

Spread Newspapers Around: Students Acting!

The Invaluable Role of Modern Theater class in a STEM Environment

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All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

This line of William Shakespeare's, itself often redrawn and refashioned to suit different intended purposes, perhaps never rings as poignantly as during high school. Students speak of trying on a particular personality or character, as they desperately seek for what TRUE player dwells behind the mask. The years between junior high and secondary education exist for many students as their *own* personal time of remaking. Students exit one wing in adolescence, rush behind the curtain as they take up or cast off whatever masks and accoutrements they desire, and emerge at the opposite side, maybe as an entirely new character. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between creativity in the Modern Theater classroom (as taught by myself at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy [IMSA]—a residential public high school for highly gifted STEM students) and its benefits to and creative application of the students across *all* their classes. And, naturally, I do not here intend to advocate for or claim the absence of such challenges to students in their STEM-focused coursework. Rather, I seek to show the highly beneficial and often unique challenges experienced by these students within a different type of class. As many schools move, or are forced to move away from the arts and humanities, my experiences with this course have solidified even more the understanding of just how crucial these types of classes can be.

Modern Theater at IMSA is an English Department elective—available only to second semester juniors and seniors. As is the case for all our English courses, it is a one-semester class. By that time, students have progressed through the core of required classes—been asked to read, analyze, speak, write, present, argue, and interpret. They are expected to have achieved a certain level of comfort and mastery with these essential skills. My Modern Theater class combines examination and analysis (through discussion and formal essays) of several pivotal post-1950's texts (Beckett, Miller, Pinter), with some fundamentals of stagecraft and acting (ranging from body-position awareness and projection) and performances (informal classroom acting opportunities, formal and graded monologues and group scenes). All students have several opportunities to direct during the course of the semester. In my classroom, improvisational theater also factors in heavily.

In a way, as STEM students in a science and math-focused atmosphere, drawn to IMSA purposefully for the exposure to challenging STEM classes and myriad research opportunities, these students *already* have to act within the English classroom. (I, of course, will sometimes be speaking in broad generalizations, as we have many students who both adore and thrive within the requirements of English courses! As Modern Theater student Dennis puts it: “IMSA is STEM-focused. Still, I think many students here, myself included, consider themselves somewhat better-rounded than that”). Students at IMSA are highly motivated, highly goal-oriented, and highly focused; their focus is for their science, math, and engineering-based courses. And then, suddenly, they sign up for the Modern Theater elective course...and the challenges become completely different.

So what does the Modern Theater classroom offer these students? For one, the course allows students a creative outlet which demands a type of focus so unlike their other courses it is

frequently referred to as “*much needed* breath of fresh air” (emphasis mine). I have long believed that our students, who are amazingly driven and so intelligent, benefit from their humanities courses not just on the basis for the content and the skills those courses offer, but also for what they *lack*: the specific rigors of math and science. At a school where students double up math and/or science classes in many semesters, humanities courses allow them a sanctuary in which their right-brain is called into full account.

Students seemed to feel this way because of the different atmosphere within the Modern Theater classroom. Often, students can find themselves in highly competitive situations—as many smart students enjoy some level of intellectual tussling with each other. But in MT class, (and I do take a measure of professional pride in this) students often spoke of how they felt highly comfortable with each other because of the atmosphere created within the classroom. As not one of my students has ever been a classically trained actor (nor do I expect them to be!) they all have the same performance-based fears and trepidations on Day 1. This anxiety-based camaraderie quickly fades into an environment of comfort and safety—where students are not afraid to take chances. As Amy, who was a junior when she was enrolled in the course, says:

At first, I think we were all thrown out of our comfort zones, but eventually we all got comfortable with each other. That comfort and supportive environment we created allowed us to act freely and perform with more confidence. In that class there was no stress and all my worries seemed to get stuck at the door when I walked in. It was extremely beneficial for me because Modern Theater became my mini break from reality, a sort of oasis filled with laughter.

I view Amy's use of the word "oasis" as quite striking. An oasis is both a place of safety, but also one of restoration—a haven from the "stress and...worries" and pressure faced by the students in their other coursework. She went on to say:

As we grow up, it seems that we neglect our imagination more and more. Now, the only imagining I do on a daily basis involves calculus and imaginary numbers. When I had modern theater, it was a break in my day when I could use my imagination freely, and be as outrageously creative as possible.

This should not be misconstrued as saying that Modern Theater is an easy class, a chance for these gifted science and math kids to just relax and goof around. What I am stressing is that the challenges and new experiences they face in the MT classroom provide both a type of respite from their usual expected brain functioning and give them practice with an entirely new set of skills which will serve them well as intelligent, free-thinking, motivated young people.

