

A TRAUMA-INFORMED CURRICULUM FOR DEvised THEATER

by

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To students of theater everywhere.

*“It is not the place of the theatre to show the correct path, but only to offer the means by which all possible paths may be examined”*  
*Augusto Boal*

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

I took a new job as a theater teacher in a Minneapolis high school. I started three weeks into the third quarter and for at least the first month, the students thought I was a substitute teacher. Getting them to do anything felt nearly impossible. I had some successes among many failures and doubted myself most of the time. I also doubted them. I thought maybe they had no real interest in learning theater. I mean, after all, many of them had an after-school job, some had kids, and many saw so much violence on a regular basis they often self-medicated, sometimes during school. These kids were struggling because they were a highly traumatized population. I realized I had to understand what they were going through if I was to ever figure out how to teach them theater, which led me to the following question: *How can a high school theater curriculum be designed that is sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engages them as resistant learners?* I began to imagine what it might be like to be a teenager growing up in a poor neighborhood, to have been a victim of systemic oppression, racism, and poverty all one's life. To grow up being triggered by authority figures rather than feeling protected by them. What it must be like when the mere act of survival has been the best teacher and one is forced to go to school and take an elective that has no



relevance to their life at all. What does one do when the theater teacher asks them to stand up and do an eight-count shakedown or talk in gibberish? That'll be the day.

But these exercises serve a greater purpose, not just for theater, but for skills in life as well. Theater teachers know that if they can get students to engage in the work, they will eventually walk away from class with new and better coping skills. They will have a receptive mind and know what it is like to function in a positive safe space. They will get a glimpse into the potential they never realized was there. They will be able to express themselves freely and release some of the emotions locked inside. If only. The purpose of this capstone project is to identify and recognize the various resistant behaviors of students who have survived trauma and learn how to engage them in creating theater in a high school class. In order to do so, I need to find out what all teachers need to know about trauma in order to develop the curriculum.

### **Overview**

Before you continue reading this, take a deep breath. Seriously, sit up straight, put your shoulders back, and, for four seconds, inhale. Hold it for another four seconds. Exhale for another four seconds. Do it again if you need to.

Maybe you are reading this because you are busy doing lots of research for your own project. Perhaps you have had a tough day, you have a million things going on in your life, or you generally have trouble focusing when you read. I wanted to make sure you took a moment for self-care, that you took a moment to bring a healthy dose of oxygen into your system to clear out some of the troubles weighing so heavily on you

before you attempt to take in more information. I want you to access your Receptive Mind (Mandell and Wolf, 2003).

According to Menakem (2017), breathing and other relaxation exercises help us communicate with our vagus nerve to let our body know it is safe. When we feel safe, we can then create space for new information and be open to new ideas. This receptiveness is essential for new students of theater, because the work is often radically different from what they are typically used to doing in a classroom setting. It is also essential to those who may not be comfortable around people, or who are rebelling against systems that might be repressing them inadvertently or not, such as school systems and socioeconomic status (Toshalis, 2017). It would be a disservice to the student to ask them to be open-minded when they are carrying the heavy burdens of their trauma into the classroom.

I invite you to read the following instructions and give it a try. Take a moment to get out of your chair. Stand up, take a deep breath, then while vigorously shaking your right hand, count backwards from eight. Do the same thing with your left hand, then your right foot, then your left foot. Repeat this pattern dropping to a six count, then a four count, then two, then one. Count aloud as you do. Repeat the one count, but do it silently. Go ahead and give it a try.

Now I am guessing that some of you did it, perhaps reluctantly, or maybe with great enthusiasm, and some of you did not even bother to stand up, let alone shake body parts. Think about the amount of energy, the amount of receptiveness, the risk-taking it took for you, or someone else, to do this even in the privacy of your own home. Consider

what it might be like for a traumatized teen doing this among a group of peers. What kind of effort would it take? I have been doing theater for a long time and I am still uncomfortable when I do this exercise, which is a common warm-up that energizes the body and mind.

The purpose of this capstone project is to create a curriculum for devised theater, theater that is created from scratch by its participants, that helps students feel safe enough to engage in theater activities. The curriculum provides tiered activities that construct a safe space for students to open up and be themselves. The activities range from low-risk engagement to eliciting truly bold and creative work. The curriculum features a menu teachers can use to help students become active and productive members of the classroom while working toward the goal of creating a truly unique theatrical piece that is meaningful to them. The techniques and exercises covered naturally differentiate instruction through trauma-informed activities and will alleviate some of the anxiety associated with classroom engagement.

### **Personal Experience**

I was a resistant learner. Not that I did not want to learn, but rather I did not learn the way most of my teachers taught. I generally got good grades on school work and tests because I understood how to manipulate information. I could scrap together any bit of knowledge I may have picked up in class or elsewhere into what appeared to be a comprehensive response to any academic challenge. I could fudge words and numbers with little to no effort at all. I coasted on this gift all the way through to my senior year of high school.

Despite these abilities, I was always a terrible wreck whenever I had to give an oral report in front of the class. My stomach would churn, the palpitations would threaten to launch my heart right out of my throat, and I would shake as if I had the delirium tremens. I always found it terrifying, and, as a kid, I suffered from no obvious trauma beyond the basic, awkward self-consciousness that nearly every kid has. I was not afraid I would get a bad grade. Instead, I was absolutely terrified of standing in full view of my peers, their judging eyes seeking every flaw they could later exploit and whisper about on the playground at recess or on the bus ride home. They rarely did, yet the dread was always present.

By the beginning of my senior year in high school, none of this had waned. The drama teacher, Lou Volpe announced that the year's musical production was going to be *Little Shop of Horrors*. I loved the movie. I had not done any theater before. I was a soccer and volleyball player, more athlete than artist, but I was determined to audition. I arrived at the theater and was only somewhat acquainted with the kids there. Nearly all of them were life-long drama kids, "Volpe-ites" as they were commonly referred to by the rest of us. They all knew each other well and already had a remarkable confidence I could only dream of having. I imagined them whispering to each other about the meathead interloper that had just crashed auditions, but in actuality, they were all quite welcoming. Their gregariousness and my enthusiastic investment filled me with enough courage to get on the stage and audition. I was awarded the part of Mr. Mushnik, the crotchety, old shopkeeper, a leading role my first time out. I am certain there was a Vo-pe-ite or two that might have been fuming about this, but they never made me feel unwelcome.

Take a moment to reflect on a time in your own life when, despite all of the reservations you may have had, you took that risk and it paid off. Remember the paralyzing fear you might have had initially? Now think about what factors might have come into play to help you overcome that fear. I am willing to wager that you did not do it alone. In my case, the Volpe-ites were warm and hospitable. Lou Volpe was affable and enthusiastic about auditioning someone new. The theater was warmly lit and comfortable. And I had a connection to the play for which I was auditioning. If any one of these factors were not in place, I wonder if I would have ever managed to get myself up onto that stage. Now imagine how much more improbable my success would have been if I did not have the privilege of being a white, suburban middle-class student. Imagine the added difficulty of being traumatized by domestic violence, systemic oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, and a slew of other tragic repercussions that result from living in poverty. Imagine trying to overcome apprehension when support systems are not in place and you live in a culture stuck routinely in survival mode. When I think of this, I realize I had it easy, so what about the students who do not?

### **Professional Experience**

In the middle of developing my capstone project topic, I was suddenly thrust into a new situation. I was hired to be the theater teacher at a high school in Minneapolis. This is what I had been working so hard to achieve. I was newly licensed and ready to build a dynamic theater program geared toward devised work that would prove once and for all the value of a fully integrated theater program in school; except there were quite a few obstacles I would have to overcome, the first being that I had little experience doing

devised work. I had studied it, seen it, met some terrific mentors, but I had never actually done it before. Even still, this was the least of my troubles.

I started at my new high school teaching position three weeks into the third quarter. The students had been without an actual teacher for at least two of those weeks. The classroom was literally the entire auditorium, which was newly refurbished with all of the latest and greatest equipment that a small, urban school could get its hands on. The student population was primarily African-American and Hmong students who live at or below the poverty line (Minnesota Report Card, 2019). Almost all of my students were highly resistant learners in some way, if not highly traumatized. Either they fit the bill of systemically traumatized teens or they had other personal reasons for resisting the learning. Getting them to do the work was very difficult. I suddenly felt like I was the lead role in a terrible 1980's film wherein the white savior teacher enters the rough-and-tumble school in a downtrodden, urban neighborhood and teaches the kids how to pass their standardized tests all the while changing the system against which he had to rebel to make a difference in everyone's lives. My memory of my first couple of weeks there is like a bad montage of trials and tribulations.

I had not fully planned for a curriculum for the third quarter. I did not feel that I could since I did not know what the students might have been taught, what the theater program there was geared toward, nor any clue as to how the school's grading system worked, which is something one does not learn while working toward all one's fancy degrees and licenses. The staff at the school referred to it as a "trial by fire," and they supported me where they could for a little while. Then they pushed me out of the nest like

a baby bird. Spring break did not come quickly enough, but reflecting on the difficult weeks leading up to it, I realized I would have to be a phoenix. I would have to burn down everything I had done and rise from the ashes of charred, hastily-planned lessons and clueless ideas of what a capstone thesis should be. This is when I realized I had the opportunity to connect my capstone project to something more practical and meaningful and use it to build a more effective curriculum for my students. I realized I had to fully grasp their trauma, know the triggers of their resistant behaviors, and have some ideas about alleviating their burdens enough to get them to engage in creating theater. Most importantly, I realized I am not their savior, I am their teacher, and I am there to teach theater and nothing more. I just have to figure out how to get them to do the work.

### **Project Summary**

This project is a curriculum for a devised theater unit that answers the question *how can I design a high school theater curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engages them as resistant learners?* Chapter two will review the literature selected to answer the question, which explores how trauma affects the brain and how the processes of theater connect this trauma. Chapters three and four discuss the project in detail, covering the methods used to create it, as well as a reflection on the entire process of researching and developing the curriculum.

