation of story inherent in theatre work may provide student actors with a broader palette from which to derive and develop possible selves. While the palette of selves derived from their daily experience may be limited to mostly low- achieving and negative possibilities, they may have the opportunity to embody very different kinds of characters on stage. As students become more accustomed to using their imaginations, they may be able to conceive of a divergent pool that includes many, more varied possible selves. The presence of a wider variety of choices, including those with greater potential for success, may encourage action that makes these more positive selves more likely to come about. More choices may also encourage an individual to avoid behavior or apathy that will form the basis for the existence of negative possible selves. Positive future selves may be developed even in cases where present adversity results in a negative current self, as it did for many of my HGHS students.

Participation and training in the process of Acting, may provide students, particularly youth at risk with a collection of competencies and understandings, which will allow them to perceive greater empowerment and potential for themselves. This may result in a more positive outlook and an ability to withstand adversity fostering long-term success in life, not just achievement in the classroom.

Conclusion

According to the theoretical literature on the subject, Successful navigation of adolescence is evidenced by:

- The ability to maintain a belief that an individual's actions have consequence for their lives and are within one's control to alter
- The attainment of higher order thinking skills, characterized by an understanding of cause and effect relationships, the ability to consider multiple perspectives, and the capacity to contemplate possibilities that do not currently exist but may exist in the future
- The capacity to segment desired future states into manageable action steps which can be realistically, visualized and striven for
- The development of a broad range of salient possible selves, representing the perceived positive and negative potentials of an individual, which can influence the individual to actively pursue or avoid certain behavior
- Successful development of an identity which views past events, current capabilities and future potential in a stable positive light

My experience and observations indicate that participation in the process of acting may aid adolescents in the development of habits of mind which encourage feelings of empowerment, foster broad consideration of possibility, and promote positive response to adversity. Specifically:

An inclination toward active participation developed through participation in an art form, which depends upon active initiative from its adherents, may support young people in rejecting beliefs about their own powerlessness and specifically combating inclinations toward apathy. The language of theatre participation is active, based on infinitive verbs, and dependent upon the engagement of each individual in the process. There is simply no way to play a passive role in theatre arts. Engagement of any kind flexes the muscles of involvement and industry, negating apathy and feelings of powerlessness. Research indicates that, perceptions of power and control attained in one domain can carry over to other domains in which a young person had little control, reducing stress by producing a belief in self-efficacy that may be unfounded, but is nonetheless protective.

The understanding that it is within one's power to change the shape of events honed through the process of making choices and experiencing outcomes in rehearsal may transfer to daily life. The awareness of one's own role in determining outcomes may help to combat the effects of learned helplessness by disputing beliefs that adversity is personal, pervasive and permanent. If an adolescent can maintain an understanding that misfortune is not universal, she may be better equipped to develop a positive explanatory style and to compartmentalize negative stimulus.

The ability to recognize and evaluate multiple perspectives and possibilities is a critical element of the creative process. Through experimentation and evaluation within the

acting process in a rehearsal setting, students build their capacity to imagine multiple scenarios and explore cause and effect relationships. By invoking “if” patterns of thinking, they are able to move beyond concrete operational thinking to consider more expansive scenarios through formal operational thinking. This enhanced cognitive capacity allows them to better consider the reasons behind both the adversity and success they experience. They are therefore more likely to recognize the real obstacles in their lives over which they lack control as well as the domains they are empowered to address. This kind of expansive consideration may also enable student actors to construct a broader cohort of possible selves.

Possible selves are constituted from the individual’s personal contexts. In the process of theatre making, an individual is exposed to multiple characters and scenarios which may not be a part of their life experiences. This expanded repertoire of experience “lived” onstage may increase the quantity of salient characteristics from which the individual can construct positive possible selves.

By dissecting “stories” and “actions” to their elemental level and experimenting with the manipulation of specific details in the rehearsal process, students gain **an appreciation of the implications of subtle choices on ensuing outcomes**. Student actors gain the capacity to similarly deconstruct their personal challenges so that they can be addressed in manageable units rather than daunting hardships. As actors they grow in their power to express precise ideas and emotions. As growing individuals they learn that each

particular choice they make carries with it a range of distinct consequence that can be shifted with the making of alternate choices. As they develop, they gain understanding of the effect of targeting their energies to particular goals.

Students involved in theatre become skilled at invoking multiple perspectives through the experience of assuming different characters and scenarios, which may fall far outside the realm of their day to day experiences. They learn to consider these perspectives and make critical decisions about their validity. **This capacity to manipulate and consciously shift perspective on past, present and future events** supports the critical evaluation of circumstances inherent in identity development. Even students whose early life experiences have been fraught by tragedy and needs unmet can, with the attainment of proper perspective, develop a stable and positive identity. If, during the critical stage of adolescence, an individual is capable of integrating past experiences and current realities in a manner which mark her as capable, effective and empowered, it may be possible to reverse the effects of prior adversity. Skill developed through the manipulation of stories and the modification of beliefs necessary for theatre practice may support this process.

It is not my intention to suggest that the habits of mind described herein are developed exclusively through theatre study. I believe that there are likely corollaries in other art forms and perhaps in other forms of human endeavor which convey similar effect. I do believe, however, that there is a strong connection between the skills developed in

theatrical processes and the habits of mind which support resilient function and positive psychological development. More research is needed to further explore this link as well as other benefits inherent in Arts education. Further exploration may be able to determine the optimal conditions for applying these ideas and for measuring their ultimate worth. The specific content, depth and intensity of experiences and their short and long-term effects on both “typical” and “at-risk” students should be studied to develop intervention models of optimal scope. I believe that, given the ability to apply these principals to their greatest effect, the short-lived resurrective qualities that we observed among the students at HGHS might have been effectively cultivated in the long term.

I don’t diminish the fine work done by the Arts in Education field over the past two decades. Art is a powerful tool with many applications. Boosting academic achievement is one realm where the Arts can, and have been, spectacularly successful. The emphasis on standardized test achievement is an undeniable priority in American education at present. It is nearly impossible to be successfully funded or allotted time within a school schedule if one cannot demonstrate positive impact on those scores. It is my hope that my colleagues in the field will continue to strive to enhance and measure the elusive, but possibly more important gains of Arts participation, and not rely on the more cursory benefits which are valued by the current K-12 industry.

I am so grateful for having had the opportunity to work with the beautiful, bright and vibrant students of HGHS when they were at their best, and for the creative and dedicated teachers who were my colleagues in the CPP. Insight gained from that experience has certainly made me a better educator, student and artist. I am hopeful that that same insight will encourage those in my field to use the fundamental power inherent in Arts work to support students, like those at HGHS to achieve their fullest potential.

Resources

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