As in all their courses, students are encouraged and expected to take chances in Modern Theater, with some major differences. Here, the gulf between the payoffs and the failures can be immense and immediate—your audience laughs (or doesn't) when they are supposed to, or a line is flubbed and the skit falls short. There is no lag time in finding out if something has been successful or futile as might be the case with a submitted essay or exam. Students find themselves "exposed" in an entirely new and different way. There is not a lot to hide behind when giving a monologue or performing a scene (save for an acting partner!) And, even though the majority of our performances during the semester took place in our classroom (which I now absolutely love to think of as an "oasis"!) the students were on display and "on stage" in a very complete way. Ultimately, they had to come to rely on each other. As Maureen relayed:

There are little to no opportunities/assignments for public speaking in the science and math classes at IMSA. I felt out of practice when I started Modern Theatre class. Initially, I was challenged with getting comfortable with my fellow classmates.

While the students did a wide range of performances through the semester, ranging from improvisational games, scenes, memorized group performances, all the way to monologues, most frequently they were not on stage alone, and had to find ways to work together. In many classes, when students are tasked with a group-activity one member might more easily skate by without doing much work, or, just as frequently, one person might end up with the lion's share of effort. This less-than-desirable amount of input is much more difficult to attempt when the directed outcome is a performance, and the expectant eyes of the classroom audience are fixed upon them. Thus, the expectations of participation in Modern Theater (which I purposefully reiterate on Day 1) often motivate students to take more ownership of their own involvement in the course than they might otherwise do.

Conversely, students who I had in previous classes who were highly intelligent but just on the more introverted side often found amazing ways to express themselves on stage. One such student, Alan, showed such natural presence and ability on the stage, I constantly found myself asking him if he *had* done any acting before. He came alive on the stage with an energy and passion that I had never seen in any other classes—delighting his audience with interpretations and impressions. Indeed, students speak of the way that MT imbues them with new types of confidence—allowing them to try, and sometimes fail, but to enjoy the entirety of the process. Early in the semester, when students were called upon to perform or engage in an activity, there was still that moment of charming self-consciousness, a laughing hesitation. As the semester

went on, student eagerly put their hands up, begged to be called upon to act, and bemoaned the end of class or wrapping up of an activity.

Interestingly, the chance to *not* be themselves came up again and again as a source of enjoyment. Students truly relished the chance to become a character—the power (and freedom!) of acting. As Luselena described:

At times, different situations pushed me outside my comfort zone such as yelling or playing a more aggressive character that is not entirely my personality.

Although at times it was a challenge to be creative or portray the character assigned, the class was extremely beneficial in my growth as an individual.

Luselena, now a senior, is a petite, quiet, and highly intelligent student who is constantly described as “sweet” and “demure.” Being able to break from that persona and be someone more, as she puts it, “aggressive” allows her both freedom to become a character with traits which are totally foreign to her, but also the security to take on the characteristics of this character within the safety of the classroom (and to leave those traits there as desired!).

Another trend, perhaps not surprising, was the immense preference that students had for performing, writing, and improvising comedic pieces. At the heart of these choices, I suspect, is the fact that it is often easier to please a teenaged audience through humor, and that the humorous pieces and skits were more fun for them to prepare and perform. However, I discovered that their preferences did not indicate that there was a lack of ability for writing or performing more somber or tragi-comedic pieces. In fact, perhaps due to the fact that they so often leaned towards humorous pieces, when the class was prompted to script and perform serious pieces, the results were immensely moving for the class. Students spoke of the great ability of their classmates to emote, to imagine realistic dramatic scenarios and render them for

the stage, and to connect with the audience. This served as another way to push students from their comfort zone, although I found a small bit of pedagogical pleasure in pointing out to my students that they now were so comfortable as to consider humorous acting to be their “comfort zone” in Modern Theater class, and were now being compelled to move beyond that.

Students also spoke of the wide range of skills that Modern Theater demanded of them. Beyond those mentioned already—students were also challenged to comment critically on their classmates’ performances. I considered this to be a highly crucial and beneficial aspect to the class, because it helped to teach many of the drama fundamentals holistically. After an individual or group performance, I turned to the class to ask for both positives about the scene, as well as areas that they would suggest for improvement. Thus, basics such as the way an actor in a multi-person scene has to “cheat” their body $\frac{3}{4}$ to the audience in order to appear to be having a discussion yet still be visible and audible, projection, facial expressions, even gestures or foot placement—all these elements could be suggested to the actors by their classmates—the impact became much more permanent. Equally important was continued practice in *giving* and receiving constructive and productive feedback to each other—a necessary act, but one not often utilized in other courses. As Karin stated:

It was definitely beneficial to be in such a supportive classroom, and made me feel much more comfortable with not only being in front of a classroom, but taking constructive criticism as well. I’m incredibly self-conscious about other people reading what I write and watching me perform, but modern theater sit downs with directors and classroom feedback has helped me a lot.

In a typical classroom, students (in the form of the class) are often the subject of the critique—written or verbal—and thus model their own practice on the instructors they view. Now, because

I often stepped back and invited them to provide their feedback before I said anything about the performances, students were forced to find ways to express themselves first. I stressed the constructive criticism aspect in an attempt to head off any unnecessarily harsh or cruel comments, but I found that on the whole, students were wonderfully able to police themselves, vetting out the best commentary for their classmate-actors. These skills and abilities will absolutely be called upon in the future—as the applications for being able to provide and accept productive feedback are myriad.