The structure of the unit and the lessons of the curriculum are designed to facilitate students in writing, producing, rehearsing, performing, and reflecting on an ensemble theater piece that is meaningful to them. It contains processes designed to differentiate the engagement of resistant learners, especially including techniques for

working with students suffering from trauma. It leads them from sitting in their chairs hiding inside the virtual world of their cell phones and brings them into the very real world of creative process and performance. The curriculum is designed to foster creativity with these challenging students and engage them in their own learning by creating a safe space for them to do so.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

The purpose of the research in this capstone project is to identify and recognize the various resistant behaviors of students suffering from trauma and how to engage them in creating theater in a high school class. The literature review presented in this chapter provides an in-depth look at how trauma affects the brain and why it causes student resistance. It also explores exercises, both trauma-informed and theatrical, that will be essential in working with such students to answer the question *how can a high school theater curriculum be designed to be sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engage resistant learners?* For purposes of keeping a narrow scope, the research does not focus specifically on the various causes of trauma and resistance to learning, but rather examines the effects of trauma on the brain and how intends to inform the reader on what to expect from these students.

Resistant learners come to the classroom with a variety of circumstances in their lives outside school, and consequently a variety of causes for their resistance to learning (Toshalis, 2017). For some, the cause of their resistance is a deep skepticism of authority figures, rooted in witnessing abuses of authority among people in their lives; for example,

an authoritarian father figure who abuses their mother, or a bullying coach who disrespects their dignity.

For other students, the cause of their resistance is trauma; indeed, in many schools and classrooms all around the country, students come from families and communities with high rates of poverty, of intergenerational trauma, of historical trauma, of insidious trauma, of collective trauma, and very often, of complex personal trauma (VAWnet, 2019).

It is important to clarify that this research is intended to advocate the need for trauma-informed teaching in the context of theatre. To fully understand this concept, it is imperative to pause and ask, how much do most teachers really know about trauma? How can teachers be trauma-informed without truly understanding what trauma is and does, and how it manifests in behavior?

### **Understanding Trauma**

“Trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring condition in which the individual experiences a threat to life, or to their psychic or bodily integrity, over which the person did not have choice or control, and experiences intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (VAWnet, 2019, para. 2). An unexpected life- or injury-threatening event(s) that is outside of one’s control leaves that person feeling powerless, and results in negative impacts on their psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being. “A key aspect of what makes something traumatic is that the individual’s coping capacity and/or ability to integrate their emotional experience is overwhelmed” (VAWnet, 2019, para. 2).

The most recently revised version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of Mental Disorders defines “traumatic event” as:

The person was exposed to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence as follows: (one required)

1. Direct exposure.
2. Witnessing, in person.
3. Indirectly, by learning that a close relative or close friend was exposed to trauma. If the event involved actual or threatened death, it must have been violent or accidental.
4. Repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s), usually in the course of professional duties (for example, first responders, those collecting body parts or professionals repeatedly exposed to details of child abuse). This does not include indirect non-professional exposure through electronic media, television, movies or pictures. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 271)

Simple or single-incident trauma stems from a single isolated event that occurs in the context of relative emotional and physical safety, like a robbery or car accident.

Complex trauma is that which occurs in an environment of maltreatment and neglect; it may stem from ongoing, unrelenting, negative experiences; or it may stem from chronic, generally interpersonal, exposure; and it usually has its onset during early development (Cook, Blaustein, Spinazzola, van der Kolk, 2003).

In general, different parts of the human brain do different things. Human brains have evolved from stem to frontal lobe. Most primal instincts (survival skills) are in the

oldest parts of the brain, down near the stem and surrounding area (Van der Kolk, 2014). These parts (specifically the amygdala) are sometimes referred to informally as the *lizard brain*, the part that is all about survival and staying safe and alive in the presence of danger.

- **Frontal Lobes:** This is the thinking and organizational part of our brains, where we store and organize facts about our memories. After trauma, this part of the brain can begin to shut down, as other areas take over.
- **Limbic System:** The limbic system has also been nicknamed *mammal brain*. This is where we experience emotions and relationships. This can take over after trauma, with strong emotional memories that might lack the organized details of the frontal lobes.
- **Brain Stem:** This has been nicknamed *reptile brain*. It's where we get our fight, flight, or freeze instincts. It responds to the emotional messages in the limbic system, in order to survive. Following traumatic events, this part of the brain may stay in survival mode. (Menakem, 2017; Rosenthal, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014)

Trauma changes the way the brain works (Berry, 2016). When the human brain experiences a trauma—some serious threat to its safety or survival—the brain can actually become physically, or neurologically, altered. Responses to trauma are rooted in survival instincts, which are rooted in our brain stem and the very old parts of the *lizard brain* (Menakem, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014). Without proper intervention, trauma can sometimes keep us stuck there in that primal, instinctual part of the brain that is all about survival, rather than using our frontal lobe to process and respond.

In terms of the neurobiology of trauma, when a person perceives a threat to her or his safety, a complex set of chemical and neurological events known collectively as the *stress response* is triggered (Menakem, 2017; van der Kolk, 2014). Over time, survival responses that are adaptive in dangerous situations (e.g., shutting down, constantly surveying the room for danger, expecting to fight or run away at a moment's notice) may occur whether or not danger is present. Over more time, people who have experienced trauma may also become less able to regulate arousal and emotional responses (NCTSN, n.d.).

With this explanation about what happens to the brain due to trauma, it is critical to understand how trauma manifests in human behavior—i.e., how the changes in how human brains work cause changes in thoughts and actions. Most importantly, know that trauma is fundamentally subjective, as are responses to it. Everyone's response to a traumatic event is different. According to SAMHSAa (2014), some common symptoms include:

*Intrusive thoughts and memories.* After a traumatic event, it is common to experience some intrusive thoughts and memories about the traumatic event. This is especially likely to occur when encountering something (for example, a person, place or image) that is a reminder of the traumatic event.

*Hypervigilance.* It is also very natural to feel more on-guard and aware of one's surroundings after a traumatic event. This is actually a very protective symptom following a traumatic event. The body is attempting to keep itself safe by making one

more aware of potential sources of threat and danger. This natural safety mechanism is going to be more sensitive after a traumatic event is experienced (SAMHSAa, 2014).

*Hyperarousal.* Just as one is likely going to be more on-guard, one is also likely going to feel more keyed-up and on edge following a traumatic event. This is again part of the body's natural protection system. Fear and anxiety communicate there is some kind of danger present, and all the bodily sensations that go along with fear and anxiety are essentially designed to help respond to that danger. They are preparing one to flee, freeze or to fight. Following a traumatic event, the body's alarm system is going to be more sensitive in an attempt to protect one from future traumatic events (SAMHSAa, 2014).

*Feeling unsafe.* After a traumatic event, assumptions about the world being a safe and secure place are understandably shattered. Consequently, people may feel as though any situation or place is potentially dangerous. Places or situations that once felt secure may now feel threatening and be anxiety-provoking. This is especially likely to occur in situations or places that remind one of their traumatic events (SAMHSAa, 2014).

For some people, reactions to a traumatic event are temporary; if there is a strong support system in place, little or no prior traumatic experiences, and an array of protective factors that create resiliency, trauma may not affect their mental health in the long term (PTSD Alliance, 2019). Other people have prolonged reactions that move from acute symptoms to more severe, prolonged, or enduring mental health consequences (e.g., posttraumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, substance use and mood disorders) and medical problems (e.g., arthritis, headaches, chronic pain). Responding to trauma is not the same as having Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); PTSD cannot be diagnosed

until at least 30 days after the last exposure to a traumatic event (Cahill and Pontoski, 2005).

When the symptoms do not lessen or actually get worse over time, then the person may develop PTSD or other anxiety disorders and medical problems. Additional symptoms may also appear, including loss of interest and detachment (isolating self from others); avoidance (staying away from location where trauma occurred and/or people or places that remind of trauma); unhealthy coping behaviors (substance use, risky behaviors like self-injury and risky sexual encounters) (NCDV, 2012).

### **Becoming Trauma-Informed**

The term “trauma-informed” refers to an understanding of trauma and an awareness of the impact it can have on people and communities across settings, services, and populations. But of course, knowing is not doing; merely having knowledge of what trauma is says nothing about our ability to put that knowledge into practice through integrating skills and techniques into our teaching repertoire.

According to the CDC (2018), trauma informed teaching borrows from the principles of human services and social work, and is grounded in a distinct set of values that include:

- Safety
- Choice and empowerment
- Naming and acknowledging the experience
- Trust
- Compassion

- Collaboration
- Strengths-based (para. 2)

Within the field of human services generally, trauma-informed care (TIC) is a strengths-based service delivery approach that requires that practitioners:

1. Become grounded in an understanding of the impact of trauma;
2. Emphasize physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and trauma survivors;
3. Avoid institutional processes and individual practices that are likely to re-traumatize people; and
4. Create opportunities for trauma survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment. (Center for Evidence-Based Practices, 2011, SAMHSAa, 2014, SAMHSAb, 2014)

### **Understanding the Impact of Trauma**

In addition to the information above about brain functioning, it's important to be fluent in recognizing the observable symptoms of trauma and what it means for our teaching techniques. Some behaviors common among people experiencing trauma include:

- Strong, quick-to-surface emotions and a lack of emotional regulation;
- Distraction, dissociation, avoidance of addressing it or reminders of it;
- Substance use and abuse;
- Inability to track a conversation, or presenting as scattered, or discussing ideas that seem fragmented, or failure to recall events over time in a linear fashion;



- Inability to envision and plan for future, stuck in the now/past; and
- Hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, hyperarousal (NCTSN, n.d., SAMHSA *a.*, 2014).

Being trauma-informed requires the recognition that trauma-related symptoms and behaviors originate from adapting to traumatic experiences. Many behaviors stemming from trauma are simply survival or coping skills learned in response to traumatic events or circumstances. Many of these behaviors are maladaptive—that is, they are unhealthy reactive behaviors that become problematic on their own. Common maladaptive coping skills may include numbing, dissociating, and/or self-medicating with drugs or alcohol to *turn off* the pain of trauma (NCTSN, n.d.).

