

IF YOU FEEL AS THOUGH YOU DON'T FIT IN THIS WORLD, CREATE A NEW ONE:
STRATEGIES TO MOTIVATE ADOLESCENT MALES TO PARTICIPATE IN THE
PERFORMING ARTS

By

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From the age of three, when I sang my first solo in the church preschool choir, until now, as the theatre arts teacher and director at a public middle school during the school year and a director for a performing arts camp during the summer, the performing arts have been my passion, career, and grounding force in life. My experiences in arts leadership and education have led me to work with all kinds of students, ranging from totally unwilling teens whose classrooms I invaded with interactive drama techniques, to students whose passions mirrored my own in after-school productions.

And in all those scenarios - from performing to directing, from childhood to adulthood, from teaching in large public schools to small private conservatories, in rural townships and throughout the largest city in the United States, the same question always arose - *where are the boys?* After all, boys were around, just not in the auditorium. Copious data from my review of the literature regarding adolescent male performing arts participation rates confirmed the anecdotal evidence my life experience claimed. The underrepresentation of males in the performing arts inspired the following research topic: *Strategies to motivate adolescent males to participate in the performing arts.*

As a performer exploring an issue in the performing arts, I wanted my product to have a performance element: this is who I am and what I do. I envisioned a product that connected people through one of the most powerful mediums throughout human history: live performance. While nothing can replace the impact of a live performance, having a product that can be referred back to at the educator's convenience was necessary. Considering these factors, a TED talk was the best format to deliver my message. I can present the lecture live at conferences, meetings, and hopefully on the TED talk stage and also have a recorded version as an anytime

resource for anyone who needs it. Using the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework created by Wiggins and McTighe (2011), I outlined strategies that performing arts educators and leaders can use to recruit adolescent males into their performing arts classes and programs, retain these students in classes and productions throughout their academic careers, and reframe the conversation and culture surrounding gender and the role it plays in performing arts participation.

The combination of the topic at hand and the product chosen to deliver it led to the following research question: *Can a TED talk be developed on the strategies that can motivate adolescent males to participate in the performing arts?* While I focus my research on adolescent males and discuss curricular and extracurricular options for teachers, these strategies can be implemented for all age groups and all performing arts settings (ie community and professional theater companies) by all performing arts educators and leaders working with youth (ie director, musical director, choreographer).

My TED talk opens with an introduction of my professional background and a personal story that led to my research question. I then explain the Understanding by Design framework and how it was used to organize strategies from the research and my personal and professional experience into the three stages of recruit, retain, and reframe. Each stage and its corresponding strategies are then elaborated upon. Gender identity theory is explained and data from the literature regarding gender typicality and gender conformity as it relates to gender and its relationship to the performing arts is presented. Toxic masculinity theory as it relates to adolescent male participation in the performing arts is explored. The TED talk concludes with a final review of the three stages and a call to action from the speaker.

LINK: [Grunzke, Gretchen TED talk](#)

SCRIPT

SLIDE 1- TITLE

From the age of three, when I sang my first solo in the church preschool choir (and refused to hand the microphone back afterward) until now, as the theatre arts teacher and director at a public middle school and performing arts summer camp, the performing arts have been my passion, career, and grounding force in life. I was a bona fide theater kid, eating my lunch in the choir room and rehearsing in the auditorium late into the night with my fellow artistes. My dream was to be a professional actor. After earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting at my dream college in New York City, I began to pursue just that.

My first real, paid acting gigs after graduation were national tours in educational theatre. My castmates and I cruised the country in neon-colored buses, like the cool kids that we were, stopping at every school auditorium along the way. We used the power of theatre to teach everything from preschoolers how to count to high schoolers how to recognize the signs and get help for substance abuse, and everything in between.

These experiences led me to arts leadership and education. I worked with all kinds of students, ranging from totally unwilling teens whose classrooms I invaded with my not-at-all dorky interactive drama techniques, to students whose passions mirrored my own in after-school productions.

And in all those scenarios - from performing to directing, from childhood to adulthood, from teaching in large public schools to small private conservatories, in rural townships and throughout the largest city in the United States, the same question always arose -

SLIDE 2-WHERE ARE THE BOYS?

Where are the boys? Which always makes me think of the Backstreet Boys and N Sync and boy bands in general, so- here they are.

