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Theatre Studies as a Practical Liberal Education

AT A TIME when college administrators, faculties, and parents are debating the purpose and value of higher education, the rising cost of a baccalaureate degree, and the role education plays in the twenty-first century, a major in theatre, theatre studies courses, and theatre activities have not received much interest. It is not uncommon to hear, on campus or at a neighborhood gathering, parents, students, and even some members of the higher education community ask: Why in a period of economic

uncertainty are students electing an impractical field of study like theatre as a major?

How can this discipline provide the practical skills that help students face the harsh realities of securing a job in today's world?

What astonishes them is hearing theatre students speaking articulately, purposefully, and passionately about how the study and practice of theatre promote the educational outcomes associated with good citizenship.

Because theatre studies programs are not usually part of the traditional liberal arts curriculum and their activities are perceived as marginally important in undergraduate education, the college community and the public are unfamiliar with the discipline.¹ Unfamiliarity with the courses and the marginal positioning of theatre studies programs as campus entertainment create a lack of awareness about how the philosophy and pedagogy of theatre studies encourage critical and deep thinking about the human condition. I would like to suggest that college and university theatre departments, often known on campus only through their production programs, offer much more to the community than an entertaining way to escape from the harsh realities of everyday

life; significantly, the pedagogical principles found within the formal study of drama and the practice of theatre help students to develop the inquiry skills, social and civic responsibility, and integrative learning that are the goals of liberal education, enabling them to achieve productive and successful lives.

Although a theatre curriculum—its pedagogy and departmental activities—is not one that comes to mind as a program that encourages responsible citizenship, through the study of playscripts and the performance of plays, students explore and critically examine diverse cultures and historical and contemporary social issues. The pedagogy of theatre involves both independent and collaborative activities based on the combination of dramaturgical analysis with creative interpretation.² To some degree the pedagogy of script analysis is incorporated in the information and practices found in most theatre classes such as acting classes, directing and design courses, playwriting workshops, and dramatic literature, history, and criticism courses. Furthermore, dramaturgical analysis is a creative skill helpful to all students who interpret plays and analyze productions in college core courses other than theatre and in theatre experiences beyond college. Play analysis and the performance of a playscript help students to recognize how social artifacts, historical images, and symbolic literary metaphors promote a deeper understanding about societal issues and the psychology of human nature.

Theatre studies programs address the educational needs of students who face the realities of a complex and pluralistic world. Here, I will focus on two points: how the dramaturgical pedagogy found in a script analysis course responds to current understandings of liberal learning and teaching initiatives and how it promotes civic understanding.

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Script analysis

While many educators realize the experiential nature of theatre programs, less is known about the pedagogy of play interpretation and dramaturgy. Dramaturgy, as it relates to script analysis, involves the practice of analyzing a playscript prior to production. The objective of such an analysis is to understand and interpret the play's human history. Dramaturgy, a process that begins with questions about the play's dramatic structure, social and political ideas, characters, environment, and historical time, involves creative research; the collection of information about the period, biographies on the playwright, reviews of other productions, as well as visual artifacts and musical illustrations enter the world of the play and inspire further creative thought. Script analysis de-

velops the dramaturgical skills a theatre student needs to interpret a playscript prior to a stage production. Dramaturgical skills deemed essential for effective analysis are

- inquiry, the literary competency to explore and analyze the playscript, and the research proficiency to define questions and discover answers;
- interpersonal and communicative skills; the ability to present, in written and verbal form, research findings that are shared in roundtable discussions;
- creative problem solving, the artistic competence to transfer analytical information into creative ideas and images.

The learning that occurs in this environment produces “informed learners” who value synthesizing ideas across the curriculum.³



Most beginning students believe the playscript is nothing more than a maze of lines, a set of predetermined themes, a collection of disparate characters, and a depiction of the mandatory settings, but they later discover how deep readings of a play clarify the mystery of complex literary components. Students find script analysis meaningful and rewarding because dramaturgical research enables them to understand what has been, to this point, the hidden, inaccessible world of the play.

