

Choice Based Directing: Promoting Inclusivity in Middle School Theatre Programs

By Brooklyn Riggs

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching Theatre & Dance K-12.

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Project Summary

This capstone and the accompanying project was seeking to cultivate my approach and techniques into something accessible for other middle school theatre directors and educators. It documents the work that I have already executed using this directing approach. This project intends to answer the question, *how can implementing Choice-Based Directing promote inclusivity in a middle school theatre program?*

I set out to create a professional development program to promote my Choice-Based Directing process that I developed in schools and communities. It carefully guides participants through Choice-Based Directing by giving a thorough background to its development and examining the definition of Choice-Based Directing. It also engages adult learners in ways to implement inclusivity by activities, handouts, and fundamental group building techniques. Inclusivity is the continual practice of including those who are commonly excluded and marginalized. In this capstone, I also use inclusivity as a definition for including middle school theatre participants in more than just acting and stage space. More examples are shown through the project along with outlining the previously mentioned harmful traditional methods and the rationale for why they need to cease being implemented in middle school theatre departments. The professional development itself is divided into two sessions. It consists of slide shows, speaker notes, activities and discussions, and handouts with tools and techniques.

The main objective of this professional development focuses on the shift of the director's role and how to apply Choice-Based ideals to different aspects and areas of production when working on plays or any type of staged work.

In the discipline of theatre, specifically during my time in the industry, I had not seen many professional development programs or activities catered especially to theatre educators and

directors. Just this year, I found that there were many different professional development programs in many areas of theatre, but not as many regarding theatre education and directing in the same experience. Creating a professional development for theatre is unique due to how few there are in the education realm. It is beneficial to adult learners because they have the basic concept of what a professional development is already. The project is identified as created for the audience of middle school theatre educators and directors, working with grades 6-8 or 5-8.

The content of the professional development information can be presented in a number of ways. It can be in written form, online, or through in-person workshops. It can also be an appropriate setting for administrators and other staff to attend and better understand what a theatre department encompasses. Each faculty group will have different ideas and understandings of how theatre fits within the mission of the school and will perceive the benefits of Choice-Based Directing differently. Some content can be presented by speaking, some can be shown in a video or powerpoint, and some can be experienced through hands-on learning as well, such as group brainstorming and activities. A professional development, particularly for theatre, can be so versatile.

The professional development is accompanied by a slide deck made on Google Slides. It includes speaker notes in a separate Google Doc, all converted to a PDF format. Participants will learn the development process of Choice-Based Directing as well as be presented with concrete reasoning for adopting the process into their theatre programs. They will also learn the downfalls of continuing with traditional methods of running theatre departments and the ways that it will ultimately not be able to retain the theatre departments by use of these outdated practices. Integrated in the presentation is also two active activities, a group discussion, and some handouts on the fundamentals, tools, and techniques of Choice-Based Directing.

Ist PD Session (1.5 hours):

[Title Slide] Opening Greeting: Hello Everyone,

My name is Brooklyn Riggs. I am a middle school theatre educator and play director. I have been involved in the theatre industry since I was a middle school student myself. I am here today to present a professional development specifically for middle school theatre departments, something I have never seen before in my years of theatre and theatre education. This three part series is designed to provide a better way of running and retaining middle school theatre departments by revamping current practices and directing styles. If you already use some of the approaches I have developed for Choice-Based Directing, I am hopeful that maybe some others will be new to you or that you will come out of this with more resources at the very least. If this is entirely new to you, I hope I have made a positive impact and have persuaded you to embrace a new direction!

[Backstory of Choice-Based Directing Slide with Bullet Points] I am sorry that I will be talking at you for much of this first session. I am optimistic that my backstory of how Choice-Based Directing came to be will inspire you to try it with your students!

In the summer of 2018, I was hired to direct a middle school play for a small town in Wright County, MN. I learned that I would be replacing the woman who had been running the program as essentially a one-woman show with her husband for the past 30 years or so. The program was structured around her system for doing the work. It did not take long for me to discover after her departure, she took all her costumes, sets, props, community contacts, and resources. No matter, I was able to lead the audition process with some help from some of the high school theatre students and the town community ed. As I set up for auditions, I heard whispers and murmurs around me. Students looked at me; some with wonder and excitement, some with hesitation, some in plain distress. Part of me thought to dismiss this because most kids that age, and really anyone in the theatre industry, go through all different emotions through the audition process. An even larger part of me felt something was amiss. Eventually, some parents and students began expressing their thoughts and feelings about the past program to me, many of them not sparkling in review. The past director called students to rehearsal every day, even if their character specifically was not rehearsing that day, making the students feel their time was not valued and their desire to participate was unfulfilled. Students were repeatedly cast in roles without so much as a single line, there were clear favorites among the casting, and the kids were afraid to be reprimanded and “barked at.” Responding to this feedback, I conducted auditions and was as encouraging as possible. I answered the actors’ questions and allowed them all to read differing roles. I also decided to add some games and pantomimes in groups, and took careful notes throughout the casting process.