Once a teacher becomes aware of the significance of traumatic experiences in students' lives and begins to view their presentation as adaptive, the teacher's identification and classification of their presenting symptoms and behaviors can shift from a "pathology" mindset (i.e., defining them according to their diagnostic label, implying that something is wrong with them) to one of resilience—a mindset that views trauma survivors' difficulties, behaviors, and emotions as responses to surviving trauma (Bloom, 2019). They did what they had to in order to survive, and once safety is achieved, they can learn new behaviors to replace their adaptive strategies. Their challenge now is to build their resiliency through learning to recognize their own strengths and coping skills, and to enhance protective factors in their lives (Center on the Developing Child *b.*, 2019).

In essence, the teacher comes to view traumatic stress reactions as normal reactions to abnormal situations. In embracing the belief that trauma-related reactions are adaptive, the teacher can begin relationships with students from a hopeful, strengths-based stance that builds upon the belief that their responses to traumatic experiences reflect creativity, self-preservation, and determination. In short, trauma-informed services highlight adaptation over symptoms and resilience over pathology (Elliot, Bjelajac, FalLOT, Markoff, & Reed, 2005).

### **Emphasizing Safety**

In the transition to becoming a trauma-informed teacher, it is essential to learn how to turn the classroom into a safe environment. Creating safety is not about getting it right all the time; it is about how consistently and forthrightly the teacher handles situations with a student when circumstances provoke feelings of being vulnerable or unsafe.

Like trauma, safety looks different to everyone. Teachers should talk with students about what safety means to them and have a conversation about what specific circumstances need to be in place for them to feel and be safe. For some students, emotional safety may mean freedom to make decisions about their lives and to believe in their own ability to act on those decisions without being threatened, coerced, insulted, or harmed (Menschner & Maul, 2016).

One common feature of safe environments is that they are predictable. Having consistent and reliable routines helps build trust, allowing students to feel stable in knowing that their safety is protected against sudden or unforeseen dangers. In practice,

this means teachers should prioritize consistent routines and interactions, ground rules or group agreements, following through with what has been agreed upon, and notifying students of impending change or acknowledging change that has occurred (Center on the Developing Child *a.*, 2019).

### **Avoiding Practices That Re-Traumatize**

Sometimes best intentions do not result in the best outcomes; sometimes pain is caused when the intention was to help. Being a trauma-informed theater teacher requires that we think critically in advance of acting and anticipate how traumatized students may interpret our actions. Trauma survivors may be more likely to experience particular procedures and practices as negative, reminiscent of past trauma or abuse, or re-traumatizing—feeling as if the past trauma is recurring or as if the experience is as dangerous and unsafe as past traumas (SAMHSA *b.*, 2014).

For instance, some students may express or act on feelings of powerlessness or being trapped if they are not actively involved in decisions about their lives, including what happens to them inside your classroom; if a particular teaching technique or activity mirrors behavior from the clients' past experiences with trauma, they may respond in the same way as they did to the original trauma. Therefore, best practice requires teachers to reexamine their strategies, procedures, and policies that could inadvertently trigger traumatic experiences (SAMHSA *b.*, 2014).

As teachers know well from their education and training, *one size fits all* rarely fits anyone. In the classroom, this means that they must have an array of techniques, activities, and even communication styles that they can employ depending on the student.

In a group activity, it may mean that they should expressly allow for adaptation of the activity based on the needs of each individual student (SAMHSA b., 2014). For example, if the activity is to close one's eyes and focus on one's breathing, the teacher may add, *If you're not comfortable closing your eyes here, you can just stare at a single spot on the wall across from you.*

### **Empowering Students to Exercise Choice**

For many survivors of trauma both young and old, gaining a sense of control over their lives, along with understanding their trauma triggers and reactions, may be pivotal ingredients for recovery. By creating opportunities for empowerment, teachers help reinforce students' sense of competence, which is often eroded by prolonged traumatic stress (SAMHSA b., 2014). Strategies that prioritize student autonomy and choice need not focus only on major decisions; teachers can apply empowering approaches to common tasks and everyday interactions, such as where to sit within the classroom, which activity to participate in, even whether to do the work in writing or aloud. Another example especially suited to the theater setting is receiving feedback: the teacher may want to ask students, *what are three areas of your performance that you think feedback from others would be most helpful to you? What responses from others feel most helpful to you in assessing your work?* Allowing the student to determine what areas they want feedback on helps promote their reflective capacity, and also helps instill a sense of control over what they may fear most—the judgment of others (SAMHSA b., 2014).

### **Reflecting on Trauma**

It may feel overwhelming to affirmatively acknowledge the level of trauma experienced by students, as required to effectively teach in a trauma-informed way. The lives of the students can be unfathomably difficult, and the teacher's capacity to help them is necessarily limited. However, it helps to remember that students are resilient, and a teacher's role in their lives can be a pivotal force of positive change (VAWnet, 2019). Professor Bruce Ellis, a leading expert on trauma, proposed the concept of post-traumatic growth: if we are able to recognize and celebrate the positive changes that can occur after trauma, we can best promote the factors that bolster resilience capacity (Ellis, Bianchi, Griskevicius, & Frankenhuis, 2017). "The healing process isn't about becoming who you might have been had you not experienced trauma. It's about integrating the wisdom you have gained from this experience into your life" (Keene, 2015, para. 12). Ellis noted that people need to, "see through the darkness to leverage what it gives us" (as cited in Keene, 2015, para. 6) explaining how adverse childhood experiences can develop specialized skills for adaptation. Devised theater work in a school or other setting is particularly well-suited to both responding to trauma, and to building the resilience that helps us bounce back from it.

### **What Is Devised Theater?**

In its simplest definition, "'devising' is a process in which the whole creative team develops a show collaboratively" (Walton, 2014, para. 1), but the nature of that *show* depends completely on the purpose of the work. In other words, it is the process of creating a play in collaboration with the performers. With proper guidance from an educator, students bring their own ideas and knowledge to the process of devising a

collaborative theatre piece that represents their abilities to examine and question concepts meaningful to them, implement problem-solving skills as individuals and as a group, reflecting, reviewing, and defending their artistic choices, and presenting their competence in theatre techniques. They accomplish this from the ground up, with no initial script to follow, utilizing dramaturgy skills developed in their theatre classes. The innately organic form of devising theatre permits nearly limitless possibilities. Traditional theater, the plays and musicals to which most audiences are accustomed come with a preset understanding of what theater is (Graham & Hoggett, 2009). According to Graham & Hoggett (2009), “a rigid sense of what theatre should be will always be the enemy of devised theatre. The ‘what might be’ is essential” (p. 3), and that opens the door for all manner of creativity and exploration.

### **How Devised Theater Accesses Student Engagement**

Benjamin Bloom classified learning outcomes and objectives based on the desired outcomes of cognitive skills, known as Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning (Heick, 2018). Bloom initially created six educational objectives, which were later revised in 2001 by a group of cognitive psychologists, curriculum theorists, instructional researchers, and assessment specialists to place focus on the action of learning rather than static objectives (Armstrong, 2019). Armstrong (2019) listed these cognitive processes as:

- Remember
  - Recognizing
  - Recalling
- Understand
  - Interpreting
  - Exemplifying
  - Classifying
  - Summarizing
  - Inferring

- Comparing
- Explaining
- Apply
- Executing
- Implementing
- Analyze
  - Differentiating
  - Organizing
  - Attributing
- Evaluate
  - Checking
  - Critiquing
- Create
  - Generating
  - Planning
  - Producing. (para. 9)

When a teacher considers the importance of Bloom’s Taxonomy in regards to student-centered instruction, which “emphasize[s] supportive relationships between students and teachers in academic environments that are challenging, relevant, collaborative, student-directed, and connected to real-life situations” (McKenna, 2014, para. 3), devised theater covers all bases. When theater is devised, students collaborate to *interpret and summarize* problems and situations relevant to their lives. They are *differentiating* their approach to the topics they have chosen and are *organizing* their ideas into a scene. They are *checking* and *critiquing* their own work as they rewrite and revise. They are *generating* material from concepts they *recognize* and *recall*, then *planning* and *producing* a theatrical performance. These are the processes devised theater through which students progress.

There is no singular definitive model for such processes, as there are countless ways to inspire and create devised work, but it allows students to explore content relevant and meaningful to them. Through devising, students can “address social issues, create

moments of revisionist history, and deconstruct dramatic (or other forms of) literature” (Green-Rogers, 2016, para. 4). It provides students a way to be heard by their educators and gives them guided autonomy over their learning processes.

### **Devised Theater Processes and Activities**

Boal (1992) presented the theatre world with a plethora of exercises and games. His exercises were designed to develop personal awareness and the relationship of the five senses to the world around it, and the games are designed to emit and receive messages to and from those around us. Most notably, Boal (1985) developed *Theatre of the Oppressed* in conjunction with his philosophical colleague, Paulo Friere (2000), author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, both of which follow the same principles in treating the learner, or in Boal’s (1985) case, the actor, into the co-creator of their own knowledge. Boal’s (1992) use of “Forum Theatre” was essentially early social justice theater, wherein the work was devised and applied based on the socially relevant problems existing wherever he brought it with the intent to enact change. Boal (1992) provided a long list of theater exercises, such as space walks, which provide performers with a variety of ways to explore the space around them as well as their own physical awareness, mirroring techniques that develop an actor’s focus and anticipatory skills, and community-building games, such as Cat and Mouse, a variation on tag that is highly engaging.

Spolin (1976) provided the theater world with many exercises, games, and activities designed specifically for training students to use intuition and learn through experience. According to Spolin (1986), “we learn through experience and experiencing,



and no one teaches us anything” (p. 3). In theater, performers are always on their feet, learning through process and practice. Spolin’s (1986) activities do the same and connect the student to acting and performance through many improvisational, interactive experiences.