I decided to answer this question by making it the research topic for my Master's degree. "Where are the boys?" was not deemed *academic* enough, and boy bands were deemed irrelevant, so I changed my topic to

SLIDE 3- RESEARCH TOPIC/MARCUS

Strategies to motivate adolescent males to participate in the performing arts.

So why does this matter? A lifetime in the theater has given me plenty of reasons, but a recent experience stands out in my mind. I was leading a workshop at an at-risk elementary school to recruit for an after-school Create-A-Play program I was running, and I was thrilled to meet a second-grade boy, we'll call him "Marcus", and see him thrive and shine. Marcus was bold, funny, and quick while most of the boys were sullen and withdrawn. He took initiative and took the stage while the other boys hung back. He had that spark - Marcus was a star.

The workshop ended and as I was helping a handful of girls at my table with registration, I saw Marcus start to walk over. I smiled at him and right as I did, I saw his friends grab his arm.

Then the taunting began. "You wanna do a play?" "Look, it's just girls over there!" and then his friends laid out the big fear for men in our society. I used to think this fear arose with the onset of

puberty but apparently second graders now grapple with it. “Marcus, you can’t do that. That’s gay.”

His friends continued, goading him to go to the gym with them to sign up for basketball. I saw Marcus standing there, frozen, looking back at the stage where he had just performed, caught between his actual desires and the desires society was telling him he should have. After a moment, his face just crumpled and he left the room with his head hanging to sign up for basketball.

Unfortunately, that moment is hardly unique. I could tell many versions of the same story. What impacted me about that one is how young Marcus was and how recently that happened.

Whatever amount of progress we think we’ve made is not enough if an eight-year-old boy in 2017 can’t pursue his passion because it will cost him his masculinity.

So how do we shift this paradigm? How can we transform the performing arts from its current view as an inherently gendered activity to what it truly is, as William Inge tells us:

SLIDE 4 - WILLIAM INGE QUOTE

“Theater is, of course, a reflection of life”. The need to share stories, express oneself, and yes, reflect life, is neither masculine nor feminine. It is simply and fundamentally human.

As a result of my research and in response to this problem, I developed three *stages* (pun intended) outlining strategies to motivate adolescent males to participate in the performing arts.

SLIDE 5 - BACKWARDS DESIGN

I was inspired by the three stages of backwards design by Wiggins & McTighe. While these *stages* were designed for lesson planning, I found they helped me organize my strategies.

Stage 1 - identify desired results

stage 2 -determine acceptable evidence, AND

Stage 3 - plan learning experiences and instruction.

SLIDE 6- RECRUIT, RETAIN, REFRAME

So using that framework, I came up with (CLICK)

Recruit -our desired results are more adolescent males in performing arts programs (CLICK)

Retain (CLICK)

acceptable evidence is males being retained in our classrooms and on our stages throughout their years of school, and finally to (CLICK)

Reframe - planning learning experiences and instruction that reframe the conversation and culture regarding gender and its relationship to the performing arts.

I focused my research on adolescent males since that's the age group I work with but please use these strategies with our younger boys because, as I have recently found out, they also really need it.

Also, keep in mind that, much like the arts, this process is cyclical and messy, and if you're a teacher AND in the performing arts, you already know that this work is never done. So let's dive in!

SLIDE 7 - RECRUIT

The first stage is recruit. In my research I found over 30 studies and meta reviews from all over the world, covering all types of schools and programs and demographics, and one statistic regarding male participation rates remained true across all of them: (CLICK)

Males are consistently and historically underrepresented in the performing arts.

This has been true since at least the 1930s when this data first appeared in the literature, with male participation rates typically ranging between less than 12 to less than 25 percent . So we have been asking this question - “where are the boys?” (CLICK X 4) - for almost a century.

(CLICK)

SLIDE 8 - CORE STANDARDS

To help us recruit, the perception of the performing arts as not a “core” subject needs to change.

The fact that we say “core” to refer to certain subjects and not others creates a false academic hierarchy. After all, no one thinks math is just for farm kids or that city folks don’t need literacy.

But the performing arts can and do suffer from a false perception of a lack of relevance.

