



GASP Professional Development Project **Performing Arts**

Model Project: Critical Thinkers Theatre—Building Life Skills Through Theater Arts

GASP Artist: Billy Hetherington billybard579@hotmail.com

Introduction

The *Critical Thinkers Theatre—Building Life Skills Through Theater Arts* project is focused on empowerment through confidence and communication alongside creating healthy teacher-student relationships through the mutual willingness to fearlessly explore. This concept is based on a few principles to help the students and teacher examine the process of creating ensemble, giving and receiving constructive criticism and maximizing the student potential. The idea is that a student who is confident to ask questions and explore new concepts without the fear of negative criticism will have a better chance of success in all they do. By examining the concepts of trust and communication in a safe environment where students can fearlessly fail the groundwork for true learning is established. This process also provides students with insight and skills in how to build trust with peers to combat bullying and negativity so that ensemble can emerge, how to talk to one another so that everyone can get the most out of the conversation and change the idea of failure from a daunting negative into an opportunity to gain knowledge through exploration. The project was developed to work with youth in 6th-12th grades but can be altered in ways that make the experiences appropriate for younger age students. This project utilizes the lessons of theatre and performance to delve into the concept of critical thinking.

One example of a focus for the Critical Thinkers Theater is a project I created called *The App*—a theatre piece based on an imaginary iPhone App as a way of engaging in conversation on the students' level. The plot is this—a student is faced with a difficult decision and is told by a friend to try this new “app” (or application) that will help them make the best decision. *The App* is designed to lay out all the choices—good and bad—that can be made based on the problem faced. The choices are acted out as students watch, trying to determine the best choice. The problems explored and the choices are generated by the students themselves during workshops conducted in class or rehearsal. After a few uses of this app, right when the student really needs it, the battery dies forcing them to act out their own choices and putting them in charge of their own life with the ability to see problems from all angles to determine the best choices.

The idea is that students will look at all angles of a prompt to develop a well-thought out conclusion to a problem (social, physical or scholastic) that is relevant to them. The students first develop trust and an ensemble with their peers in order to create a balanced and supported atmosphere where they feel free to explore the prompted concepts. Students then learn to critique ideas and to be critiqued so that solid communication skills can be established and built upon. The element of performance gives opportunity for the student to learn to overcome fears with the support of their peers. The performance allows students to see how, when supported by their peers anything may be possible—through performing together students find lasting bonds that can propel them forward in school with new confidence. The focus is on the process, with the end production a wonderful by-product of an amazing learning process.

Arts Area and Grade Level Focus

Performing Arts—Dance, Music and Theater; Literary Arts—Poetry, Story and Play Writing; and Visual Arts—Drawing, Painting and Sculpture for 6th-12th grades, with tips for scaling down for younger students

Connections To Elements of Art/Principles of Design

This project emphasizes **line**, **color**, **shape** and **form** through exploring prompts about life issues that students face in conjunction with the elements of theatre and presentation. Students explore how their bodies are the tool of trade for performance through the expression using the principles of: **line** to create grids within the stage to move within or in the painting of the backdrop to create a forced perspective or horizon; **color** to emphasize mood within the mind or the use of gels on lights to enhance a mood or effect; **shape** as used by the body to express a thought or feeling; and the function of **form** in relation to presentation. This is studied through the use and examination of physical theater exercises and writing in order to create an ensemble performance. The project emphasizes **rhythm & movement** through the study of pacing, physical articulation through body isolation exercises and basic dance steps to gain control and understanding of how the body represents feelings, emotions and metaphorical evaluations. **Harmony & unity** are experienced through ensemble building games and exercises in critiquing which delves into how to give and receive constructive criticism to build up a person, not break them down. Students will learn how the *Elements of Arts and Principles of Design* are the foundation of any meaningful performance. Theatre has the ability to integrate all aspects of art and design—from set painting to prop building and script writing to light design. The sky is the limit when it comes to watching imagination come to life through theater which is a remarkably versatile tool and medium through which a concept can be explored and a new reality can be discovered for both the actors and audience alike.

Connections To Core Curriculum and Content Standards

This project supports core curriculum by setting the groundwork through developing communication, problem-solving and critical thinking skills that together build confidence in their conclusion. In the classroom there are often kids do not speak up because of fear of being wrong. This project integrates skills that allow students to gain confidence in the knowledge that if they are wrong then that is a step towards finding out what is right. The project supports teaching and learning across the curriculum and is beneficial and advantageous to students and teachers alike as the groundwork set through the process of discovering answers to questions for true learning through critical thinking, communication and confidence-building rather than memorizing facts and information. More importantly, the project is designed to create an atmosphere of camaraderie and peer empowerment to allow students to get the most out of the experiences.

