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The Arts as Educational Tools

Katie Daniel
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Senior Project

Whenever a budget crisis hits a school system, programs in the arts seem to be the first to be cut. However, whether a formal art program exists and especially if it does not, teachers from all disciplines can use the arts as a way to help students learn. Although I believe every discipline can incorporate the arts, the English or reading classroom is the one in which I am most interested. The arts can make a piece of literature that seems dull and boring at first come alive. I have completed three very different projects which demonstrate how the arts can be effective as an educational tool.

Third graders write plays

In the fall of 2001 Dr. Misty Anderson and I did a four-week theatre workshop with Ms. Pucker's third grade class at Lonsdale Elementary School in Knoxville, Tennessee. Lonsdale is an urban school where 87.8%of the students are on free or reduced lunch which means that the majority of the students come from families with low incomes. Also, Lonsdale scored an F in achievement in language arts "based on goals set by the State Department of Education" (School Report Card for Lonsdale Elementary School). Although I do not know what these goals are, I do know that most of the students in the class were functioning below grade level in reading.

The theatre workshop Dr. Anderson and I worked on with these students was designed to help them with their writing skills. During the first week of the workshop we started by having one of the students tell the class the story of "The Three Little Pigs." After that, I read Jon Scieszka's book "The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs" after which the class compared and contrasted the two versions of the story. When we finished talking about that, the class discussed what other fairy tales they knew that they could

rewrite by themselves, and they decided to use "Goldilocks and the Three Bears." In groups of four they worked together to write their own versions of the story.

The next week, Dr. Anderson and I talked about how plays are made up of dialogue and actions and discussed what dialogue is. Then we had some of the students get up and demonstrate by using our example story of "The Three Little Pigs." Then we showed them on the chalkboard how to write dialogue and asked to them change their stories from prose to dialogue. One of the ways they were able to do this as a group was to have each person in the group take one of the characters in the story and try to come up with lines for their characters. They were ad libbing and then transcribing what they had ad libbed with some minor editing.

During the third week, they finished up writing their plays and worked on designing their costumes. They made hats and masks with paper plates, ribbons, and markers. They could not wait to put on their plays!

The last week was rehearsal and performance week. They donned their costumes and Dr. Anderson and I circulated through the room helping them figure out the best ways to stage their plays. After several rehearsals, they were able to stage their original productions.

The results of their plays were impressive for students who were known to have difficulty reading and writing. All of their plays made sense which is a big accomplishment for third graders. They all took characters from a story they knew and used them in a new story. They also added their own characters to their stories. One group added Goldilocks' mother, a vampire and a ghost to the story. Another added Ms. Pucker and Snow White. The other group added "Robbin Hood." I also heard from Ms.

Pucker that the students had independently decided to use dialogue in their journal. It was exciting for me to hear that they were applying what we had taught them on their own.

Eighth graders make poetry collages

When I was given the opportunity to teach Mrs. Akers' class during my field experience at Vine Middle School, I decided I wanted to teach poetry in an innovative way. First, I had to find some poetry with which the students would connect. Since Vine has a high population of African American students, I wanted to present a poet who was not a white male. They had already read Frost and Poe so I thought it was time to move on to something a little different. Luckily, the textbook the school uses has a section of poetry by Nikki Giovanni, an African American woman, and the selection of poems, including "Knoxville, Tennessee," "Choices," and "A Journey," were very well chosen for this demographic of students.

I decided to open the class by reading the poem "Knoxville, Tennessee" since the students could probably connect with a poem about their city. I was trying to highlight the imagery in this poem so I explained what imagery is and asked them to name images they could remember for the poem. After this, I paired them up and gave them the assignment to choose one Giovanni poem and make a collage using the imagery from the poem. If they chose a poem that was not as strong in imagery, they also could highlight the theme of the poem in their collage. They also were expected to present the collages to the class the next time I came and explain why they had chosen the imagery they did.

By using visual imagery to represent verbal imagery, these students were better able to understand the concept of imagery. The groups who were conveying the theme of

the poems in their collages had all chosen images that showed that they understood the meaning of their chosen poem. In the final presentations of their collages, all of the groups demonstrated an understanding of the poetry that they might not have otherwise had if they had been asked to merely read the poems instead of reading and interpreting the poems into artwork.

College students produce a play

Although the production of *Waiting for Godot* was not done in a classroom, it was produced as an educational project. Sam Morris and I decided to produce this play so that he could have an opportunity to convey his ideas about gender studies to a wider audience than would read his papers and so that I could have the opportunity to stage manage and design costumes for the project.