National *Core* Arts Standards demonstrate how a grounded curriculum develops not just artistic skills but practical skills that are, yes, core, to any college or career discipline. Students should be able to connect these standards to their own areas of interest within and outside of performing arts content.

So as we can see here the four categories are creating, performing/presenting/producing, responding, and connecting - and these are the soft skills people need on and offstage.

For example, the first standard under the first category asks students to “Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work”. So ask your students - “What other content or career areas might ask you to generate and conceptualize ideas and work?” Artistic ideas or not, students will soon see how the skillsets the arts teach are core to many content and career areas.

Students can see the value in this whether they choose the arts or not - one study found that even in a drama class where 90% of students felt “neutral” or “negative” about having to be there,

100% of students could identify one or more ways in which the class helped them learn cooperation skills.

So even compulsory in-school classes are crucial for providing a pathway to recruit males into further classes and into extracurricular performing arts programs. For many males, their only exposure to the performing arts is through school day classes. One study found that the top two reasons male students won't participate in dance are competency and accessibility.

So fight for those school day dance classes, and maybe your after-school production of West Side Story will look like this!

SLIDE 9 - WEST SIDE STORY

Looking at boys who DO participate, like these men who were in the recent Broadway revival of West Side Story, and who researcher Martin Ashley dubbed the "boys who dare", found the following reasons boys dare to participate in the performing arts:

SLIDE 10 - BOYS WHO DARE

(CLICK)

To be with male friends who also did,

(CLICK)

because older male role models at the school participated,

(CLICK)

and passion for the art form: from the self, friends and/or from the teacher.

(CLICK)

Teacher qualities that were most sought by students were

(CLICK)

competence in art form,

(CLICK)

pedagogical expertise,

(CLICK)

and confidence that comes from a belief that boys can, should and will engage in the performing arts.

While students can be recruited during and after school through quality arts instruction, sometimes parents, principals, and policy makers and surely other groups of people that start with the letter “P” don’t understand how core the arts really are, and so the arts can suffer from a lack of funding and support. So then you can’t retain students because there isn’t a sustainable program.

SLIDE 11 - RESOURCES

The plus side to this quandary is that there are a plethora (another P word) of local, state, and national organizations that can provide that funding and support above and beyond your school budget and resources. Obviously presenting a list of all of these organizations would be a Herculean task so I am only listing a few key organizations here that I have personally worked with and recommend as a jumping off point. You may be able to tell from this list that I currently live in Minnesota but resources for all states as well as national organizations, like the ones I have included here, are a good place to start.

Even if you still end up with less resources than you want or need, you can still make an impact.

One meta review of the literature on the effects of performing arts instruction for students ages 11-18 found the following three keys to success across studies:

SLIDE 12 - 3 KEYS TO SUCCESS

(CLICK)

By actively involving young people,

(CLICK)

addressing their concerns,

(CLICK)

and using activities that engage them in productive group work processes, drama can be usefully applied whatever the resources available. So even if you're teaching in an old basement storage room - which I have done -you can still be successful.

So now moving on to reframing, the final and most complex stage. So start off simple by keeping it local - if possible, highlight some male performing artists from your area and their contribution to the field. As I mentioned, I'm in Minnesota, so here's just one way to capture attention and open male students' eyes to the possibility of participation.

SLIDE 13 - FAMOUS ACTORS FROM MINNESOTA

Here we have Chris Pratt, Vince Vaughn, Josh Hartnett, and Garrett Hedlund. What do these guys have in common? They're all famous actors from Minnesota. Fun fact: Josh Hartnett played Sky Masterson in his high school's production of Guys and Dolls. I am very dedicated to research involving Josh Hartnett.

SLIDE 14 - SHAKESPEARE

In addition to current references, painting a picture of the history of the male *role* in performing arts (puns are always intended) contextualizes males in the performing arts and proves that it's

not an inherently gendered activity. After all, in Shakespeare's time, only men were allowed to perform, and until recently

SLIDE 15 - IMPROVISED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

this was also true at the Improvised Shakespeare Company in Chicago which is who these guys are. A bit of the past connected to the present can relate the performing arts to males in a new way, which can in turn inspire them to participate.

So now that your students know that males have been an integral and at times singular force in the performing arts throughout history, they may wonder when and why that changed. This is where gender identity theory, gender typicality, and gender conformity can help reframe the conversation in your classroom.

