

# Academic and Social Benefits of Participating in the Theater

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Most people don't quite understand the time, energy, and knowledge that goes into a theater production, whether it be a small scale, high school play, or a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Phantom of the Opera." Thus, knowledge of anything pertaining to the theater, especially acting, is relegated to being an "extra-curricular" activity in our schools. Much of the problem comes from lack of funding from the federal government, but it also comes from the lack of willing people to take on student productions, and many people's inability to grasp the concept that theater can be just as important to a child's education as chemistry or statistics. This project is intended to show that though you may not be working straight out of a textbook and taking quizzes and tests every few weeks, being some part of a theater production enhances the student's education to the point that I believe, and the project proves, it should be included in our everyday curriculum.

I've talked to adults who have run children's theater programs, directed shows with student participants, and students who have participated in these, and it is my conviction that there can be a more solid case for having drama and theater programs as part of school's curriculum than classes that fulfill occupational or physical education credits. Perhaps it can't totally take the place of math, science, and English, but it can, in some ways, act as a substitute. This, I believe, can be shown through the interviews I've conducted, as well as through the reading of articles and testimonies of how theater benefited (or didn't benefit) students in other schools around the country and the world.

Carol Steckler has been an integral part of our island's Community Theater program for many, many years. Twenty years ago she was the driving force behind, and head of, the Lopez Island High School Drama Club, before Alan DiBona took over. Since

then she has worked on many community theater productions, allowing anyone to audition for her shows, whether they are students in high school or older members of our community. Therefore, her productions are very, very diverse, both in talent and especially age. In fact, she says that she prefers to work with mixed age groups, saying it's a "powerful opportunity to gain skills and confidence" for the younger members of the show. (Steckler, Personal Interview) It is generally understood and believed that confidence developed if a student participates in a drama production and learns to perform in front of an audience. Carol, though a strong believer in this, takes it one step further and says that that is merely the beginning. She believes a student's participation and communication skills, as well as their perception of what learning really is, is better in a multi-age group, where the students are able to maximize their learning opportunity. (Steckler, Personal Interview)

When working with adults, young students are able to see things from other perspectives, and are able to draw on this extraordinary "living textbook," to become characters much different from themselves, but who may be like the adults they are working with. Method acting is a popular form of acting that emulates this, but it requires actors to draw on their own experiences to be able to become their character and empathize with them; with multi age groups younger actors can draw on the experiences of the older actors, thus bringing a new dimension to a character whose life experiences may have been very different from their own.

These multi-age productions that Carol directs often have five and six year olds working alongside seasoned professionals, many of who have performed in theaters across the country. However, Carol holds them all to the same standards. She has the

same expectations of the young children as she does of those many times their age, holding them to their commitment, making them wait patiently and get there on time. There are many who would say that this isn't fair, that young children simply can't do that; that their minds will wander and they ought to be given special treatment and be entertained while they wait. I, on the other hand, have seen it work. I've been in a production with Carol, where she had quite a few young children, and I've seen that they will sit still if that is what they are expected to do and they want to be a part of the production. Young children have an extraordinary capacity to figure out their place in a large project, observe what others around them are doing/saying, memorize their lines, and retain their knowledge of the time and place of the play both on and off the stage. It is also Carol's belief that young children participating in a theater production with older members of their community learn to behave appropriately in the social aspects that go along with being a part of something that big.

Another influential woman in Northwest theater is Joan Langley, head of the Educational Department at Ashland's renowned Oregon Shakespeare Festival, has been working with the festival for 19 years now, and she still keeps in touch with many of her students. The Festival has two different types of classes students can take. The first is a series of classes designed to help students understand a play they are about to see, better than they would have been able to had they simply walked into the theater. While this class is not designed specifically for those interested in participating in the theater, per se, it uses theater games and techniques to explain the play's context, text, and characters more fully. Ms. Langley is of the opinion that if all students took courses like this before going to see a production, they would glean more from the performance than

they ever could just seeing it, or studying it in the classroom. (Langley, Personal Interview)

The second program is one specifically for theater students. It is an intensive, two-week study program, during which students not only attend productions, but they learn different facets of the theater, focusing mainly on acting. Programs like these, for students in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades, are “life changing experiences for them [the students],” according to Ms. Langley. They learn not only about themselves in the process of learning the art of acting, but about those around them, with whom they interact on a daily basis. There are programs like these all over the country, and the world. Most collegiate summer programs for high school students offer a type of drama program, which are great ways for students interested in taking classes to do that, especially if their school doesn’t offer its own drama program during the school year.