Rohd (1998) developed a logical structure for his theater activities, many of which are borrowed or modified from Boal (1992) and Spolin (1976). He maps his activities starting with warm-ups, which include energy and focus work and trust work, then does bridge work, which helps the student transition into the more challenging work ahead, then improvisation, followed by activating material, which is the creation of theatrical work. The purpose of Rohd’s (1998) processes is to enact social change through presenting social problems through a devised piece that the audience responds to and helps solve.

Teaching students to create original plays is the central focus for Mandell and Wolf (2003). Using many of their predecessors’ activities as well as developing some of their own, they provide processes specifically for teaching in a high school setting.

### **Conclusion**

Everything that has come before in theater has a proven track-record. The undeniable accounts of their success has been written about and studied. Furthermore, the processes of Boal (1992), Spolin (1986), Rohd (1998), and Mandell & Wolf (2003) have been repeated to much success over the years. In many of these cases, their work has been presented in a reasonably willful environment, to students who have been open-minded and receptive to theater concepts. So what happens when students are so

resistant that the sheer act of getting them out of their seats is a feat in and of itself?

Understanding how trauma functions in the brain can help a teacher develop approaches to theater that transition students from their fight, flight, or freeze response and get them participating willfully in the theater processes described here. The literature provides insight into understanding what happens in the brains of survivors of trauma. It highlights the need for a delicate approach to these types of students and explains the importance of emphasizing safety and avoiding practices that re-traumatize. It also provides some strategies for empowering students to exercise choice and reflect on their own trauma.

All of this can be done in the context of creating theater. The nature of devised work fits naturally with the concepts discussed here.

## CHAPTER 3

### Project Description

#### Introduction

It is not enough to have a curriculum full of well-designed lesson plans and assume that it will work for any teacher or student. The curriculum itself should address the issues that arise in difficult classrooms and provide a way to foster positive creativity with resistant learners more directly than walking through some simple steps. For this project I created a curriculum for devised theater that is both student- and problem-centered in its design. It is geared toward resistant learners and students suffering from trauma. It includes several tools and resources that are designed to unlock student potential through the creation of an ensemble theatre piece that reflects the thoughts and feelings that matter most to the students. There are modular lesson plans with activities chosen for fostering trust, building community, engaging in ensemble work, developing creativity, and rehearsing and performing an original theatrical piece. I uses examples from successes and failures in my own classroom, as well as support from the research to answer the question *how can a high school theater curriculum be designed to be sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engage resistant learners?*

The curriculum is organic and improvisational in structure. Rather than dictate what a teacher should do with their students day after day, the curriculum provides the tools necessary for tailoring lessons to meet their specific needs. It is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum, but rather, one that allows the students' needs to direct what should happen next. It is a menu of activities and exercises designed to engage resistant learners and scaffold the skills essential for building a safe space where everyone can flourish in creating theater.

### **Overview**

Aspects of this curriculum have been experimented with in a theatre classroom. The design, concept, lessons, and classroom management associated with it were practiced in two different classrooms. The difference between these two classrooms was significant in an unexpected way. Both classes had a similar demographic breakdown with a respectively even distribution of Individual Education Plans (IEP) and 504 Plans, which are education plans that guarantee specialized accommodations for students with disabilities. The two classes followed each other at the end of the school day (6th and 7th period) with both being roughly thirty students each. The lesson plans had been essentially the same for both classes during the first week or two, but the student learning diverged, so the lessons had to as well. Each lesson was constructed to be organic enough to adjust to the needs of the students and to adapt to their various levels of resistance to the learning.

### **Audience**

This curriculum is for any theater teacher, but specifically those who work with student populations in which many have experienced trauma. The practices in this curriculum differentiate engagement for all learning and skill levels, but might best be used for a first year theater class. That is not to say that these tools would not be useful for advanced classes, but rather that the curriculum is specifically intended for students who are new to theater.

The community-building aspect of this curriculum might also prove effective for nearly any teacher who can find the space to work them into their lesson plans. The activities and exercises are universal. They train skills and bring students together in a manner that is useful for success in any classroom.

### **Curriculum Development Model**

I mainly used the Understand by Design (UbD) model (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) for developing this curriculum. Teaching devised theater is activity-based. UbD identifies activity without purpose as one of the “twin sins” for unit design, because it is a common mistake to focus on student engagement without being able to connect to coherent learning outcomes. The second “sin” is content coverage, largely a non-issue for devised work, but still an easy trap to fall into when attempting to blend in traditional theater learning, such as the parts of a theater or other technical aspects of acting, both of which carry less importance than theater creation in this curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

UbD provides a logical process to plan for all the seemingly random activities of devised theater. Activities such as mirroring or space walk become more poignant when

they are planned in conjunction with a specific outcome, rather than just practicing them to get acquainted with one another or developing focus, which is generally their functions. The most effective way to do this is to fully understand what needs to be achieved and then plan on how to get there rather than doing these activities because that is what the theater teacher did when they were an actor. In this way, mirroring and space walk become a necessary part of the learning plan which provides evidence that our desired results are being met.

### **Curriculum Outline**

This curriculum focuses on including breath work in conjunction with six different aspects for theater creation. They are trust work, community building, ensemble building, creating, revising, and performing skills. They are not meant to be taught consecutively, but rather simultaneously (Mandell & Wolf, 2003), with a heavy focus on trust and community in the beginning and branching out from there. This may seem counterintuitive since without trust, it is difficult to have community, and without community, it is difficult to build an ensemble, but the activities and exercises presented often cover more than one aspect. It then becomes essential to appropriately connect activities together in the same lesson. The curriculum categorizes each exercise for ease of selection and recommends logical and effective connections for lesson planning.

**Trust work.** Simply put, if the students do not trust the teacher, they generally will not put forth their best effort (Toshalis, 2017), but they also have to learn to trust each other. We accomplish the former by working in exercises that meet the students where they are at, or allowing students to select or even introduce ideas to use in class.

The latter is covered by a series of low-risk activities and exercises that allow them to comfortably express themselves about issues that are relevant to their lives and then encouraging them to take small steps into what will turn into larger risks later on when the classroom community is built.

**Community-building.** Emdin (2016) stated that building a cosmopolitan environment in the classroom where everyone feels a sense of duty and belonging gives students a strong sense of belonging. Being involved in any theatrical production is very difficult if there is no sense of community. This community typically develops over the course of rehearsals, but can and should be developed in the classroom to create that cosmopolitan sense of belonging. A properly built community works and has fun together simultaneously. There is probably not a single theater activity that does not build community, but there are many that do this specifically.

**Ensemble-building.** The concept of the cosmopolitan classroom is very much related to ensemble work in that its members are responsible for themselves and each other. This does not tend to happen naturally in theater, and is particularly important to foster when doing devised work. Mandell and Wolf (2003) stated:

Theatre arts are, by definition, a group undertaking...students [do not] walk in the door willing to work with strangers or with people they resent, avoid or fear. To help classes work, teachers have to coach students on ways to be productive members of an ensemble. (p. 33)

**Creating.** The nature of devised work is that it is created by the participants. The exercises used in this section are either directly borrowed or adapted from the work of

Boal (1992), Rohd (1998), Spolin (1976), or Mandell and Wolf (2003). Some of them are pieced together from my own ideas after trying them out with my students and receiving their feedback. Every one of them is designed with the intention that the students will create characters, scenes, monologues, poetry, and other theatrical concepts by engaging in the work. This engagement is crucial to the success of this curriculum, which is why understanding resistant learners is so important. Many of these exercises and activities have initially failed in my classroom until I found a way to access those learners and get them to fully engage with the work. Participation was not enough, so I had to try many activities repeatedly with new approaches to get meaningful work from them.

**Revising.** Through self-reflection and self-evaluation exercises, the students are challenged to revise, expand, and edit their creations. Revision accesses the metacognitive systems of the brain, the purpose of which is “to increase students’ responsibility for their own learning and to encourage them to become more active in the learning process” (Tolman & Kremling, 2017, p. 165).

**Performing skills.** With devised work, some of the pressure of learning to act is lifted because the students are not trying to navigate the nuanced characters and themes of a stage play carefully crafted by a professional playwright. The students are creating work from their own experience; they often already know the characters they are portraying very well. It is still necessary, however, to ensure students grasp important concepts behind performing, such as vocal projection, energy, and stage picture, among many others. The idea is not develop a polished actor who is ready to join a professional



Shakespeare company, but rather to nurture the adaptability, confidence, and self-awareness essential to a performer's toolkit.

Rather than being taught directly as a unit, these skills are honed through coaching the activities. The curriculum contains several suggestions for coaching students on these performance techniques as well as provide exercises that practice them routinely.

**Rehearsal and performance.** Once the creative work is finalized, the students will need to be led through the rehearsal process and prepared for performing in front of a live audience. The scaffolded exercises will have given them much practice in performing for each other, but dealing with an actual audience changes everything. The rehearsal process is a series of repetitive exercises that train memorization and fine tune the students' performances, while building the confidence necessary to put it in front of a live audience. With enough attention given to proper preparation, this final week or so should transform the students from learners to performers.

**Final reflection.** This is the part of the curriculum that solidifies the learning. The students spend some time reflecting on their creation and performances, review how far they have come through the devising process, and evaluate what they have accomplished. They will also be challenged to suggest changes for the developed work if there will be future performances and given the opportunity to inform the curriculum for next semester's students.

### **Limitations**

Combining these processes to build a curriculum is no easy feat. The roadblocks ahead, usually in the form of student resistance, will always be challenging to overcome. This curriculum is malleable in order to cater to the varying needs of an ever-changing student body and the different types of resistance they put forth. It is not to be viewed as quick-fix plan that will work in any classroom, but rather as a road map for creating something unique every time it is implemented.

This curriculum does not teach traditional aspects of theater and may not cover every federal or state standard required by a school's administration. It is important to check what standards are needed to be met before implementing it.