It was clear to me the previous director was an example of someone who was burned out or did not enjoy working with children and creating live theatre anymore. I knew immediately I needed to be dynamically different with a cast of kids looking to be reborn on that middle school stage. This was my chance to implement some new practices and turn the hierarchy of theatre director and cast on its head. It was my objective to breathe life into this department again. I decided that my approach needed to be of ingenuity, changing the paradigm from control to collaboration, and that is how my directing style, which I have coined *Choice-Based*, came to be.

Choice-Based Directing started as a hypothesis, testing theories by making choices that were the exact opposite of what the department had done before. I scheduled certain scenes and characters to be worked with on certain days, so students were still able to enjoy their summer and participate fully when they were at rehearsal. I actively rejected typecasting as I chose students for roles in the show. My lead female role was not your stereotypical “stick-thin blonde” girl, my actor who had behavioral issues played *two* roles, and my “prince” was actually a princess. I also began to give students choices when it came to blocking. For example, I asked them what they thought their character should be doing, where they should be sitting, *if* they should be sitting, and how they should move through the production. I allowed breakout spaces, supervised by the high school assistants, for students to come up with some of their own choreography, and allowed groups to vote on how a certain scene transition should be executed.

I recall a day when a group of actors came to me and told me they were not a fan of the soundtrack that went with the production. My response was not to become defensive or hostile but rather to say, “Well then, let’s change it!” This resulted in two actresses singing *a capella* for one song between their characters and using different tracks for other song numbers. The final production was so much more upbeat and gave it an overall whimsical feel that it didn’t have before. As an adult, I had the final say but my students were fully engaged. Later one of my seventh-grade students, who played the title character, told the school newspaper how much he enjoyed the show experience and commented on the Choice-Based Directing style. The actor stated, ... “he has appreciated that freedom”. He suggested that the outcome of this approach was that it made the show more unique in unexpected ways and overall an enjoyable experience. He encouraged people to come see the show because of how fun the experience was. This positive feedback strongly affirmed that my efforts had paid off and that Choice-Based Directing was the way to create lasting engagement in productions with middle school students.

[Discussion and Brainstorming Slide] Today, we are going to have a discussion at your tables. I am going to ask you to brainstorm what student voice/choice means in your classroom or program?

[Give 5 minutes or so and then hear some feedback from each table]

Thanks everyone those were some great points!

[Background and What We've ALL Seen Before Slide, with bullet points] I started working with children in theatre when I was 18 years old, as an intern and later moving up to assistant director. I went to college at Anoka-Ramsey Community College the following spring and earned my Associates in Fine Arts Theatre. Around this time, I started directing and discovered it was my true passion, even above acting. I arrived at St. Cloud State University the fall after my graduation from Anoka-Ramsey. I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Arts with an emphasis in Acting & Directing. I took a year off from school to gain some real-world experience in theatre. It was in this gap year, I realized that working with children in theatre was my calling. I enrolled at Hamline University to obtain my Masters in Art of Teaching Theatre & Dance K-12 in the spring of 2017. For my Masters, I had to complete a capstone project and paper. I have spent much time conducting research to support and shape Choice-Based Directing.

I worked with many directors in a variety of venues and styles of theatre. These experiences included community, in schools, and professional level. I carefully analyzed their directing styles, as well as how they went about directing other areas of production such as costumes, casting, stage management, and much more. I took notes of what I could take from them professionally to develop my own skills, and what I wanted to leave with them, traits that I could not see myself emulating in my directing. In some cases, it was not until years later that I realized I was too young and too inexperienced to question these directors at the time.

Learning from an experience, later down the road, has also been a factor in my cultivation of developing a directing style. Before 2018, I watched the students I was assisting through these productions. I watched them getting yelled at when it wasn't warranted and watched their faces fall. I sometimes saw the same students getting lead roles, and others being victims of typecasting, telling me they wished they had a chance to play a different kind of character. Always picking a student for a role because of how they look, is type-casting, which is a trap that many directors fall into. I watched some students lose motivation and eventually stop engaging or even asking to go home. When they would ask why they had to do something, their question was met with, "Because I said so!" instead of something constructive or useful. I believe as the actors who ultimately own their production, they deserved insightful explanations and answers. All of this, plus what my students told me, led me to approach this particular production with my Choice-Based Directing style.

The goal of this professional development is to help directors see how implementing Choice-Based Directing can help promote an inclusive theatre department, keep middle school students engaged, and foster a passion in students. That passion will be able to feed into the high school theatre program where the students have already learned the basics and will have a better

advantage of holding their own to such a program's rigor. Choice-Based Directing involves Social-Emotional Learning as well as avoids recreating productions which educators have seen in college or a professional version of a show, as students do not learn by recreating what others have done. I am hoping to bring a broader awareness of new ways to create theatre.

