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LEARNING IN PARTNERSHIP: ENGAGEMENT IN INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL THEATRE

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Inquiry-based learning aims to engage students in the learning process by starting with student questions. By focusing on the big ideas of learning, students are able to meet curriculum expectations and expand their knowledge in ways that intrigue and challenge them. In this partnership, this is done by way of special units of study delivered through the relationship between a school and professional arts organization. This model fosters deep learning for all engaged participants by developing new programs in response to their questions and interests.

Keywords: Drama education; Inquiry-based learning; Collaboration; Professional Theatre; Professional development

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share best practices for fostering inquiry-based learning through partnerships between schools and the professional arts. The case study for this exploration is the partnership between St. Sylvester Catholic School and Young People's Theatre (YPT) in Toronto. Tailored to the specific aims and needs of the school and responsive in its design, this partnership continues to develop. It is one of the most successful examples of collaborative pedagogical practice within YPT's Member Schools program in its impact on both communities.

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CONTEXT

YPT is Canada's largest TYA [theatre for young audiences] company and Toronto's oldest not-for-profit theatre - an influential institution, not only in this city, but on the world stage (Pitman, 1998, p. 236). Located in downtown Toronto, it includes two theatres with full theatrical lighting and sound systems. All of the production shops are located onsite. Having ownership of a space like this is part of what allows this company to accommodate large audiences and to focus on high production and aesthetic values, as well as to develop and offer a variety of complementary programming (Adamson, 2011). YPT focuses on cultivating the emotional, social and intellectual development of young people through the professional arts; deeply embedded in the philosophy of the theatre is a commitment to learning, whether it is in the classroom or at YPT.

St. Sylvester is a small, faith-based school of about 175 students in Kindergarten through to Grade 8. Located in Scarborough, Ontario, it is a school within the Toronto Catholic District School Board. In 2014, the school made a concerted effort to immerse students in inquiry-based learning. This has come about as a result of staff identifying the need to have students more engaged in their learning journey. While there has been some scepticism from the parents, given a desire for maintaining a so-called traditional style of learning, a positive impact on and response from students has been clear. The Member Schools partnership between St. Sylvester and YPT has allowed for the inquiry to deepen in various ways.

Member schools

YPT works with schools from various school boards in the Greater Toronto Area. The theatre's work with these schools ranges in scope and depth of engagement from teachers bringing their students to see a show as part of a fieldtrip to classes participating in post-show Q&As to delving into in-depth research projects about the process of play creation, production and design. Much of

this work happens by way of YPT Member Schools, a pilot program that began in 2012 with the aim of creating deeper relationships with the schools the theatre serves and making YPT programming essential to school culture. Each Member School partnership includes in its scope visits to see shows at the theatre, student and teacher workshops and learning projects delivered jointly by school and YPT staff. Something that sets the Member Schools program apart is its focus on partnership. Unlike many ‘one-size fits all’ programs delivered by professional arts organizations, this is a program that demands collaboration and asks teachers to work in partnership with the theatre to both design and implement the curriculum. While YPT offers different avenues for engagement, providing an expertise in theatre and learning in this particular context, much of this work is collaborative and therein lays its strength. The most successful initiatives have been created in partnership with principals and teachers engaged in this program.

METHOD

This is the third year of the Member Schools program. Since its inception, YPT staff, along with the participating teachers and principals, has been investigating the value of the programming and the impact they notice on the students and school communities. In the last year, this has focused specifically on inquiry-based learning. Assessment has been achieved by way of participatory observation, online surveys and open-ended interviews. In this way, teachers have been positioned as researchers of their own practice and, as they are every day, researchers of their students’ experiences. YPT staff members have also been situated as researchers of their artistic and pedagogical practices. Member Schools has permitted YPT to further discover and refine its particular role in supporting teachers in their work.

SYMBIOTIC LEARNING

Thanks to the collaborative design and ongoing assessment of this programming, both the theatre and the schools benefit. What principals and teachers who participate in the programming find to be most valuable varies to some degree, but across the board, these are the four most important components of the programming: the quality of the art itself, the opportunity for students to learn outside of the regular classroom environment, the chance to work closely with YPT staff and artists, and the workshops that take place in connection with visits to see productions at the theatre.