The educational benefits of the theater are many and varied, but they can do more than just increase a student’s ability to comprehend the English language. I’ve known many people who have physically and mentally benefited from the practice and study of theater, but none more so than my own brother. Danny has always had a speech problem, one that used to make him cry when people didn’t understand what he was saying. As a young child he worked extremely hard to be understood, getting more and more frustrated, no matter how patient people were with him. Even with speech therapy, he suffered with this for years. One day, he discovered acting. Since then, it seems that his one goal in life is to be understood while on the stage. Many people, myself included, thought that no matter how hard he worked, it just wouldn’t happen. However, his passion for drama and his determination proved us all wrong. After many, many years of

being in productions, not often given roles with a large speaking part, he made it. For my last high school drama production, he completely blew me out of the water. After all he had been through, and all the emotional stress caused in his early years, to hear him speaking as clearly on the stage as I ever have heard him was a moment I will cherish forever. Recently he had some neurological tests done, and the neurologists discovered that the part of his brain where speech was controlled had a cleft in it. However, Danny had completely rewired his brain around that cleft, an amazing achievement I feel bound to attribute to his passion for the theater and desire and absolute determination to succeed at it.

Many students, at Lopez Island High School as well as at other schools and programs around the country, have experienced the benefits of studying the theater. Most will tell you that it has helped them in the everyday world, the classroom, as well as the stage. Terrell Carter is one of those students. As one of the most talented students at the school, he has spent years not only excelling in the classroom, but excelling on the stage as well. His experiences with the theater, from what he has told me, coincide with the feelings of both Ms. Langley and Ms. Steckler. The first point he emphasized was his growing comfort with language because of his work in Shakespeare, saying that it was because of this that has been able to understand more fully, and participate in discussions more completely, in AP World Literature this year. He also talked about how he has been able to combat his natural shyness, one of the most compelling arguments for having theater programs in schools. "On stage, you can do anything (almost) and it's fine because it's theater!" (Carter, Personal Interview) Again he referred to the assisting role theater plays in helping students become more rounded people, citing drama's ability to

allow anyone to step outside their comfort zone for a while and to try new things. Even though Terrell is still young, he believes that working with drama has already helped him in innumerable ways. “You don’t exercise your body as an athlete does, but you exercise your brain... and that type [of exercise] lasts a lifetime.” (Carter, Personal Interview)

However, as Ms. Langley pointed out, arts programs are being cut all across the country as schools receive less and less funding. Not only theater arts programs but also industrial arts programs like woodshop. This is unfortunate because it not only cuts down the number of electives a school can offer, it also creates a bigger problem: students who are not academically motivated have no reason to go to school every day. Thus, dropout rates have increased as class choices that aren’t academic have been decreasing. The push for more and more high-level classes like Advanced Placement courses, has neglected to remember that many students need something to encourage them to go to school, and often times that is theater arts programs.

Carol Steckler’s daughter, Heidi, is a good example of this theory. She didn’t do well academically at school, and didn’t even want to try; the only thing she could really pour her heart and soul into was the theater. She grew up here on Lopez, and was performing in large, community productions by the age of 12. Once she reached 10<sup>th</sup> grade, however, she was having such a miserable time that she got her GED half way through, and enrolled in the Everett Community College drama program. She started there in what would have been her junior year, and at the age of 16 got the lead role in a play. Her professor was smart enough to allow Heidi to take only drama classes for the first two years she was there. After that, she felt ready to complete the general education required to get your AA degree, and moved on to University, earning her bachelor’s

degree in Fine Arts with a major in Drama. This goes to show that if a child's passion is not integrated with his everyday studies, he is less likely to want to go on with school, and more likely to complain about how hard and boring it is. I know for myself that if I hadn't been exposed to the theater when I was in elementary school, I would never have discovered a talent that has made me the determined, open, hardworking person I am today.

A good example of a program that has been working for years, improving both the academic lives and artistic lives of its young participants is the Community Shakespeare Company, a local not-for-profit organization founded by Richard Carter and Susan Wilson, parents who wished their children to be able to "learn in an alternative classroom environment that promotes parental involvement. Their passion for the theatre and the parental "hour" obligation to their children's classroom was the catalyst for Community Shakespeare Company." (Jeanna Carter, Research Paper) Mrs. Carters work talks about how the CSC is able to bring together students from all different backgrounds and grades, and let them work together and mentor each other in an environment that is safe and welcoming to everyone. Participant Jordan Dyer started acting with the CSC because he thought it "seemed like a fun way to engage in texts like Shakespeare that have so much more dramatic effect when performed on stage." (Dyer, Personal Interview) When given an opportunity to participate in a program like the CSC, they are given the chance to "express themselves, and maybe develop some really great habits, skills, or talents, that they can use throughout their life." (Dyer, Personal Interview)

The first article I read that pertained to the academic achievements of students in theater programs was a write-up of a study done by the Imagination Project at UCLA,

part of the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, in July of 1999. (Catterall, Chapleau, Iwanaga) They discovered that the comparative benefits of the theater become more and more pronounced with time in students who have been involved in the theater; however, they are unable to pinpoint student success directly to their involvement in the theater and arts, but trends in their data point to it playing a large role. Perhaps the most interesting result they revealed was that the patterns they found hold true for students from low-income or low-parental education backgrounds. For students all across the socio-economic spectrum, the more they participate in theater the better they do in school, even though one might think that those students who can afford to be exposed to the theater would be the only ones to reap the benefits. It turns out that where you come from doesn't matter; it is simply the fact that you are involved in the theater arts that gives you so much. Below is a chart illustrating their findings showing the difference between students who are involved in performing arts programs and those who are not, at the 8<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade levels.