As undergraduate artists become more involved with the holistic internal workings of the playscript, they begin to comprehend how the playwright structures the story, creates the characters' psychologies, clarifies social ideas, and develops dramatic rhythms and language that suggest the play's scenic images.

Eventually, they uncover how the playwright crafts the play as an organic artifact representative of the social issues found in a particular time period. When they learn how the play's parts work together, students find substantial connections and meaningful revelations. As students become more comfortable asking questions and discovering how some answers can be found through the process of careful analysis and research, they recognize the value of critical investigation. In particular, they see how the process of deep thinking allows them to consider, for example, why the playwright's characters make particular choices, or why the play's author selects and repeats certain words, images, actions, and rhythms to reinforce the play's social issues.

In a script analysis course, I begin by presenting the foundational material in the first three weeks. We review the history and meaning of dramaturgy, as well as consider how dramaturgy is practiced in America's regional theatres. We analyze how the play's parts—its plot, characters, diction, ideas, music (dramatic rhythm), and spectacle—independently and collectively work to develop literary structure. The remainder of the semester (weeks four to fourteen) is directed toward the study of one playscript for six weeks and a second playscript for four weeks. From this point onward, there is a limited amount of traditional lecturing; instead, I guide students' learning from the side.

I find learning in a script analysis class is best served in an experiential laboratory setting, roundtable discussions, where students focus on the problems found in a particular case study (a playscript), and learn how to identify key questions, conduct research, synthesize literary theory and production ideas, and apply their critical observations in a practical way. Throughout the process, I am a participant, not the leader, in roundtable discussions. The objective of roundtable discussions is to simulate the process that professional artists undertake in some regional theatres when they engage in critically and creatively analyzing a playscript prior to production. Thus, in my script analysis class, theatre students are asked to become members of a hypothetical production team. By becoming either the play's director, dramaturg, designer (scenic, lighting, costume, sound), or a member of the acting ensemble, they are actively participating in the analytical activities of the professional artist.

The class begins with learning how to read a play slowly and taking the time to identify initial questions about the play's historical, psychological, literary, cultural, philosophical, and sociological background. Questions that result from their numerous deep readings of the playscript provide topics for their individual research projects. Examples of specific questions are offered later in this essay.

Roundtable discussions

I find critical thinking skills improve when students learn how to ask pertinent questions about the world of the play and conduct research to find answers to those questions. After the students independently research their questions, they propose their findings to the production team through roundtable discussions. At this point, they begin the process of working collaboratively as they present and exchange material about the play's multifaceted background. Roundtable discussions continue for several weeks and provide the opportunity for students to consider the research of others, synthesize material, ask additional questions, and exchange ideas. As an experiential think tank, roundtable provides the opportunity for substantial, sustained, and deep learning.

Unlike other departments where research and learning often are solitary activities, the pedagogy of a script analysis class is one that depends on a willingness to share independent research with a community of learners. To that end, the script analysis course uses the same pedagogical building blocks that inform innovative teaching and learning initiatives: interdisciplinarity, learning clusters, linked courses, and experiential learning. By its nature, play analysis in a theatre department often occurs in a learning community where over a period of time a group of students (members of a class or a cast) actively participate in the skills of interpretation by focusing on a case study, i.e., the analysis of a playscript.

For the undergraduate who for the first time encounters the rigors of research and thoughtful time on task, a script analysis class can be intimidating. Initially, the research process and the exchange of ideas in roundtable appear to the novice theatre student to be a meaningless and time-consuming activity. However, over time students learn that sustained dramaturgical inquiries and roundtable discussions produce numerous insights regarding the

play's social, historical, and cultural issues. Additionally, because they take the time to thoughtfully consider how, for example, the psychology of each character relates to the play's social ideas, they gain an additional awareness about the human condition. For example, they become more capable of determining for themselves what drives a character to make or not make a choice; or they become more adept at recognizing why a playwright selects a particular dramatic form to tell a story.