The quality of the art itself

School staff says that the visits to the theatre are of the utmost importance. The shows must resonate with students and challenge them artistically and thematically in order to engage them. This program has made clear the fact that what is put on stage directly affects student learning. If the plays are not good, the learning cannot be good either. A strong example of this is the student questions and responses made through a shared online discussion in connection with a number of productions. Students articulated what the big ideas of the play were for them and what resonated with them, but most importantly, they responded with more questions about what the play made them wonder. The strength of artistic programming is what makes this learning possible.

Learning within and beyond the classroom

This helps to make the learning process continuing and engaging. Rather than fieldtrips that are disconnected from the life and work of the school, visits to the theatre become the core of longer, deeper units of study explored together. Through the leadership of their teachers who employ the theatre's study guides, workshops delivered in the classroom by YPT artist-educators and visits to the theatre, students have the opportunity to explore multiple ways of knowing (Pataray-Ching & Roberson, 2002) and to experience learning extended beyond the walls of the school. Students and teachers are able to draw inspiration from an artistic context and apply it in the school environment.

While learning outside of the classroom is invaluable, the connections made within the context of school are equally important to experiential learning. These show-connected workshops deepen the impact of the shows students see at the theatre. They also provide teachers with the opportunity for professional development in drama-based education.

YPT staff and artists

Many teachers and principals also talk about the value of the high level of access they have to YPT staff and artists. The opportunity not only for their students, but also for themselves, to learn from experts in a professional place of work is not something they can access within the walls of the school. While the programming supports student inquiry, it also fosters learning among staff at both the participating schools and YPT. YPT staff says that participating in the program has made them reflect on their responsibility as a role model, positively impacted their own practice and given them the chance to learn things about our audiences that they would not otherwise know.

CASE STUDY

One of the strongest examples of partnership in the YPT Member Schools program is St. Sylvester. This partnership privileges intellectual engagement (Willms, Friesen & Milton, 2009). The units of study are experiential and collaborative and, with support from their teachers and theatre artists, students benefit from the involvement of many stakeholders in their learning (Harada & Yoshina, 2010). Outlined below are some elements of programming that have allowed for success.

School leadership

Roy Fernandes, the principal at St. Sylvester, models and fosters inquiry professionally and personally. A good example of this comes from his blog:

Here's the thing. I get it. I get why inquiry is so important. I'm proof. Once you tune into being a life long learner, you can't stop. I constantly have questions. I constantly want to

learn. This is new for me and was NOT part of my school life as a student. But now... I can't stop inquiring and learning. I want my children to have this problem... I want my students at school to have this problem... I want my staff to have this problem. Many are starting to both catch and spread the problem... I think I may have a problem....but I like it!"

(Fernandes, 2015)

Fernandes' commitment to learning through inquiry has increased the depth and strength of YPT programming not only at St. Sylvester, but more broadly. It has allowed YPT to emphasize an inquiry-driven methodology and experiential curriculum in their work with all schools. YPT strives for access; they aim to open the doors of the theatre wide so that young people and their teachers can learn about and be a part of the world of professional arts and, the theatre has learned, this is best done by supporting student inquiry. Fernandes' expertise has fostered learning and a deeper commitment to teaching among the YPT staff beyond the Education and Participation department.

Facilitation for artistic reflection

A strong example of this work is Fernandes' co-facilitation of the post-show discussions alongside a member of the Education and Participation department at YPT. He does this whenever his students come to the theatre to see a play. Each time this happens, there is a lot of excitement among YPT staff and visiting teachers. They are inspired to see another model of teaching and learning in the arts. For Fernandes' students, this demonstrates to them the fact that he makes arts education a priority, thus affirming their participation in it. While YPT's post-show discussions are always carefully curated, beginning with an open-ended question designed to foster further reflection and questioning, Fernandes models a particular inquiry-focused pedagogy when he facilitates these sessions which, he says, is a virtue of the artistic experience:

The essence of good theatre is precisely what YPT is able to create. I tell students that they need to engage and interact with the message. Plays such as *Blue Planet*, *Minotaur* and *Sultans of the Street* [in YPT's 2013-2014 season] were all able to establish connections with our students and this, in turn, has allowed me to engage these students in topics and themes that are sure to resonate beyond a 65-minute theatre experience. (R. Fernandes, Personal communication, November 3, 2015)