I had read *Waiting for Godot* in class before we had even thought about producing the play. Although I knew how to read scripts from being in the theatre department, I only had a shallow understanding of the play until I started working on the production. The whole process of production from reading and hearing the script more times than I can count hearing the director's interpretation of the script to seeing the actors' interpretation of the director's interpretation of the script helped me understand the work at a deeper level than I did before I worked on the production.

The production of this play also taught me about people. As the stage manager, I was responsible for keeping the people under control. Since I was only dealing with ten people in the cast and crew, counting the director and me, I did not think this would be very difficult. With a female lead who decided she did not need to cooperate, a cast who

mutinied, and a lighting designer with whom we could not get in touch, I realized that any number and mix of people with whom you work can work together well or have many problems.

I think that in an English classroom, students could work together to produce scenes or whole plays in order for them to understand plays better and to learn about the interdependence necessary for a play to be produced. Since interdependence is also a necessary part of the 'real' world, it is a valuable thing to learn. Also, when producing scenes or plays in class, students do not have to be actors. They can also be directors, stage managers, or designers since these are also just as necessary to making a show happen.

Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

One reason that the arts can be so effectively used in a classroom is that all nine intelligence types postulated by Howard Gardner in his theory of multiple intelligences can be used. While all nine types may not be used at one time, several of them are usually used in each art project. This gives more students an opportunity to show their strengths than most activities do. It also gives students a chance to strengthen intelligence areas not normally used.

The third graders who wrote their own plays used four main types of intelligences. They were using linguistic intelligence in order to write their plays. They were using logical-mathematical intelligence to give their stories a logical sequence of events. They were using bodily-kinesthetic intelligence in getting up and acting out their plays. They were using interpersonal intelligence to be able to work with each other. At

this age, none of the children were especially well developed in any of these areas so this project gave them an opportunity to strengthen all of these areas. However, some of the students definitely had more of an aptitude for some areas of intelligence or were weaker than most students in certain intelligences. The students with stronger linguistic intelligence usually were the scribes for the groups so it was usually easy to tell who they were. Probably the easiest thing to tell though was who had problems in the area of interpersonal intelligence. Those children were the ones who had trouble if they did not have complete control over what happened in the groups. One boy in particular did not want to listen to anyone else's ideas.

The three main intelligence types used in the poetry collage project were linguistic, spatial, and interpersonal. Linguistic intelligence helped the students understand the poetry. Spatial intelligence helped them put together their collages. Interpersonal intelligence was used to be able to work in pairs and to share the materials (magazines, scissors, glue) with the class. Spatial intelligence was the most evident to me since their collages showed how well they could make their collages visually pleasing.

Working on *Waiting for Godot* used all of the different intelligences. From verbal for understanding the script all the way to interpersonal for getting the group to work together to existential in dealing with issues of the meaning of life brought up in the play, every single type of intelligence is used at some point in the process of producing a play. Because of this, people with all different areas of intelligence are needed to produce a play. Some types of intelligence (bodily-kinesthetic, linguistic) are especially important to actors. Others are values in stage managers (interpersonal, logical-mathematical.) Still others are valued in designers (spatial, musical, naturalistic.) The use of multiple

intelligences is one of the main reasons the arts are so valuable in education (Eggen 126).

Bloom's Taxonomy

Another educational framework that supports the use of arts in education is Bloom's Taxonomy which is used to help set up assignments for different levels of student thinking. The arts require students to use higher level thinking skills which means they move up to the higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The third graders and eighth graders I worked with both had to use analysis, the fourth level of Bloom's Taxonomy, in order to examine the works they were using as the basis for their projects and synthesis, the fifth level, to create their own works. The eighth graders had to also use evaluation, the sixth and highest level, in their presentations of their collages. The production of *Waiting for Godot*, as should every theatre production, used all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Evaluation was especially important to the production since we constantly had to evaluate whether the choices we made for the production were working towards our goals (Wong 218).

Although I do not think the arts have to be used every day in every lesson or that using the arts are the only good way to teach, I do think they can be a good way to get students to think in new ways. The arts give opportunities for students to use the intelligences they have and strengthen the ones in which they are weaker. They also give opportunities for higher level thinking. Plus, they give students a break from the skill-and-drill-and-kill stuff so common in classrooms today. Maybe if the arts or other

interesting higher level thinking skill projects were used students would be more interested in learning for the sake of learning.

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