
DEVELOPING A MENTOR-BASED THEATER CURRICULUM

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In his latest book, *The Unschooled Mind: How Children Think and How Schools Should Teach*, Howard Gardner proposes radical but reasonable educational reforms to shift the focus of learning from rote fact-collecting to deep understanding. Gardner, who is most famous for his book, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, spoke at a KSC sponsored conference shortly after I began teaching here. At the time he was deeply involved in the research that would result in this latest book. My whole philosophy of teaching was influenced by his presentation. I remember the clarity and passion of his vision of alternative or augmented teaching styles that could lead our students past superficial knowledge to a real grasp of their subjects.

Though the entire scintillating and brilliant argument is worth hearing (or reading), I was charged especially by a part that insisted that students don't understand the ideas we are teaching until they can have direct contact with the reality of a situation rather than an abstract representation of it. To illustrate this argument Gardner cited a nationwide survey of honors students in physics that showed that only a few of them could solve even simple physics problems when they encountered them in "real life" rather than a typically organized word problem. (His book, in fact, contains almost 100 pages

of similar examples drawn from many disciplines at all levels of the curriculum.) To cite an example from my discipline: all my students know that Shakespeare is "the greatest dramatist of the English language" but until they have performed one of his plays few have any idea what that means. They are apparently not alone in this. The theater community is currently wracked in a sustained conflict over a play called *Two Noble Kinsmen* which may or may not be, wholly or in part, by Shakespeare. Those who think it is by Shakespeare declare that it is one of the best plays in the canon. Those who attribute it to another author often cast aspersions on its basic stage-worthiness. It is difficult to see how such a variety of opinions about the value of a script can exist among leading critics, except the possibility that many, like my beginning students, know that Shakespeare is great without an inkling of what it is that makes him so.

In the theater program we felt that our students were getting an above average classroom education, but we worried if that were enough. Taking a cue from Gardner, we decided to instate a series of apprentice experiences to augment our teaching. Apprenticeships are, of course, a time-honored method for bridging the gap between rote-knowledge and deeper understanding. Ironically, this oldest of theater teaching methods is so little a part of modern college curricula that we have received an invitation to discuss our approach this summer at a national convention in a seminar on innovation! A Faculty Summer Stipend last summer allowed me to implement a plan to institute

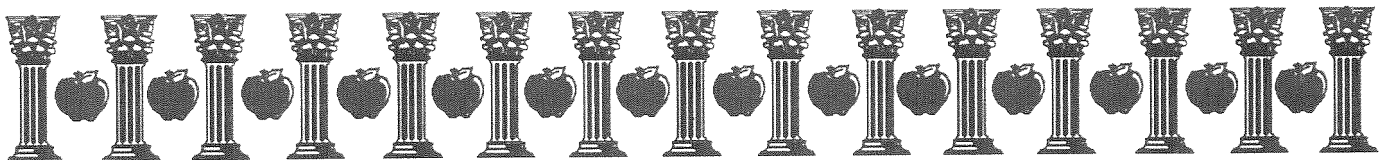
this apprenticeship idea throughout our entire curriculum. The basic idea is easily summarized, though it was difficult to accomplish. We established a resident theater company on our campus and, as much as possible, we have created interactions between its operations and our classroom curricula. It has become a sort of living laboratory attached to our theater program.

The centerpiece of our efforts is what we call our "mentor" program. Throughout the year we have created mentor/protege relationships between the artists working for the theater company and our students. In specifically designed and formally recognized relationships mentors have undertaken one-on-one responsibilities with assigned students. These have ranged from leading actors coaching student performers within a specific production to students taking over a set of year-long administrative tasks for the theater company under the supervision of a professional manager.

Mentors agree to do their work as publicly as possible, allowing all our student body to observe them in process and in performance. They take special time with their assigned proteges to lead them through the process, turning over as much responsibility to the students as is possible in each case.

From the student response, we believe this effort has been spectacularly successful. These relationships have often developed into close friendships and working partnerships. The students value them highly. One student wrote in an evaluation, "I have never

(continued on page 4)



TEACHING EDUCATION IN THE ARTS: Fostering Creative Thinking

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Creative teaching in the arts is fraught with many challenges and hurdles. How can this be? The essence of an art form is creativity. Yet it is less problematic to teach about art than to teach individuals not only how to enhance their own aesthetic response, but also in the case of teacher education, the aesthetic awareness of their students.

Music is a "sound" experience, but in this age of video pizzazz, high tech graphics, and rapid-fire visual stimulation, it becomes more difficult to ask a student (of any age) merely to sit and listen to a piece of music. The teaching of perceptive listening is challenging in all its stages: planning, monitoring, and evaluating. But, the ability both to audiate (to hear internally without an external sound being present) and to

listen discriminately is critical to performing, describing, and enjoying music.

Our students, as well as the children they will soon be teaching, have been influenced by and integrated into this super-visual environment. So within teacher education courses, the goals include not only developing musical skills, but the assimilation of pedagogical strategies as well. Often neglected in the course structure are built-in opportunities for both critical and creative thinking. When class design allows and encourages composition, improvisation, and the creative use of iconic visual aids, students can not only begin to synthesize musical concepts by merging the abstract sound into their own personal experiences, they can also learn how to make this possible for the children they will be teaching.

Bright and colorful visuals, charts, games, manipulatives, puppets, and creative movement activities that incorporate cooperative learning and group sharing all serve to expand the

domains of experience in a way that is sensitive and responsive to the multi-learning styles of all the students. These related arts opportunities can demonstrate repetition, contrast, form, line, texture and other concepts which are common across the arts. Good visuals can be attention grabbers, appropriate objects for focus, and appealing iconic representations of structure and abstract emotional content. Most importantly, they allow a teacher to "see to hear" and to model this multi-sensory approach when designing future lessons.

As in any art form, the whole of music is so much greater than the sum of any of its parts. All students deserve to be given opportunities to be performers, describers, and creators of music. Prospective teachers must develop a heightened awareness for "expressing the inexpressible" in order fully to communicate and to stimulate both the cognitive and the aesthetic growth of their students. 🍎

(continued from page 3)
worked harder, nor learned more, in my life." From a supervisory vantage point we are also pleased. The students have gone far beyond developing a few new skills. They have proven themselves able to rise to real understanding. The actors, for example, seem less interested in the temporary solution ("How should I inflect this line?"), than in the big questions like ("What is it like to commit yourself to the life of a performing artist?"). One of our students floored us all by stopping a rehearsal cold to ask how we could justify the existence of our theater company in this time of tight resources and Sen. Helms-inspired public distrust. Once I

managed to get my heart started again, I spent the most interesting hour of my career. The passion of our working artists as they articulated and defended the role of the arts in relation to a community was inspiring. The obvious activity of the students' minds as they struggled to take in their mentor's viewpoints and/or keep up the challenge to elicit more information was education in the best sense.

Besides the mentor/protege relationships, artists also regularly attend classes as resource people, guest lecturers, or simply interested visitors. The activity of the company itself has become our main classroom example. Students are welcome guests at rehearsals, design

conferences, and in the offices where day-to-day operations are ongoing.

Being our first year it is too early to make final judgments, but our theater company, Classic Theater Works, has had a very successful season, winning much public acclaim. Less visible to the outsider, but crucial to us, our students have grown enormously from the mentor-based curriculum. We see constant evidence of deep understanding of our discipline and work of a much higher caliber than was possible a year ago.

Editor's Note: This article is a report of the work done by the author in fulfillment of a Summer Stipend Award during the summer of 1991.