English/Language Arts

Reading

- Students will be engaged in determining central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas; analyzing how and why individuals, events and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text; interpreting words and phrases as they are used in a text including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings and analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning or tone; analyzing the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene or stanza) relate to each other and the whole; assessing how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text; and delineating and evaluating the argument and specific claims in a text including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

Writing

- Students will be engaged in writing arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence; writing narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences; producing clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience; and developing and strengthening writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting or trying a new approach.

Physical Education

- Through using synchronized movement to create a performance ensemble and a series of warm-ups designed to engage the body in expressive activity students will be engaged in demonstrating motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities; in demonstrating knowledge of movement concepts, principles and strategies that apply to the learning and performance of physical activities; in demonstrating and utilizing knowledge of psychological and sociological concepts, principles and strategies that apply to the learning and performance of physical activity.

Mathematics

[Note: I didn't truly understand algebra until I began breaking down characters and analyzing the variables of choices created within a character. Character study is a great way to relate theatre to mathematics. As we first learn math, numbers are given a character, whether it be apples or fingers, math can be applied throughout a production in the same way and vice versa. Math can become a production full of characters in situations that are abundant with life and imagination.]

- Throughout the study of a script, students will learn factors and variables of a character; addition and subtraction of concepts and actions; and proportions and degrees of energy and emotion.

Visual and Performing Arts

- Students will be engaged in processing, analyzing and responding to sensory information through the language and skills unique to Theater and/or Visual Arts including the development of the vocabulary of Theater; in creating, performing and participating in Theater and/or Visual Arts including the development of theatrical skills and engagement in creation/invention in Theater such as metaphorical imaging and on stage dynamics; in responding to, analyzing and making judgments about works of Theater and/or Visual Arts including comprehension, analysis and critical assessment of elements of Theatre; and in connecting and applying what is learned in Theater and/or Visual Arts to learning in other art forms and subject areas and to careers including connections and applications of Theater to life skills and overall school success.

Steps and Tips

The following key steps are based on years of delving into the craft of theatre both as actor and instructor. At the heart of the project is the desire to not only help students engage in the process but for the teacher to engage with the students so that everyone is involved in learning together.

Step One: (30 minutes) Trust and Ensemble—*Laying the groundwork and creating a supported learning environment.* This is the most essential step to a healthy learning environment. Through the use of several exercises described in the accompanying handouts (see *The Human Knot Handout* and *The Circle of Trust Handout* in **Supporting Resources**), students cultivate a balanced and supported atmosphere where they feel free to explore the prompted concepts. In addition to the exercises, I also open up a discussion about my experience in theatre. Letting students ask questions about my experience allows them to become more comfortable with the process of exploring and questioning and also to start trusting my guidance.

Step Two: (45 minutes) Language—*Learning the vocabulary of the stage and finding a common language.* Developing common language is key to understanding one another. This includes all relevant vocabulary words and concepts related to the study of theater. I generally spend a few days going over vocabulary and stage directions so that everyone is on the same page when we start to work together on the performance. I like to relate words and concepts to things relevant to the age and have found that by making an effort to relate to students you gain their trust and are able to get more out of the student-teacher relationship. As always, be sure to establish and confirm the boundaries so that students won't be confused when it is time to become a disciplinarian.

Step Three: (45 minutes.) Define Idea—*Exploring the possibilities and finding the focus.* This is the fun part when students start to engage in the process of creating—when all ideas are generated and discussed. It is always good to stay within a given theme but sometimes necessary to let the conversation wander as inspiration is a mysterious creature that hides in the cracks of our minds and waits to be found (see *Script*

and Performance Development Handout in **Supporting Resources**). I like to form the group into a circle so everyone can see each other. As the instructor, it is my responsibility to guide and organize the circle and to remind about the concepts of critiquing and exploration (see *The Critiquing Process Handout* in **Supporting Resources**). As the creative process can become chaotic, one method is to use “a talking stick” with only the student holding the stick allowed to speak. Record the ideas generated on a white board or chart paper so that everyone can see the ideas coming together. Once an idea or concept is agreed upon, the instructor or facilitator then identifies roles. Sometimes in the process of zeroing in on an idea, the students automatically agree on who should be responsible for what but not always. This process of identifying and assigning roles also gives the instructor an opportunity to see where there are strengths and where skills are lacking and students need additional support. I always keep in mind not who will be the best at the role but who will gain the most from the role.