So what do those terms mean?

SLIDE 16 - GENDER IDENTITY THEORY

Gender Identity Theory is

(CLICK)

the extent to which a person perceives and identifies the self to be masculine or feminine in a specific context. Two aspects of this theory are

(CLICK)

Gender Typicality, which is the extent to which one identifies as a typical male or female, and

(CLICK)

Gender Conformity, which are internal pressures people place on themselves and external pressures felt from others to conform to gender stereotypes.

That's pretty dense, so to simplify for your students

SLIDE 17 - BRUCE BANNER TO FULL-ON HULK

Gender Typicality means which image from Bruce Banner to full-on Hulk do you most identify with, and

SLIDE 18 - WE WEAR PINK ON WEDNESDAYS

Gender Conformity means how much pressure from your friends, your family, or yourself do you feel to wear pink on Wednesdays. So obviously these two aspects apply to both genders but this can be a fun way to introduce these concepts in your classroom.

SLIDE 19 - GENDER TYPICALITY - “THE HULK EFFECT”

A study of over 5,000 7th graders was done to determine whether gender had an effect on what they called “Highbrow cultural taste”, which includes fine and performing arts, by measuring gender typicality and gender conformity and their relationship to an interest in the performing arts.

So as we can see here, Gender Typicality, or the “Hulk Effect”, as I’m now calling it, is very strong on boys - the more stereotypically masculine they see themselves, the way less likely they are to engage in the performing arts, while the effect on females is minimal, and results for males and females for Gender Conformity,

SLIDE 20 - GENDER CONFORMITY -WE WEAR PINK ON WEDNESDAYS

The “we wear pink on Wednesdays” idea - look almost exactly the same.

So again we ask, why? Why are women in sports sometimes called “tomboys”, which is generally not an insult, while “boys who dare” to do drama or dance can’t be simply called “tomgirls”? And are in fact, called much worse?

SLIDE 21 - HEGEMONIC/TOXIC MASCULINITY

You can answer this question through the lens of toxic masculinity.

(CLICK)

The technical term is “hegemonic” but the term your students will probably be more familiar with is “toxic” masculinity, which is

(CLICK)

the dominant notion of masculinity in a particular historical context or how being a real man is currently culturally defined.

(CLICK)

Some characteristics of toxic masculinity include

(CLICK)

the domination and devaluation of females and feminine attributes, in women and men,

(CLICK)

a social chain of command built on intermale dominance - gangs typically operate with this type of structure

(CLICK)

stigmatization of homosexuality and homophobia - as we know from phrases like “that’s gay” and more recently “no homo”

(CLICK)

ruthless competition

(CLICK)

inability to express emotions other than anger

(CLICK)

and feeling shame in admitting weakness or even perceived weakness and dependency.

So this was also very dense and honestly pretty sad, so to sum it up just remind your students:

SLIDE 22 - DON'T BE THIS GUY

Don't be this guy.

So now is the time to ask your students why the performing arts tend to be considered feminine in our present context, and what would need to happen to change that. Then, work together with them to change that. Sounds simple, will probably be hard, but that can be the catalyst to create a more inclusive performing arts program that meets the needs of the actual students within it. Obviously there is no one size fits all solution to this problem and this is meant to be the very beginning of a much longer and larger conversation.

SLIDE 23 - REVIEW - RECRUIT, RETAIN, REFRAME

As a reminder, the recruit, retain, reframe method is a cyclical and continuous process grounded in theories of gender identity and toxic masculinity and their relationship to performing arts participation.

Recruiting students into your classrooms and on your stages, retaining them throughout their years in school, and especially reframing the perception of the performing arts in any given school or community is very personal and deeply dependent on the culture therein.

As a performing arts leader, it's up to you to educate yourself on the culture and climate you're in and use that information alongside this to reframe the conversation in a way that is meaningful to your particular students.

SLIDE 24 - DANCER

Hopefully you feel more confident now that you can recruit, retain, and reframe your performing arts program using these strategies to motivate adolescent male participation. And if you need further inspiration, please read my favorite quote from the research. When one teenage male was asked how he handled being a dancer, he said:

(CLICK)

“If you’re strong enough to dance, you're strong enough to put up with the -” well, you can read.

Thanks for watching!