Finally, working with survivors of trauma can be a difficult and delicate endeavor. It is important to maintain contact with any and all support staff trained to handle the various difficulties that can occur. Any teacher using this curriculum should frequently consult the students' counselors, psychologists, and other intervention specialists to when working with survivors of trauma.

### **Implementation**

The curriculum is broken up into six project assessments to be completed over eight weeks. Included in each assessment is the main objective of the unit, what types of summative assessments can be used, the basic processes for completing the assessments, ideas for scaffolding and differentiating the work, and then finally, some suggested activities that fit into the unit. Following the assessments is a list of all the recommended activities along with their descriptions and uses. Teachers can choose the ones that work for them and build them into their daily lessons. They can use any of their own activities

and exercises as well. There is no one way to teach this curriculum. This curriculum merely provides guidance for tailoring it to the students' specific needs and the teacher's pedagogical style.

I began this project in mid-March of 2019 when I started working with my high school students and discovered a need for such a curriculum. I tested out ideas in real-time to collect the more effective activities and plan to implement the curriculum this September when I meet two entirely new groups of students. I will tailor the curriculum to the needs of each class, as indicated, and use the full eight weeks.

### **Assessment of Effectiveness**

This trauma-informed curriculum for devised theater has a head start in its effectiveness. The use of theater is not new when it comes to victims of trauma. It has been used as a vessel for introspection, reflection, and communication since its inception. The creative aspect of devised work allows for its participants to dig deep and reflect on their trauma in a productive environment, while offering nearly limitless possibilities for coping. By adding in a specific sensitivity to survivors of trauma, it only serves to amplify its power and make it accessible to those who may not have expected theater to be of any significance to them.

This curriculum is built on the shoulders of giants and is a parsed version of all the work that has come before and reapplied with a profound understanding of trauma. The knowledge gained from the literature review may not be readily apparent in the activities and assessments provided, but it is certainly present.

The curriculum also demands that its users do some leg work. It might be essential to read the entire literature review to grasp the importance of the activities and how they are assessed. It is the approach to implementation that is vital, as it seems to me the curriculum can not function without the understanding of trauma.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter lays the groundwork for the entire project. It explains the process used for creating it and breaks down the important elements to explain their necessity, not only as theatrical concepts, but also as delicate approaches to complex issues when dealing with survivors of trauma.

There is also some insight into the potential this project has for success, and the pitfalls that might beset it entirely. The only real way to know its effectiveness is in the doing, which is the very nature of theater.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

#### Introduction

With this project, I attempted to answer the question *how can I design a high school theater curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engages them as resistant learners?* Having gone through this process has led me to several important revelations and conclusions. The following sections explain my personal growth with this endeavor, starting with what I have learned about the process itself. These comments are important because if I endeavor to do this again, I would like to improve on my approach.

I also cover my connections between my research and my finished project, as well as its implications and limitations. After all, what was all this research for if it did not have a significant impact on the development of the curriculum?

The process of creating this capstone project also led me to several new important questions to explore. It is my hope that if I never find time to answer these questions, somebody else might pick up the mantle and run with it, or be inspired for their own projects.

Finally, I have a few words to share about the project and how I plan to get it out there to be used by other theater teachers. Differentiating theater to meet the needs of trauma survivors should prove useful in any theater program, even if only parts of this curriculum are used by others.

### **What I Have Learned from the Capstone Project Process**

Through this process, I have confirmed the importance of differentiated assessment. Creating a capstone project is quite rigorous, but most of that rigor comes from adhering to a specific structure and format. In my particular case, I learn best through collaborative, active processes, which is why I am a theater teacher and why my project is activity based with differentiated assessments. Many times throughout this process, I was told my work was “unconventional” or that the literature review needed to be long and boring rather than personally connected to the reader. I understand the need for certain standards, but if I am going to spend time writing this for a specific audience, I would like to make sure they will not only read it, but stay engaged while doing so. This is why I have always struggled with academic work. The push for academic conformity is an impediment to kinesthetic learners, divergent thinkers, and hinders creative approaches to new problems. I struggled to get this work done for a number of reasons, most of which was getting hung up on doing it the “right” way instead of allowing my natural tendencies to inform the work. It is stifling, to say the least, and counterintuitive to everything I have been taught in my pursuit in a Masters Degree in Teaching. Right now the only differentiation in assessment offered is whether to do a thesis or a project,

but the demands on academic structure have truly interfered with my ability to do this work the way I need to do it.

That being said, the process was still effective in helping make the connections I needed between my research and the project. Being somewhat forced to adhere to a specific method may not be the most effective process for every learner, and it can definitely lead to some unnecessary research rabbit holes, but once I figured out how to narrow it down, I did make some very astute connections.

### **Connections from the Literature Review**

The most important connection I made from my literature review has to do with what inspired my project in the first place. Resmaa Menakem's (2017) *My Grandmother's Hands* and Eric Toshalis' (2017) *Make Me!* inspired me to explore trauma as deeply as I did. I realized the importance of these books with regards to my own students, the former being recommended reading from my student teaching school, my mentor, Jan Mandell, and, not surprisingly, by my current school. Mandell and Wolf's (2003) book, *Acting, Learning, and Change* gave me the strongest bridge between trauma and theater, specifically because the exercises and philosophies in that book deal directly with empowering marginalized students. But knowing Jan Mandell personally and being mentored by her greatly continues to inform most of my work as well as addressing the needs of my students.

Through this literature review, I have learned that trauma is nothing to ignore or take lightly. The serious effects trauma has on the brain greatly impacts the abilities and behaviors of its survivors. If I can find ways to help survivors of trauma transition from

their natural defense mechanisms to their receptive, cognitive minds, I can better achieve the level of engagement necessary for them to not only learn theater techniques, but create something truly meaningful to them. The literature review, above all else, helps me understand my students in a completely different context, which leads me to some very important conclusions about the implications and limitations of my project.

### **Implications and Limitations of the Project**

The ideas for the development of this curriculum came about in a high school setting, located in a low-income community with a high-needs population. The classroom itself was on the stage in the auditorium which presented itself with even more particular challenges. Curtains and technical equipment provided distractions and places for students to hide and the auditorium itself was a cavernous retreat for students who wished to dodge doing the work. Sometimes they texted their friends and opened the doors for them to sneak in. These interruptions added to my need to keep lessons flexible. The activities and exercises were practiced through established rituals, varied trial-and-error approaches, and a whole lot of community-building exercises.

I had two classes at the end of the school day, grades nine through twelve. The 6th hour class had thirty-one students and a student aid. The 7th hour class had twenty-six students. There were eighteen Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and 504b plans across both classes, with two students in all-day special education classrooms, my class being their only inclusive integration for the day.



The students in 6th hour were largely African-American, with five Hmong students, and one Latino. The 7th hour was also largely African-American, with seven Hmong students.

My classroom was full of students who did not want to be there, who had little to no interest in theater, some of them little to no interest in school in general. Many attempts at these exercises resulted in only a few fully engaging in the work or abject failure. It was not until I started applying the work of Toshalis, Tolman & Kremling, et al. (2017), that I started to find progress with the work. It took considerably longer for my classes to get to a place where they could receive theater, which is what inspired the need to develop this curriculum.

The most important implication my project might yield is that dealing with the trauma of survivors in this manner has high potential to trigger profound emotional responses. I am not an expert in psychology, nor a trained counselor. I am not even an expert on how trauma affects the brain, despite my extensive research for this project. It is also reasonable to assume that anyone else who decides to implement this curriculum also falls short with this specific expertise. It is vastly important to keep in communication the school psychologists, counselors, administrators, and any other relevant support staff to ensure the mental health of the students is properly attended to and remains of the utmost priority.

Some of the limitations of this project that it is not a traditional theater curriculum. Students will not be reading plays and performing pre-written characters and dialogue. It is quite possible that some educational standards that might be required by a

school district will not be met, so it is important to make sure that this is not the only type of theater class offered.

There is also no guarantee that all students will have the confidence to perform for an audience. Perhaps some traumas will be too severe to overcome and being in front of a live audience is just too much for them to bear. It is best to evaluate students based on the processes they have gone through rather than the final product, which may be an argument for an entirely different thesis.

### **Recommendations for Related Projects**

The way we assess theater is still a vastly unexplored area. The demands for measuring learning and grading requirements often clash with the point of theater and other arts, as does differentiated assessments, aesthetic choices, academic language versus culturally responsive pedagogies. Had I the choice, I would do away with grading entirely and just concentrate on the continuous creative processes of theater without the added pressures of traditional grading methods.

I would also recommend collaborating with professionals in the field of psychology when working with survivors of trauma. Healing through the arts has proven its merits time and again, so why not continue to explore this vastly important subject?

### **Getting the Word out about the Benefits of this Project**

This project is only a beginning. It is by no means a definitive authority on creating theater with students who are survivors of trauma. I hope that my work will be read, used, modified, and built upon. I also expect that once the students in my school see the positive results of the curriculum, engagement will become more proactive. That

generates the potential for the final performances of the students to be brought to the community or even tour other schools and community events. It will create more evidence in defense of devised theater, in defense of the importance of the arts in school, and why we need a whole more of it.

Devised theater has increased in popularity, especially in high schools because it is the epitome of student-centric learning. Students who suffer from trauma stand to benefit the most from trauma-informed theater creation and differentiating to that population benefits everyone. That has always been the central purpose of this project. I know my students will benefit from these processes, especially as I refine and experiment with this curriculum. Others will, too.

### **Conclusion**

In my effort to answer the question of how can I design a high school theater curriculum that is sensitive to the needs of trauma survivors and engages them as resistant learners, I think I cracked open the potential for new growth in approaching devised theater. I may not have accomplished a perfect curriculum that is going to solve all of the problems inherent in working with survivors of trauma, but I do believe, at the very least, that I have created a small foundation upon which I, or others much more qualified than I, can build on, borrow, steal, it does not matter which, so long as future students of theater, future survivors of trauma, will be able to benefit from this exploration. It starts as a trickle...