Moreover, as students learn how to read a play slowly and carefully, they learn how the playwright's words create, through an artful selection of images and metaphors, connotative associations as well as denotative meanings. Careful readings, thought-provoking questions, thorough research, and the exchange of ideas help script analysis students achieve a more reflective and comprehensive understanding of the play. In this way, they discover the value of dramaturgical research. They find it is not time-consuming and irritating, but instead facilitates meaningful "aha" experiences that are revelatory and beneficial to their creative interpretation of the play's ideas.

Interacting

The development of interpersonal skills is another natural outcome of a dramaturgical learning community. Not only must they develop responsible research skills, they must also develop the ability to express their ideas clearly and succinctly, present material in a timely manner, and respect the ideas of others. As the project evolves and their research is presented and ideas are exchanged, students inevitably recognize that responsible research clearly presented leads to valuable connections. As a result, they are less intimidated by the rigors of a thorough investigation and more interested in finding ways to improve their ability to think and write critically and express their ideas clearly in order to contribute to the success of the project.

But can specific dramaturgical practices advance a student's awareness of democratic values? The pedagogy of dramaturgy strengthens the student's ability to identify and learn more about the play's social issues. Within the environment of a learning community, dramaturgical activities emphasize the importance of community and cooperation over individualism.



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The following example illustrates the point. In a case study involving a hypothetical production of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, discussion begins by considering if this play is stage worthy. What are the play's socially relevant issues? Why is a production of this late-nineteenth-century Russian play appropriate for an American audience in the twenty-first century? Is Chekhov's world relevant to the interests and concerns of a contemporary American society? Are the psychological needs of his characters ones that a current audience finds recognizable, significant, and worthy of attention? Students soon discover their initial questions (Why stage this play? and Why stage this play this season?) cannot be answered until they learn more about the play's psychology, its social and artistic history, and the life and thought of the playwright. Thus, a new list of questions develops. Students ask: What was happening (socially, politically, culturally) during the time the play was written? What were the characters' social, religious, and moral expectations? How were the playwright's ideas reflected in the literary and thematic structure of the play? What was theatre like during this time period? How did people dress? Where did they live? What music did they like?

After they research such questions, discuss their findings, and note how information provides a deeper understanding of the playscript, they are ready to consider if a play written over a hundred years ago is relevant to a contemporary audience. The social dimensions of the play have become integral to understanding both its context and the present social environment.

Theatrical images

Devoting a substantial amount of time to working on one playscript simulates the interpretive process of the professional artist. When they devote enough time to considering the playwright's philosophical position on the human condition, students' subjective interpretations are more responsible and their personal visions more substantial. However, unless the artist knows how to skillfully transfer analytical information into theatrical images, research accomplished in a timely manner is not sufficient. The reason is that artists communi-

cate their perceptions about the playscript and its world through a collection of images that have metaphorical import. Effective analysis must include the imagistic exploration of the play's characters, ideas, rhythms, and settings.

The development of a portrait gallery is one way script analysis students transfer their theoretical understanding of the play's characters into a collection of artful images. The objective of this project is to further the student's critical understanding of the play's characters.

Students explore, select, and present a gallery of images (numerous photographs or drawings of people) that reflect their diverse and multiple views regarding the psychological temperament of each of the play's characters. Earlier critical analysis activities provide students with a substantial literary awareness regarding how the playwright shapes the characters' psychologies (their internal needs and relationships with other characters). Students' prior research and roundtable discussions inform their creative choices as they select the appropriate images for their portrait galleries. Eventually, they display their galleries on the classroom walls. Their exhibition encourages more discussion and additional revelations about the play and its characters. Because each gallery is different, students recognize why multiple interpretations evolve; why there can never be one "right" interpretation of a playscript; and why the interpretation of a play is not fixed, but given fresh readings every time it is produced on the stage.