Step Four: (90-120 minutes or longer) Rehearse—*Studying the problem and defining the answer.* Once the idea for the show has been conceptualized and the cast set, it is time to delve into the heart of making the performance a reality. This is the time for practice and exploration. I encourage my students to start big and then trim the excess. Always remind students there are no wrong choices just unfulfilling explorations. I try to include students in on all aspects of the production from scheduling and time management to technical support and directing. The theatre especially, holds space for all walks of life and is a great example of how we can all work together harmoniously to create amazing works full of passion, meaning and inspiration.

Step Five: (45-90 minutes) Perform—*Bringing everything together and testing the ideas!* I have been impressed over and over again at what students retain when the time comes to perform and the pressure is on. Although there are times when they seemed they weren't paying attention the performance always shows me differently, with students using the skills and knowledge gained in surprising ways. Unlike standard tests that seem to isolate the student and only reward students who recall an exact answer, theatre rewards the struggle and problem-solving toward the right answer or perhaps multiple right answers. Engaging all the senses at once—not just within the actors but within the audience as well—performing theater is the equivalent of being cheered on while solving a math problem at the front board or moving someone to tears as an essay is read aloud. The right balance of pressure and discipline should be applied so as to not overly stress students but to encourage and challenge them with each and every performance. Of course, I am known for saying on opening night, “*The work is done...now it is time to PLAY!*”

Tools and Materials

- A space where the exercises can be comfortably carried out in order to establish trust and create the ensemble. Preferably an open, well-lit space with mirrors so students can observe themselves in process.
- Notebooks and pencils or pens for students to brainstorm and record ideas and thoughts they generate.
- A whiteboard, chalkboard or large easel with paper and color markers to record and organize ideas.
- For the performance, props, costumes and set pieces need to be created. This allows an opportunity to assign specific roles to non-performing students so that everyone has a part in the final production. All materials can be found, made or borrowed. Local theatres are a great place to start as they will have most prop, set, costume or make-up needs. Your community network is where you will find the most support and through asking for help you will establish bonds through creating opportunities for community involvement.

Supporting Resources

- The Human Knot Handout
- The Circle of Trust Handout
- Script and Performance Development Handout
- The Critiquing Process Handout
- Additional local resource include the Willits Shakespeare Company at willitsbard.webs.com; Near and Arnold's School of Performing Arts and Cultural Education (SPACE) at www.spaceperformingarts.org; Mendocino College at www.mendocino.edu; Long Valley Dance at laytonville.org/longvalleydance.html; Ukiah Players Theatre at ukiahplayerstheatre.org; Mana from the Muse at www.manafromthemuse.com; and Dell'Arte International at www.dellarte.com.

Project Objectives & Habits of Mind

Students engage in the process of creating ensemble, giving and receiving constructive criticism and maximizing their potential by building the confidence and communication skills to together fearlessly explore and better understand themselves and their lives through theater.

Objective One: Students will **develop craft** and **envision** through the study of theatre elements and the process of designing a show unique to them. Pride in the final performance solidifies their knowledge.

Objective Two: Students will **engage** and **persist** and by this build confidence through accessing their own abundant curiosity. When students are instilled with the confidence to ask questions and explore the possibilities they have the power to gain knowledge. Also, the element of performance gives students the opportunity to learn to overcome fears through the support of their peers and find lasting bonds that can support their overall school experience.

Objective Three: Students will **express** and **observe** themselves through communication which gives both the students and teacher the language from which to build the foundation for learning by knowing how to speak to each other and agree upon the terms in which they will be exploring.

Objective Four: Students will **stretch** and **explore** and then **reflect** through developing critical thinking skills by assessing problems and discovering answers and conclusions in ways that speak to them on a personal level.

Making Learning Visible



Willits Shakespeare Company (WSC) Directors modeling constructive criticism with cast of *Alice In Wonderland*.



WSC “Bardlets” ages 5 to 18 performing *Alice In Wonderland* and in *Ming Lee and The Magic Tree*.



Students from the Willits Charter School grab hands as they begin **Part I** of *The Human Knot*.



Finding new ways of communication and learning how to cooperate in silence in **Part II** of *The Human Knot*.



Untying the knot without the use of speech or sight in **Part III** of *The Human Knot*.



The Circle of Trust gives students an opportunity to feel supported by their peers.

Tips for Scaling Project and Further Opportunities

The basis for this project is universal and can be used without much change for all ages. The prompt is the key element that may need to be changed depending on the level of understanding of the students. The prompt is usually generated through the discussion with the students or formed from current issues that students are facing. I define “The Prompt” as any idea that offer an opportunity for further exploration. Even a concept as simple as exploring a colors and how they make us feel or shapes and what they represent can evolve into a rich performance. The imagination is unlimited as long as the teacher and students are willing to fearlessly explore. Remember, students understand and have experienced much more than they are often given credit for and when presented with engaging challenges and opportunities students will step up if the proper groundwork is established for them to do so!