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## APPENDIX A

### Trauma-Informed Devised Theater Curriculum

#### Objectives

Students will be able to (SWBAT) collaborate as an ensemble to create and perform an original theatrical work using vocal and/or physical theater techniques and reflect upon the impact devised theater has on the participants and the audience.

#### Assessments Used

Prior knowledge assessments are ungraded, but can be used as a marker for measuring student development of concepts and ideas. There are three types of summative assessments that will be used repeatedly throughout the curriculum -- written text, performance evaluation, and reflection. Not all summative assessments need to be graded. There are three types of formative assessments that work well, which include journal entries, self and peer evaluations, and research presentations. Use these assessments to inform you of student understanding.

#### Why this Curriculum?

The exercises in this curriculum were specifically selected for trauma-informed differentiation. They include breathing, meditation, reflection, and self-expression, and are intended to be slowly scaffolded based on the needs of the students. There is no “one size fits all” approach to working with survivors of trauma. Use this curriculum as a road map, not a mandate. Specific rubrics and worksheets are not included here purposefully.

#### How to Use

The curriculum is built around the main assessments for each unit. For each assessment, I include the main objective of the unit, what types of summative assessments can be used, the basic processes for completing the assessments, ideas for scaffolding and differentiating the work, and then finally, some suggested activities that fit into the unit. Spread the processes out as necessary for your class. Many of them can be done in one class period, but it might be prudent to spread them out for students who are trauma survivors and are new to theater. Following the assessments is a list of all the recommended activities along with their descriptions and uses. Choose the ones that work for you and build them into your daily lessons. Use some of your own as well. There is no one way to teach this curriculum. This curriculum merely provides guidance for tailoring it to your students’ specific needs and your teaching style.

### **Portfolios and Journals**

Students should keep a portfolio of all written work in the classroom and any rubrics as well. A journal (physical or online) kept in the classroom is also ideal for formative assessments and their own self-reflection. Give regular writing prompts about the lessons and activities.

### **Attendance**

Students should be able to make up missed assessments in one of three ways: written work can be submitted anytime, performance work can either be reperformed with the group, or a solo performance of the written material (in some cases that might mean reading it aloud), reflection work can be submitted anytime after the written and/or performance work is completed.

### **Guest Artists**

Whenever possible, bring in guest artists to work with the students, particularly those who represent them demographically. Have guest artists who can perform and teach relative to the lessons. The curriculum can be taught without them, but the value of guest artists is priceless and will go a long way toward increasing engagement.

### **Breath Work**

Many of these breathing exercises can be inserted almost anywhere throughout a lesson. The quicker exercises might be great to throw in during partner exercises or before starting a new task. The more complicated exercises are great for starting and ending class, or when the students have lost focus. The goal with this work is to create a habit for the students, so structuring use should have purpose and be meaningful for the students and not just done to do it.

#### **Elevator Breath**

Raise an arm while slowly inhaling. Lower it when exhaling.

#### **Four-for-Four (Irreducible Grace Foundation)**

Inhale for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds.

#### **Rose/Candle**

Pantomime smelling a rose, then blowing out a candle.

#### **Sigh**

Deep inhale, vocalize exhale.

#### **Prayer Breath (Irreducible Grace Foundation)**

Place palms together, fingers forward in front of chest, inhale while moving hands forward, exhale while moving them back. Point fingers upward, inhale while raising them overhead, exhale while lowering them.

### **Activities**

The activities listed here were selected based on student-responses in a specific classroom. Others were tried to little or no success. Some of these took several attempts before the students responded to them well. Some of them were successful for a couple of days and then the students lost interest. Use whatever works until it does not. Give some

activities a second or even third chance before deciding it does not work. Use activities repeatedly and with variations that work for your students and/or lesson.

Wherever possible, I noted the primary source of the activities. This does not necessarily mean that that person created the exercise, but it is where I learned it, either in person, indirectly from other instructors, or by reading about it and trying it out. I also included a list of benefits the activities provide. It is not comprehensive, but gives some guidance in purposefully selecting activities.

### **Community-Building/Warm-Up/Games**

**Ask My Neighbor (Spolin variant)** - *eye contact, awareness, energy, non-verbal*

Students stand or sit in a circle. One person is “it” and goes around the circle asking a question of each person while making eye contact. Questions can be anything the person wants, but the answer is always “ask my neighbor.” It continues around the circle in this fashion while the members of the circle silently attempt to switch places with each other. Players should communicate non-verbally before switching. If it gets someone’s spot, then that person becomes the new It.

**Cat and Mouse (Boal)** - *awareness, energy, physical contact*

One student is the cat, another is the mouse. If the cat catches the mouse, the mouse becomes the cat and vice versa. All other students link arms in pairs. The mouse can link arms with one person in the pair. When they do, the other person must unlink and become the mouse.

**Elevens** - *awareness, non-verbal, problem-solving*

Divide students into an even amount of small groups. Designate one student as the caller for each group. The caller gives a one, two, three, shoot count then everyone, without speaking, puts out any number of fingers they wish. The goal is for the entire number of fingers thrown to equal eleven. They keep doing this until they are successful. When two groups are successful, have them join up and designate a new caller. Keep joining groups until the whole class is together. The whole class must throw a total of eleven fingers to be successful.

**Follow the Leader** - *awareness, observation*

One person, the guesser, leaves the room. The rest of the class stands in a circle and designates a leader. The leader starts a movement that everyone copies. The guesser comes back in. The leader secretly changes the movements that everyone copies and the guesser gets three attempts to guess who the leader is.

**Group Juggle** - *memory, awareness, coordination, focus*

Students stand in a circle. One student starts with a ball. They say a person’s name and throw it to them. That person picks a different person and so on until the last person has only the first person to throw it to. Next, they repeat the pattern silently. After a round or two, add a second ball, and then a third. Keep adding as long as the students are successful.

**Keepie-Uppie** - *awareness, cooperation, communication, energy*

Use a ball or balloon and have the students stand in a circle. Working together, they attempt to keep the ball in the air by hitting it with their hand, foot, etc. Keep count of the number of contacts students made with the ball. If it hits the ground, they have to

start over. Apply restrictions if necessary, such as they can not hit the ball twice in a row, or they must say their own name before they hit the ball.

**Missiles w/Eye Contact (Frantic Assembly)** - *memory, awareness, eye contact*

Students stand in a circle. Pick one student to start as person A. They make eye contact with someone across the circle (person B) and move toward them. Person B must say person A's name before breaking eye contact and moving toward another person C. It continues like this until movement is fluid and names can be removed altogether, leaving only eye contact.

**Student Request** - Play any game that is requested by the students.

### Trust Work

Guidelines for trust work:

- Sharing is voluntary.
- Give time for thought before sharing.
- Share with a partner first.
- Ask, don't tell.
- Always ungraded.

**3-Part Handshake** - *physical contact, collaboration*

With a partner, create a 3-part handshake to share with the class.

**Eye Contact** - *eye contact, focus*

Students are asked to make eye contact with a partner for a specified period of time. This is a silent activity. Start with 10 seconds the first time you use this, and build over each use. Instruct the students that this is not a staring contest, blinking is okay. Coach them to relax their jaws to prevent laughter, take it seriously, stay focused. Ask for verbal reflections the first few times.

**Partner Share** - *listening, responding*

With a partner, share details about yourself based on a prompt. Example prompts include a time you got in trouble, the best day of your life, a very bad day, your biggest pet peeve. Designate a speaker and a listener. The listener should be able to share what they heard from the speaker. In building trust, the person who shared the story must give permission to share out to the larger group.

**Space Walk** - *listening, responding, awareness*

Students walk around the room, exploring the space in the context of given directions. This could be any variant on speed (slow motion/fast), direction (backward, sideways), level (leading with forehead/crawling), emotion, situation (late for bus/lost in woods). This is also a good time use more breathing techniques, quiet reflection, and meditation. For an extensive list of space walks check out Boal (1992).

**Storytelling (Rohd)** - *communicating, listening, responding*

Students partner up and tell each other a story. It should be a story they are comfortable with and have a beginning, middle, and end. Discuss the connection between storytelling and theater.

**(Variation)**

Have students choose one of their stories and connect with two other students. Have them decide on one of the chosen stories to act out. The storyteller narrates while the rest of the group performs the actions described.

### **Ensemble-Building**

#### **Complete the Image (Boal)** - *physical contact, observation, reflection*

Have two students shake hands and freeze mid-shake. Have the rest of the students analyze what the image could mean. Next, have a different student step in for one of the others and change the image. This could be another handshake or a completely different response, but the image should remain frozen. Have the rest of the students analyze the meaning and relationship of the image. Next have the students pair off and freeze in mid-handshake. Then they alternate changing the image and creating new relationships. If there is an odd number of students, make one the “joker” who can go and add a chair or object to a partnership, be a third person, or switch someone out.

#### **Copy Freeze/Counter Freeze (Mandell)** - *low risk, observation*

Without speaking, students walk the space. Instruct them to freeze in an image at random and wait for someone to copy them. They break away from each other whenever it “feels right.” Coach the students to use facial expressions as well. For counter freeze, have students freeze in a random image the same way, but they stay frozen until someone creates an image that responds to theirs rather than copies it.

#### **Ensemble Movement (Graczyk)** - *nonverbal communication, collaboration, awareness*

Without speaking, students have to form a circle, a triangle, a straight line, a curved line, as called out by the teacher.

#### **Ensemble Shift (Graczyk)** - *nonverbal communication, collaboration, awareness*

Review the different movement qualities. Instruct the students that they have to think of three that they want to do. Introduce this as their Movement Phrase (write it on whiteboard). Have students perform in groups of six, introducing ensemble shift. All students walk actor neutral in unison to downstage then perform their movement in place. Use bell to announce the shift. When they shift again, they walk actor neutral back to the center line. Try adding circle shift, triangle shift, etc.

#### **Solo/Join (Graczyk)** - *nonverbal communication, collaboration, awareness*

Number actors on stage from one to six. Actor one begins their movement phrase. Call two to join, doing their own movement phrase, then three, and so on. Remove actors one at a time starting at one and going to six. Experiment with ensemble shape when all six are acting their phrase.