Another activity that illustrates how critical inquiry inspires the selection of evocative images is the creation of a storyboard. Here, the script analysis student reveals, through a series of drawings (images), the play's significant atmospheric moments. The storyboard helps the undergraduate explore the play's settings and characters, note how the play's images change from moment to moment, and understand more about the play's social conditions. Again, the presentation of multiple storyboards encourages the student artist to consider the possibilities of fresh interpretations.

The pedagogy of script analysis and dramaturgy champions the development of intentional learners who are "empowered through the mastery of intellectual and practical skills, informed

by knowledge about the natural and social worlds and about forms of inquiry basic to these studies" (AAC&U 2002, xi). Students who study plays, create theatre, and attend performances become socially engaged through

- studying human psychology (self and others);
- exploring the history of ethical and moral dilemmas;
- discovering the complexities of moral decision making;
- developing a respect for diverse cultures.

The study of drama and practice of theatre produce informed learners who attain practical skills. Students are required to make ethical judgments about the complex issues of a diverse global community. Play analysis requires the practice of thinking beyond core concepts by investigating human society and the natural world through imagination and multiple forms of expression. The study and performance of plays representing diverse cultures and multiple historical periods enables students to see the interrelationships "within and among global and cross-cultural communities" (AAC&U 2002, xii).

The examination of a playscript as a case study is a microcosm of an historical moment of time; it encourages responsible learning.

The conceptual study of diverse plays demonstrates how individuals are part of society and bear social responsibility. The pedagogical process promotes self-reflection and ethical perspectives and develops the personal and interpersonal skills students need to guide their professional and civic lives beyond the college curriculum. Finally, dramaturgy as a learning community is an effective model of a practical new liberal education that breaks down disciplinary boundaries and seeks connections to the world beyond the classroom. □

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NOTES

1. American higher education saw its first performance of a play at Dartmouth College in 1779. Despite early interest in plays and the production of playscripts, it was not until 1925 that theatre departments were recognized as a formal academic discipline. Until then and well after this date, the study of drama occurred in English departments and the practice of theatre was perceived to be an extracurricular activity, something one pursues in their leisure time for fun.

2. Theatre pedagogy is different from other disciplines because the experiential learning process (the transference of research or theoretical ideas) leads to an actual, artful, collaborative reinterpretation of playscripts by groups of artists. Theatre programs select a season of plays that is beneficial to both the artistic growth of a theatre student and the social awareness of the campus community. Theatre seasons are announced to the public and occur throughout the academic year. Plays are scheduled and produced with regularity and at specific times. The "incomplete" is a nonexistent grade in play production. The creation of a play on stage means the student is assessed by a public, the faculty, outside adjudicators, or peers. Students soon learn the importance of deadlines, time management, self-motivation, teamwork, responsibility, and collaboration. The investment of time on task is essential to the success of the experiential theatre laboratory. Theatre students learn the importance of scheduling fifteen to twenty-four hours a week for rehearsal. On an average, plays rehearse for three to four hours per day, five to six times a week, for three to six weeks. Rehearsal is only part of the time commitment; for the actor, there must be additional hours researching the play and character as well as time devoted to learning lines. This process takes more time than the average "one hour per hour of classroom discussion" students report they spend on class preparation.
3. An examination of how theatre programs teach and students learn demonstrates an exemplary model of what Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1991) refer to as an "optimal learning environment." Consider, for example, how the production of a play involves a community that promotes learning. Here the learning community is the production team: the theatre practitioners (the director, dramaturg, actors, designers, and technicians) who interpret the playscript's ideas and images and recreate their vision of the play on stage. Sometimes students are actors and the technical support behind the stage. If this is the case, they work as young artists under the supervision of seasoned faculty. Another scenario consists of an all-student production team; in this example, advanced students (guided by faculty mentors) collaborate to produce a creative work of art. In both instances, the experiential model is the result of a series of basic, intermediate, and advanced courses (often linked to other theatre courses, sometimes providing interdisciplinary connections) that strive to create a working methodology that helps students prepare for their experiential laboratory or capstone experience.

WORK CITED

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