

## Teaching Philosophy

My teaching springs from the belief that a strong theatre education is essential to the individual, intellectual, emotional, and social development of all students. Through collaborative group projects and performances, critically engaged discussion, activation of theatre texts, and in-depth self-evaluation and reflection, my classes invite students to take charge of their learning. Knowing that not every student I teach will pursue a career in theatre, I create these classes both to help students hone their skills as artists and consider how theatre impacts their lives outside of the classroom and beyond traditional performance venues. Within my classes, student achievement is not measured against a traditional definition of success – the goal is not to perform the perfect scene, create the perfect design, and answer all the questions correctly. Rather, I believe that holistic student achievement grows from the successes and the failures, the process and the product, the hard days and the easy ones, and what we as a community learn from that collective experience.

In order to achieve this rich personal development, my K-12 theatre classes exemplify teaching practices in which both students and teachers work together to construct knowledge in the classroom. Through learner-centered practices, I invite students to draw upon and incorporate their prior knowledge and lived experiences into their understanding of a topic. Activities and assignments situate students as active participants in their learning process while they work to build their knowledge and develop their skills. I also strive to create projects and select plays that directly relate to the interests, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences of the school community. By building a curriculum that engages deeply with the community present in each classroom, I create spaces for students to explore issues and ideas they care about. I believe creating a culturally responsive curriculum does not just inspire students to make personal connections to their work, but rather places those personal connections at the heart of the learning process.

When working with students in a theatre class, my lessons combine active and dramatic strategies, along with practices pulled from a variety of key theatre practitioners, as a means to teach students about the many aspects of theatre. Using these strategies and practices in all areas of the theatre curriculum helps support a Discipline Based Theatre Education (DBTE) approach, in which students learn about all areas of theatre, the various roles assumed by professional theatre artists and technicians, and the interwoven relationship between production, history, criticism and aesthetics. For example, when students learn about lighting design, I don't just show them the lighting instrument. Instead, we step into role as lighting designers for a new production, explore the challenges real lighting designers face, conduct research on different elements of lighting design, and create new designs using a variety of lighting instruments. This combination of active and dramatic strategies within DBTE engages students in a process-centered approach to learning that encourages them to focus on their personal growth as creative and innovate artists and individuals while gaining theatre knowledge and skills. In each lesson students reflect on their personal experiences both verbally and in writing. These reflections frame classroom experiences in relation to the students' lived experiences and invite students to consider how these topics and skills support future careers not just in the arts, but in all areas.

In order to accomplish these learning goals I feel it is essential to create a classroom environment in which everyone is respectful and feels respected – to establish a community of peers and learners who can engage in rigorous discussion and debate in a way that includes everyone in the learning process. In order for students to get the most out of a theatre education, they must feel safe in the classroom and they must feel that they can openly share their creative ideas. As a teacher, it is my job to create a classroom environment that makes people of all races, genders, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages and ability levels, feel welcome. Through the use of Universal Designs for Instruction (UDI), class contracts, and ensemble building activities, my classes affirm my belief in scaffolding for every student's success. As I design each class, I build in different types of activities and assessments that support a variety of student needs and abilities. My courses employ a range of teaching materials and strategies, including structured note taking devices, visual aids, and notes/screen casts that summarize key ideas, to support student learning and success. These materials are available to all students regardless of ability and/or need for accommodation. For example, if students find certain activities too risky, then I give them the opportunity to write monologues or scenes instead. If they want to be important pieces of scenery as opposed to main characters, allowing them to be an active part of the scene without taking on a speaking role, then I allow them to actively embody that part of the story. While I will always strive to challenge my students to take risks and expand their understanding of and skills in theatre, my goal is to be a flexible and supportive force within the room that acknowledges the needs and abilities of my students.

In addition to implementing UDI, at the beginning of the year, I work with students in each class to create a behavioral contract that establishes in-class expectations and helps them form an in-depth understanding of respectful class practices. These practices cultivate a synergistic classroom community based in safety and support. This in turn places value in a diverse range of student perspectives and invites and encourages students to take risks, voice opinions, and share creative ideas. As part of this contract, I commit to respecting and supporting each student's learning processes by providing students with detailed directions and rubrics for each class project/assignment. These clear directions and rubrics help students understand what is expected for each project so that they can feel successful and supported as they work. In addition to clear directions and rubrics, I create opportunities for students to receive peer and instructor feedback in class, further cultivating an environment of supported and scaffolded learning. For example, after a student presents a monologue in class, students begin by sharing appreciations with the performer, then the performer gets to share something they discovered, then the other students and instructor get to share feedback or "wonders." This type of in-depth feedback and reflection process respects and values student work, while also helping students achieve a shift in their understanding of the content explored.

Much of my research focuses on collaborative teaching practices and how we as teachers can best support student learning in the classroom. As I continue to grow, each teaching experience deepens my understanding of my own pedagogy and supports my research of best teaching practices. Within classes, student assessments and reflections help me understand if I need to reassess my approach to class sessions to better fit students' needs as learners. In addition, rigorous feedback from fellow teachers and mentors helps me better understand how my methods in the classroom align with my personal goals and with best practices in my field.

As I continue in my career in education, I hope to create an apprentice program between my Middle or High school and a local university that helps aspiring undergraduate theatre educators obtain practical, hands-on experiences working with students. This trajectory builds on my belief in student-centered practice, and will continue to expand and support my research and development.

Working with students of all ages, I know my abilities as a teacher will only continue to grow, evolve, and strengthen based on what I learn from my students. I feel lucky to be a part of a profession where I get to learn on a daily basis, a profession where I am never alone in my practice. Every day I am surrounded by classrooms full of young people who I see as both students and teachers, who have an invaluable depth of knowledge and a unique lived experiences all their own. As a teacher and fellow student, it is my job to listen, to support, to encourage, to fail, to succeed, and to learn with students, and I cannot imagine a better, more fulfilling profession.

Briana Bower