#### **Solo/Solo Replay (Graczyk)** - *nonverbal communication, collaboration*

Number actors on stage from one to six. Actor one performs their movement phrase solo. When they stop, all other actors perform what they thought they saw actor one do. Repeat the process for all actors on stage. The final assessment here is about the students being clear about their own movements, but also responding to the movements of others.

### **Creating**

#### **Fill-in-the-Blanks (Mandell)** - *brainstorming, introspection, reflection*

Give students some sentence starters and ask them to fill in the blanks for each of them. Some examples are:

*Let me tell you why...*

*Once I saw...*  
*If I could...*  
*You know what makes me mad?*  
*Some people...*  
*You have to understand...*

After sharing with partners or the class, students select their favorite (theirs or someone else's) to create a monologue with, using it as the first line. If the students have characters, encourage them to try to think and write like that character. Encourage them to be honest and detailed.

**Objectives/Obstacles Improv (Mandell)** - *low risk, nonverbal communication*

Students create a short, silent moment that includes a character, a clear objective, and an obstacle such as an old man wants to open his pill bottle but his arthritis hurts his hands, or a kid wants to put on shoes that don't fit. Remind students to define their character, objective, and obstacle through specific movement.

**Shift, Through, Round (Frantic Assembly)** - *collaboration, physical contact*

Working in threes, students create a movement piece using three simple commands. Shift-physically moving someone from one place to another, Through-passing through a space created by the other two people, Round-turning someone around or going around them. Give the students a final objective or obstacles to overcome. Have them add facial expressions, emotions, movement qualities, or even characters.

**Slashwrite (Mandell)** - *brainstorming, introspection, reflection*

Use music or images to evoke emotions and ideas, or select a topic. Have the students generate a complete first sentence through some sort of prompt, such as "how did this music make you feel?" Now, using the last word or few words of that sentence, they write a new sentence. They continue on in this manner until they have five or more lines, then have them find a way to end it.

Example: *The music made me feel relaxed/relaxed and comfortable after such a crazy day/a crazy day where everyone had me on edge/on edge because I feel like I can't trust nobody/nobody better mess with me now that I'm relaxed.*

**Somebody Wanted, But, So, Then** - *accessibility, collaboration, problem-solving*

Students tell a story by creating a character "Somebody," their objective "Wanted," the conflict "But," the tactics "So," and then the resolution "Then." This is story structure in its simplest form and is meant to be used as the building blocks for creating more complex story structures. Have students trade stories and revise them by changing any or all of the elements, but keeping the "Wanted" the same. Explore how changing characters will redefine the objective (ie- a drug addict wanting drugs versus a straight A student), which can create interesting variants on the same theme.

**Revelations (Boal)** - *observation, reflection, focus*

Students find a partner and decide on a close relationship to play (parent/child, boss/employee, etc.) Determine who is who, where they will meet, and their ages. The two characters meet and begin a conversation. It helps to give the students a simple situation or topic to start with. Give them a few moments to improvise the conversation then ask one of them to make a shocking revelation (these can be determined before or in



the spur of the moment) that the other person now has to react to. Keep the scene going and then have the second person make a shocking revelation. Let the scene continue and then ask for one of the characters to find a natural way to leave the scene.

**(Mandell variant)** - Students are in groups of three. Two of them are adults talking about something important, the third is a child who is being ignored by the adults. The child keeps trying to get the adults' attention until the time is right for the child to reveal something shocking to them. The adults now have to respond to the child.

## **Revising**

### **Trigger Scripts (Mandell variant)** - *collaboration, problem-solving*

A trigger script is a short piece of dialogue between two or three characters that can be spoken by any character in countless situations. For example:

*Character A: So what happened last night?*

*Character B: I don't want to talk about it.*

*Character A: C'mon, you can tell me.*

*Character B: I really don't think I should.*

Hand out several different scripts. Students partner of and determine who, where, when of the scene and rehearse it. Then they perform it for the class. Next, one person rotates from each group to the next, the scripts stay where they are. This time, they add a couple lines of dialogue to the script, rehearse and perform. Continue until everyone has rotated full circle. Reflect on how things changed working with different people. Ask how the scenes changed or had to be revised with each new person.

### **Wake-Up Ritual (Mandell)** - *self-reflection, nonverbal communication*

Through some form of meditation, have students visualize their morning routine, recalling everything they have done and felt from the time they woke up until now. Ask some guiding questions throughout the meditation. Students create a starting position that represents the moment they woke up. Give them four minutes to act out their day, trying to focus on the main events and emotions rather than the specific details. Coach students to stay in their own space and move quickly from each activity. Have them do it again, but this time they only have two minutes. Have them replace specific details with symbolic gestures and movements, while maintaining the emotions. Repeat again, but now they have forty-five seconds, and then reduce it all to three representative gestures. Have each student perform for the class, then lead everyone in a group performance of it.

## **Performing**

### **Character Study** - *reflection, observation*

Students are asked to identify someone they admire. Without naming them, have them write down traits of this person. What are their strengths and weaknesses? What are their physical traits? Have students visualize that person then ask them to space walk acting out this person based on specific questions. How does this person move through space? How do they sit in a chair, or get up and down from the floor? How do they greet other people? What are they doing when they are at work? What might they be doing at home? Have this person interact with someone else. Without saying who you are, have a conversation. Ask each other questions, but do not try to guess who it is. Just observe.

Next, repeat the entire exercise, but instead, identify someone they despise. Avoid the obvious and choose someone that nobody else might. It is vital that no names are mentioned and that no physical traits are portrayed mockingly. Try to really be this person genuinely, as this is a practice in empathy. Reflect on how you communicated the traits of these people. Which one was more fun to portray? Did you learn anything about yourself or someone else through this exercise?

**Movement Qualities-Abstract (Graczyk)** - *nonverbal communication, observation*

Six actors on stage to demonstrate movement qualities from the following list:

- Size:
  - Superhero: You are a superhero. Be as big as you can be
  - Mini-Me: you are the smallest you can be
- Weight:
  - Cement shoes: You are wearing cement shoes, you need help from your hands to move your legs.
  - Moonwalk: You are walking on the moon and nearly weightless
- Shape:
  - Robot: you are a robot and move mechanically
  - Wet Noodle: your bones are wet noodles
- Space:
  - Trapped in a Box: You are stuck inside a box and cannot get out.
  - Top/Bottom Shelf: Everything is just out of reach and you need to grab it.

**Living Sculptures (Mandell)** - *physical contact, cooperation, observation*

Students get into groups three to five. One student is the sculptor and is given a topic. The sculptor must create an image using the other group members. They may either show them how they wish them to pose or if they have permission to touch them, they can shape them. The sculptor should also be in the image. Groups take turns viewing each sculpture, during which time, the teacher gently taps on of the performers' shoulders. That performer says one word, or one line of what their character is thinking. Experiment with having them repeating the line or word, adding a movement, turning them on and off like switches.

**Paint the Fence (Mandell)** - *awareness, observation, cooperation, empathy*

Four performers take the stage. Each is given a different character or emotion to portray, then they are given a task to pantomime, such as painting a fence. Coach the performers to interact with each other. After about a minute, have them all switch one character or emotion to the right (so that each of them gets a chance to perform each trait) and give them a new activity.

**Park Bench/Bus Stop** - *nonverbal communication, improvisation, observation*

Place a bench at center stage. Person A can be given a character, emotion, situation, or all three, and sits on the bench. Person B is something different and enters the scene, sits. Nothing is spoken. The two share a moment in silence, then person A leaves. Continue switching new people in and out. Be creative and determine relationships, recent history, or have the students come up with their own ideas. For example, maybe Person A's mom is sick and person B has been having a great day. How would they interact? Then when person A leaves, person C enters and they were just in a

fight. How would they interact with person B? This process should create a series of vignettes that are low risk for the participants.

**Pass the Object** - *object permanence, observation*

Students stand in a circle. One person decides on an imaginary object to pass. The students must attempt to maintain object permanence as it is passed along. For example, if the object is a bowling ball, its size and weight should be apparent from person to person. Likewise if the object is a feather.

**Assessments**

**Assessment 1 - Safe Space** (1 - 3 days based on how much scaffolding is needed. If this is their very first encounter with theater in general, breaking this down into smaller pieces is a good way to establish the process, practice it at a slow rate, and then eventually place more demands on it.)

**Objective:** SWBAT identify what it means to maintain a positive, safe space in the classroom through the collaborative creation of a short ensemble theatrical piece.

**Assessments:** Written text (5 written thoughts), Performance (present piece as a group), Reflection (orally or written, journal entry).

**Process:** Class discussion to define “Safe Space” and its importance to creating community, building trust, and enabling creativity/communication (Prior Knowledge).

Students individually write five thoughts about safe space and what it means to them (Assessment).

Students select one line as their favorite.

Students get into groups of five (can be varied).

Students share their favorite line with each other, then put them in a logical order to create a “poem” (note on the use of the word “poem”--students tend to hear this word and think they need to have rhyme and meter. Avoid using the term “poem” as much as possible and clarify that rhyming and other poetic devices are welcome, but unnecessary).

Students collaborate to add some group physicality to support each line. This can be quite challenging for students and might require a lot of modeling/coaching.

Students rehearse, then perform (Assessment).

Students do an oral or written reflection on the piece created (Assessment).

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written Text: Some students might require short answer prompts for their thoughts.

Performance: Have students rehearse their one line using a variety of different individual and group exercises. Have students trade lines and develop movements for each other to experience collaborative creation.

Reflection: Turn/talk share, journal prompts, group discussion.

**Recommended Activities:**

Trust Work: Space Walk, Partner Share

Community-Building: Keepie-Uppie, Group Juggle (anything with a ball garners more participation early on)

Ensemble-Building: Copy Freeze/Counter Freeze

**Assessment 2 - Movement** (Spend at least a week working with moving in silence. Far too often, students become nothing more than talking heads in created pieces when not enough attention is given to creating movement. Provide opportunity to practice creating smaller movement pieces before having the students build their assessment piece.)