Beyond the powerful value of the course content (I've consciously neglected discussing the readings and analysis done of the foundational works read, which is another crucial facet to the course) the ways that students speak about what they will utilize from the course in other disciplines demonstrates the wide-ranging impact the course has upon them. Again and again, students cite the way that the course has prepared them—often to their own surprise—for other areas of their academic endeavors.

For whatever reason—the cosmic alignment of the right group of kids at the right moments—both sections of Modern Theater I taught in the Spring of 2014 excelled in improvisational theater. Many (although not all) had never heard of the popular show “Whose Line is it Anyway?” which meant that most of them went into improvisational situations with no preconceived notion of what they *should* be doing. I devised a multitude of improv acting situations. In some, I would arrange four chairs in non-random arrangements (a circle, two facing two, two by two, etc.) and place students in the chairs, and then give them a scenario (you're kindergarten kids, you're four workers in a lab, you're on a city bus) and let them have at it. Sometime I would do “object reveal” improv with props—where I would have two students start a scene (one of you is being interrogated by the other, you just bought a present for them,

and so forth) with an object under a box. When I said “reveal!” they could see what was under the box, but had to incorporate it into the movement of their scene. I also often introduced a new character, emotion, or situation, to teach them to adapt to the change. Sometimes I would give them an opening line, or a line they had to incorporate into the scene at some point. I tried to give them enough different types of improvisational games that it never became a stale activity. After a few stumbling attempts, everything just clicked, and the students started to constantly request these improv days. Besides the enjoyment and talent that the students demonstrated, they also were learning valuable skills through these activities. Modern Theater encouraged a sense of comfort in not only acting, but simply putting yourself in a vulnerable position. Improvisation encouraged adaptation and quick thinking—skills called upon in all disciplines. Students also described how their knowledge bank grew through these activities. Maureen explained:

We performed on a daily basis in the class and I feel that this “desensitized” me to the pressure of presentations. I felt very practiced and comfortable to public speaking when I had to present for IMSAloquium [students present on year-long research projects] in April. I know that I have and will continue to use some of the skills that I learned in modern theatre in the future. (insert mine)

Students saw the value of their classroom experiences went beyond just a successful performance that day.

Many other students also cited how MT class and improvisational exercises served as “problem solving” practice for them. As Luselena described, “Modern Theater showed me I was still capable of being creative and the different activities in class still provided me with problem solving situations with different paper topics, improv skits, and directing a group of my peers in a small play.” Karin agreed, citing the new comfort she found in exposing her work, and how

many classes these skills would be utilized within. “Being more comfortable with other people seeing my work is definitely something I can use in any class, from English to science to math.”

I hoped that students realized the wide-range of applications in which these newly acquired and honed skills could be used. For them to use language like “problem solving” in the same breath as “creativity” in describing various activities, it demonstrates that their approach to the activities may have still been one that was guided by their STEM atmosphere, but was also one in which they were able to make the necessary adjustments in order for the most successful outcome. One of my students, Omair, acknowledged that the requirements of Modern Theater class went beyond his experience, and, initially, his comfort zone. “Thus, these unique challenges required unique ways of resolving them, which meant I was forced to dig deeper and explore other realms of creativity and problem solving—realms that I was not at all familiar with.” If students are able to use their academic approaches to help tackle the problems I put before them in Modern Theater, I also fervently believe that they can use the skills gained in class for the problems they’ll face not only as STEM students, but as active professionals within a wide range of careers. Omair concurred:

Taking a step back and making interdisciplinary connections, this way of thinking can definitely be used across the board in all the various academic settings. By that I mean that these skills can not only be used in a class like Modern Theatre, but also in science or math classes. By doing so, it would allow students to not only view a problem from one angle, but rather from multiple different angles to get the whole scope of what one is dealing with. I honestly believe that this push to engage the rather “untouched” areas of thinking in STEM-driven students will directly lead to the creation of not only well-rounded students, but also well-

rounded individuals that are ready and willing to serve as active citizens of society.

And, if I can continue to help facilitate that sort of thinking, engagement, and action in students, I consider my task to be a successful one.

The first half of my title refers to a Paul Rudnick play *I Hate Hamlet*, in which the ghost of John Barrymore encourages a television actor to take on the role of the melancholy Dane. But it is also indicative of the sometimes very (metaphorically, emotionally) messy atmosphere that can come from a course in which students are pushed not just to think critically and analytically, but also, creatively. There were class days in which we had multiple failures, but courageous attempts. And then there were days in which everything the students attempted came together, and they were able to complete a complex task with purpose and pride—giving them new abilities to take beyond my classroom, and beyond school. Although the Shakespeare quote I cited earlier implies a sort of artifice in how we approach life, I believe it can also be viewed as a way in which individuals can approach challenges, deftly displaying the nuanced dance between creativity and problem solving.