Project-based learning: Theatrical design and playwriting festival

In this partnership, engagement in inquiry happens in a more concentrated approach by way of project-based learning. For example, in November 2014, the Grade 3/4 class at St. Sylvester participated in a learning project devoted to set and costume design in connection with the theatre's production of *James and the Giant Peach*. These students explored the story with their teacher and then learned design tools and techniques in a workshop led by designer, Robin Fisher. As a capstone to the project, they created their own designs for the show. They then visited the theatre for an in-depth backstage tour to see the designs for the production and how they have come to life on stage. During the design workshop, Robin introduced students to design by breaking the process down into steps, beginning with an idea, then a drawing, then a model, etc. She did not show them her designs, but instead solicited their ideas of what the story should look like. Students were able to practice literacy and inferencing skills and to explore visual and spatial ways of thinking. The whole class was engaged – curious, eager and full of connections and questions. Research clearly and consistently shows that when students are engaged in their learning, they are more likely to remember what they learn and will work to continue to learn independently (Bruner, 1961), moving “toward the always shifting end/goal of learning more” (Dewey, 1938, p. 34). It is clear that the teacher and school community are supporting students as active learners and developing

their curiosity across the curriculum. It was exciting for YPT to see that the design of this unit of study and approach to the workshop aligned with the vibrant pedagogy fostered at this school.

The piloting of a student Playwriting Festival has been another element contributing to the success of this programming. Engaging students in a three-month long project where they create their own short plays with the guidance of a working playwright, this festival not only allows students from St. Sylvester to explore playwriting, but to do so in collaboration with another class at a nearby Member School, St. Henry. Through careful scaffolding from the playwright, and a combination of choice, modeling, discussion and opportunity for practice, students have been engaged in the writing process in a personal way. This project exemplifies the multiple outcomes and cross-curricular interpretations permitted through theatre-based units of study.

DISCUSSION

Responsive collaboration

The continuation of collaborative programming is imperative to success. A passive partnership will not allow for progress. As mentioned earlier, a symbiotic relationship is key for there to be benefit to all participants. Schools, much like students in a classroom, will only get as much out of the Member School program as they are willing to put into it. St. Sylvester has benefitted from initiatives such as the Theatrical Design and Playwriting Festival. While these suggestions were made by the school, far more important was that YPT then took these ideas and created a valid and authentic protocol to foster inquiry – symbiotic learning at its best.

Professional development

This partnership also acts as a platform for employing signature pedagogies, “types of teaching that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (Shulman, 2005, p. 52), which strengthens the model for collaboration. The use of knowledge

building circles has been a key element in student learning, allowing students to build on what they are learning from and with each other, but what is also special about this practice is that teachers, artists and staff at the theatre now also use this tool - and other techniques – together and how, through this approach, they have become engaged more deeply in their work, leading to reflective practices and professional development. This has happened organically, but a more concentrated approach would be beneficial. Professional development delivered to the theatre’s staff from expert educators, such as Fernandes, would bolster the Member Schools programming and the educative work of YPT more broadly.

Further research

Findings from a year of inquiry-based learning demonstrate that theatre can provide a springboard for experiential inquiry-based learning and can increase the possibility of helping students to immerse themselves in the learning process and become active in that journey. There is little research on learning in the context of the professional arts that is focused on this specifically. With regard to this particular project, much of the assessment is anecdotal, focused on student learning and program design. Furthermore, it does not include students as primary participants. There is need for research that works to understand young people’s reflections of their own learning experience.

CONCLUSION

This partnership supports the development of best practices in arts education:

Theatre programs are committed to high levels of achievement in a curriculum that supports intentional learning through high impact pedagogical strategies. Active, rather than passive, learning encourages students to become intentional learners... knowledge becomes practical, something that is essential to theatre practitioners creating informed and

responsible interpretations... They work with complex ideas, and through multiple systems of knowing (interdisciplinary investigation and integration of information), they cultivate the ability to share findings with others involved in the production. (Kindelan, 2012, p. 92)

The partnership between YPT and St. Sylvester is a strong example of inquiry-based teaching and learning through professional theatre. It provides a model for partnership in the context of the professional arts. For its continued success, a concentrated approach that includes collaborative and responsive programming, ongoing professional development and rigorous research is crucial.

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