**Objective:** SWBAT create an ensemble piece based solely on communicating through movement.

**Assessments:** Written Work (create a worksheet on qualities of movement), Performance (create a performance rubric), Reflection

**Process:** Using Space Walk, students explore different qualities of movement (abstract) - size, weight, shape, space (Prior Knowledge).

Using Space Walk, students explore different qualities of movement (situational) - late for work, just in a fight, lost in the woods, someone stole your money (Prior Knowledge).

Pair students up and have them each come up with a topic that is meaningful to them and why. Students share with each other, then select one of the topics.

Have the pairs pair up and share the two selected topics.

The four students create a physical image based on each topic. Coach them to use levels (blocks and platforms are helpful).

Create specific movements to shift between topics.

Select a spokesperson for each topic. That person explains the image and the reason for its selection.

Revise the two topics by adding movement to them, creating a living portrait.

Perform the revised piece without words or explanation (assessment).

Have students comment on what they see in each piece. There are no wrong answers.

Write a written reflection on how we communicate through movement (assessment).

**Recommended Activities:**

Trust Work: Space Walk, Partner Share

Community-Building: Cat and Mouse, Follow the Leader

Ensemble-Building: Complete the Image, Ensemble Movement, Ensemble Shift, Solo/Join, Solo//Solo Replay

Creating: Shift-Through-Round, Objectives/Obstacles Improv

Revising: Wake-Up Ritual

Performing: Park Bench/Bus Stop

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written work: Differentiate the complexity of the worksheet to meet student needs.

Performance: Students with physical impairments can include their impairment in the work since the movement qualities would still affect them in some way. There is opportunity for students to problem-solve for inclusion.

Reflection: Turn/talk share, journal prompts, group discussion. Have students express their reflection through silent movement only.

**Assessment 3 - Character** (Spend a lot of time playing with character. Give the students opportunities to create more than one to choose from. Find activities where they can practice being their character, including doing some of the basic warm-ups this way.)

**Objective:** SWBAT create an original character using movement and voice different from their own.

**Assessments:** Written Text (Character Development Sheet, Performance, Reflection)

**Process:** Have students identify actors they like and the numerous characters they have portrayed (prior knowledge).

Make a short list of a couple examples then discuss the characters' physical and vocal traits versus the actors themselves.

Use the Character Study activity to get the students practicing new character traits.

Students stand in a circle and think of a negative line they hear every day from a parent, a teacher, a boss.

Turn out from the circle and rehearse being this person saying this line with a physical movement.

Turn back in, then each person performs their line. The entire circle repeats each performance in unison.

Students get in pairs or threes and create scenes built around one of their lines. The scene should define who, what, and where.

Students rehearse and perform scenes.

Reflect, then have students think about a character they would like to portray. Encourage them to choose something real (not a superhero or horror villain). Sometimes it is easiest to start with an occupation and then ask a series of questions (create a worksheet for assessment).

Give students a variety of activities to practice their characters before asking for a final assessment.

Use an improvisation activity to assess their performance.

Do a written reflection or a partnered evaluation of each other's work.

**Recommended Activities:**

Trust Work: Space Walk, Partner Share, Storytelling

Community-Building: Ask My Neighbor, Missiles w/Eye Contact (using characters)

Creating - Revelations

Performing - Objectives/Obstacles Improv, Paint the Fence

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written work: Tailor character sheets to the abilities of your students. Some can do with simple heading prompts such as "Background," while some students might need full questions to answer in order to develop their character.

Performance: Evaluate performance in the context in which they seem most comfortable, such as performing in a scene with others, or doing some solo work. The important thing is to provide opportunities for the students to bring their characters to life in more ways than one.

Reflection: Have students evaluate themselves and each other by commenting on things they noticed, what they know about the character they saw, etc. There are also a number of processes here on which they can reflect.

**Assessment 4 - Monologue** (Take about three week overlapping with Assessment 3.)

**Objective:** SWBAT create and perform a monologue based off previously generated characters.

**Assessments:** Written text (Monologue), Performance, Reflection

**Process:** Define monologue. Introduce objectives/obstacles and tactics.

Show examples of monologues from popular movies and analyze them for objectives/obstacles and tactics.

Give students example monologues to perform and analyze them for objectives/obstacles and tactics as well.

Students brainstorm ideas for monologues based on character background, story ideas, anecdotes--anything they can think of.

Do improvisation games using the characters. Experiment with putting them in different relationships and contexts and ask students to reflect in character about each of them.

Use monologue creation exercises such as Fill-in-the-Blanks and Slashwrite to get students writing.

Students should have a completed written monologue in which they can identify the character's objective, obstacles, and tactics.

Rehearse and perform.

Reflect on things they have learned about their characters.

**Recommended Activities:**

Trust Work: Partner Share

Community-Building: Ask My Neighbor, Elevens

Creating: Fill-in-the-Blanks, Slashwrite

Performing: Park Bench/Bus Stop, Living Sculptures

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written text: Students who struggle with writing can do voice recordings or use transcription software. Get students talking about their characters if they have trouble being in character or give them a worksheet with a series of questions about the character's life.

Performance: Students can perform privately or be on script if need be, but ideally they should have it memorized and perform in front of their classmates.

Reflection: Make this character a reflection about their character.

**Assessment 5 - Dialogue** (Beginning teaching for this assessment once students start activities that require theatrical dialogue).

**Objective:** SWBAT create and perform a short script of dialogue between two or three characters based on a developed theme.

**Assessments:** Written script, Performance, Reflection

**Process:** Define dialogue.

Introduce blank scripts (see *Trigger Scripts*).

Students get in groups of two or three, each with a Trigger Script. They rehearse and perform the script.

Students switch partners and create line to continue the script. They rehearse and perform. Do this as many times as possible.

Students select any of the trigger scripts to continue and write a two-page scene incorporating (and even changing) the original text.

Students rehearse and perform their scripts.

**Recommended Activities:**

Trust Work: Partner Share, Eye Contact

Community-Building: Cat and Mouse, Ask My Neighbor

Revising: Trigger Scripts

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written script: Students can create their own scripts from scratch. Reduce the amount of lines required for students who struggle with writing, or pair students with differentiated purpose.

Performance: Scripts can be in hand or memorized (the latter is always recommended).

Reflection: Turn/talk share, journal prompts, group discussion.

**Assessment 6 - Plot/Theme**

**Objective:** SWBAT create a short script for their created characters using story, plot, and message to inform the beginning, middle, and end of the piece.

**Assessments:** Written Text (Objectives/Obstacles Worksheet/Script), Performance, Reflection

**Process:** Students pair up and take turns telling stories. Some good topics are: a time you got in trouble, the best day of your life, the worst day of your life. Have listeners retell the story they heard.

Teach objectives/obstacles, stasis/intrusion.

Have students identify these concepts using a current popular film (recommend *Avengers: End Game*).

Students get into groups of two or three (two works best).

Groups select a topic that is socially relevant (some students purposefully attempt to do the mundane; don't let them).

Using their previously developed characters, they create a simple short scene using the plot mechanism Somebody Wanted, But, So, Then.

Students rehearse and perform their scenes.

Students receive feedback from other students.

Students identify objectives/obstacles, stasis/intrusion in their own work.

Teach theme/variation.

Have students identify these concepts using a current popular film (recommend *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*).

Groups trade scenes and create a variation on the theme (change either the But, So, or Then, or all of them. The Somebody's change with the characters, but the Wanted should always remain the same).

Revise, rehearse, perform.

Students identify theme/variation in their own or others' work.

Final reflection.

**Recommended Activities:**

Creating: Somebody Wanted But So Then, Objectives/Obstacles Improv

Revising: Trigger Scripts

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written Text: Challenge the students to create a more complicated script by combining groups and having multiple objectives/obstacles.

Performance: Students can have scripts in hand or memorize for their final performance (the latter is always recommended).

Reflection: Turn/talk share, journal prompts, group discussion.

**Assessment 7 - Final Production** (Try to allow for at least two weeks of revision and rehearsal time. Attendance at the end of the school year can prove to be challenging, so it is essential to find ways of getting students committed to the final performance early on. Ensemble members should also be prepared for anything, and with enough practice, they should be able to overcome any situation that arises.)

**Objective:** SWBAT create or revise from previous work, rehearse, and perform an ensemble production for an audience.

**Assessments:** Written script, Performance, Final Reflection

**Process:** Plan to bring in an audience on a specific date. This could be family or friends, classmates or teachers. The students should know about this performance from the very beginning.

By now, students should have characters, monologues, and many scenes they have created and rehearsed. Now it is time to synthesize their work under a unifying theme, or they can create something entirely new. The play should be an ensemble piece or series of vignettes built around a theme.

Spend some time synthesizing pieces starting around Assessment 3. Find ways to put characters together that sparks new and interesting ideas and make sure students record things in their portfolios and journals.

Pay attention to the class and see what topics and themes keep coming up that are relevant to them. During Assessment 4 and on, keep helping students narrow down topics and themes. This should go well if they have been revising previous written works and performances to use for later ones.

Run students through the rehearsal process repeatedly.

Get tech help from technical theater and art classes.

Perform the show.

Reflect.

**Scaffolding/Differentiation:**

Written text: The final script is an entire class effort. Students should be graded according to their contributions as ensemble members. It is quite possible that some students float by without having done any written work, but it can be assumed that any actions or personal lines they speak are part of their contribution to the final piece. Give the benefit of the doubt if the student is actually engaged in the final performance.



Performance: Evaluate on engagement rather than performance qualities, unless a well-structured rubric is provided and the performance qualities on it were taught and reinforced throughout the class.

Reflection: The students should reflect on how the work they created affects them as performers and their audience. They should consider how this work fits into the context of their community. An audience question and answer session and some follow-up group discussion could facilitate this reflection. Have a cast party afterward.