**Figure 2a. Involvement in the Arts and 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic Performance**

<b>% in each group</b>	<b>High Involvement</b>	<b>Low Involvement</b>
Earning mostly As and Bs in English	82.6%	67.2%
Top 2 quartiles on std. tests	67.3%	49.6%
Dropping out by grade 10	1.4%	3.7%
Bored in school half or most of time	37.9%	45.9%

**Figure 2b. Involvement in the Arts and 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic Performance**

<b>% in each group</b>	<b>High Involvement</b>	<b>Low Involvement</b>
Top 2 quartiles std. tests	65.7%	47.5%
Top 2 quartiles Reading	64.7%	45.4%
Level 2 (high) Reading Proficiency	61.0%	43.5%
Top 2 quartiles Hist./Geog./Cit.	62.9%	47.4%

**Figure 2c. Involvement in the Arts and 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Academic Performance**

<b>% in each group</b>	<b>High Involvement</b>	<b>Low Involvement</b>
Top 2 quartiles std. tests	57.4%	39.3%
Top 2 quartiles Reading	56.5%	37.7%
Level 2 or 3 (high) Reading Proficiency	58.8%	42.9%
Top 2 quartiles Hist./Geog./Cit.	54.6%	39.7%

Though confidence is often the most quoted benefit of learning to perform on the stage, many others are right there in the background. Skills include new and deeper understanding of history through the characters and context of the play, as well as a deeper and well-developed understanding of the English language. Many people may argue that that is not the case, that simply memorizing and reciting isn't enough to really grasp the complexities and nuances of our language. This is true, in that one doesn't learn anything when memorizing and repeating. However, when you take the time to understand what the lines really mean, and why character might be saying that instead of something else, you can learn a lot about language and its usage in different situations.

Shakespeare is perhaps the quintessential example of literature that everyone knows about, but not everyone can just pick up one of his plays, read it, and understand it in the first sitting. I know I certainly couldn't. But then you can't do that when performing it either. To truly act, you have to know what you're saying, what it means, and why your character uses that particular word or phrase. Simply reciting a bunch of lines in a fancy costume on a stage is not acting. So, while you are mastering your lines, and mastering your character, you start to understand the English language in a whole new way. Many people jokingly say that reading Shakespeare is like reading a foreign language, but it is a language that is a gateway into the everyday English we know. Once you understand Shakespeare, you begin to understand parts of speech and English that may have eluded you before.

Language and confidence can both have very strong cases made for them, but what about the other general, core subjects? It is a common belief that the theater has nothing to do with science or math. I dare to challenge that misconception. There is a reason there are Oscars for more than just acting, because those people behind the set, and the people who put it together, are just as important to a production as those on the stage performing. Imagine if you had no one to run lights, to mix sounds, to build and paint the set, to put costumes together, to make sure everything will be in the right place at the right time. Doesn't sound like a very interesting play, does it?

However, add all those people back into the equation, and you can create magic. But they don't act? What do they do? Actually, they use math and science. The lighting person makes sure that the lights are timed correctly, but also that they are aimed at the right spot with the right amount of intensity and color. When you go to a production, notice how the lights aren't just white, and they don't just aim at one spot on the stage. With the correct lighting a bare stage can be transformed into a dark, gloomy forest, or a bright, cheery meadow. Those running the lights, because of the complex equipment involved, have to have a knowledge of how different colors of light combine, and how certain colors work with the people and sets on the stage, as well as the mathematics involved in mixing colors and setting timers and direction. So, in what you would at first imagine to be a rather easy job, you combine both mathematics and Physics. Costumes and sets other areas that use knowledge of math and science, whether it be designing sets and getting it all to scale, or fitting costumes on actors, requiring knowledge of proportion and scale.

As you can see, the suitability of drama as a core subject that ought to be part of every child's regular curriculum is something that has been highly debated over the years. It is mostly a matter of personal opinion, but through the research I have done for this project I hope to have proven that in most cases where drama is introduced into a child's life, that child goes on to function better in society and life, as opposed to how they might have functioned if never given a chance to learn to speak in front of a group and get over their shyness. I personally know of no student who has participated in theater who truly believed it was a waste of time, and who didn't gain some new knowledge of themselves and others around them. Carol Steckler and Joan Langley have worked most of their lives to involve students in theater productions and classes, both strongly believing that students need to be exposed to theater because of the multitude of skills and many confidence boosters that you gain through a greater knowledge and understanding of the dramatic arts, whether you are acting on the stage, painting the sets, running the lights, or watching and discussing the work being performed.

Drama has proven over and over again what a benefit it can be to human society, not only through the pleasure we gain watching theatrical productions, but the sheer amount of knowledge we glean from participating in the productions. As I mentioned earlier, many people are of the belief that theater just isn't an important part of a child's education, but through this project I hope to have shown that though it isn't as concrete as Math or Science, it can provide the student with more practical life skills than either of those two subjects. The skills that students gain stay with them their whole lives, making it easier for them to perform well, whether it is working on a team project at school or in their chosen career.

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