[Downfalls of Traditional Methods and Believed Benefits of Adopting Choice-Based Directing

Slide] My past experiences in theatre as an adolescent, theatre director, and theatre educator has taught me that the hierarchy of theatre in relation to the director and the cast has always been one without question and without much thought. You do as the director says and there is nothing else. This is an issue when it comes to educating children in theatre because it prohibits them from drawing their own conclusions and problem-solving. Furthermore, it directly keeps them less involved in other areas of production and execution of other production operations.

I have pulled from my experiences on both sides of the theatre hierarchy to create a working theory. Struggles I have encountered in this process include differences in directing styles and types of directors, not understanding the psychology of middle school students, and typecasting. These reasons may be why middle school theatre departments are unsuccessful and sometimes, elitist. In turn, creating an elitist department also dwindles the high school theatre department, as there are not many students to feed into the high school program. Even further down the road, this could potentially close down community theatres due to no one wanting to audition because of how non-inclusive the theatre industry was to these students. They may be reluctant to try again. These issues reflect my desire to create change in middle school theatre education, by practicing inclusivity, applying what I have learned from practice in my field, and continuing to implement Choice-Based Directing.

I believe implementing Choice-Based Directing will help build theatre programs and students themselves in a larger context of society. Students gaining their own voice will help them throughout their lifetime and that value is immeasurable. There will be more prepared and enthusiastic students (and parents, who are a huge help running booster clubs and raising funds), entering the high school theatre programs. It will better retain theatre departments and better educate students in theatre.

Middle school students typically become disengaged when they are not interested in what they are studying or have no choice in how they are learning or what they are learning about. I believe that understanding how middle school students think, and realizing they do better with having choices, will result in a better production. They will have a stake in it and will come to rehearsal with more willingness and feel that their thoughts are considered. Promoting inclusivity, creating a welcoming department, and considering all talents, will better allow for theatre education to continue and for theatre to keep thriving in schools. Directing styles drastically change the dynamics in a show and Choice-Based creates a wonderful balance of student voice and quality production.

[10 minute break]

[Choice Activity Slide] If I could have 3 volunteers come to the front for an activity, that would be great!

To person 1: You need to cross the room by marching and every third step, you must stomp your right foot. Ready? Go! [Person crosses room]

To person 2: You need to cross the room but you may do so by either skipping or hopping. Ready? Go! [Person crosses room]

To person 3: You need to cross the room, you may choose how you move. Ready? Go! [Person crosses room]

Thank you everyone, you may return to your seats. What did you notice that was different about each person's directions? [Gather responses]

I was showing that there are varying degrees in choice, right? Depending on the student and your level of either trust with them or their level of experience, you can tailor some of the choices you give your students.

[Definition slide] Choice Based-Directing is....

[Levels of Choice Slide] Upon closing, these are the levels of choice I have used to guide my practice. There is no choice, limited choice, and choice with factors as I call it. Limited choice is generally between one or two options, I typically use this for students with behaviors or for those who do not have as much experience in theatre for making blocking choices especially. Choice with factors, is more about keeping options open for students to decide, but giving them an objective or end goal to keep in mind.

[Closing Slide] I have a handout on the Levels of Choice for everyone, and thank you for attending this session! [Give Handout on Levels of Choice to participants]

2nd PD Session (1.5-2 hours):

[Title Slide] Opening Greeting: Hello and welcome to the final session of the Choice-Based Directing professional development. Part of the Choice-Based Directing initiative is to promote general good practices for running and retaining middle school theatre departments. There are several traditional (but also harmful) ways that theatre departments were conducted, and still are today. I'm talking about favoritism casting, Colorblind casting, gatekeeping practices, and type-casting. There are also issues within certain stances of directing that can become problematic.

[Retaining Department Slide]

Incorporating student voice will inevitably retain middle school theatre departments. This is a statement from the book *Real-World Theatre Education* by Rome and Dillard, commenting on the precedent we set for secondary school students. "In middle and high school, theatre is not a training ground for professionals. It's about nurturing kids and their appreciation for an art form in which they can participate for the rest of their lives. Theatre without an audience is no theatre at all, and our students are the generation of theatre-goers; the more they can enjoy its fun, richness, and energy, the more they are likely to continue to participate as they mature." We as directors, producers, and designers are instilling a passion they will carry with them all throughout their lives. This is why it is beneficial to change our practices from traditional methods to more inclusive applications.

[Theatre Directing Styles Slide] This next section will speak on the research of traditional methods of directing theatre and how the practice has carried for generations but catered to adults and applies to those with more experience in theatre.

You've got your general Text-Centered vs. Director-Centred approaches. These tend to work well, in theory, with adult performers and in professional theatre settings. However, I don't believe either of these work specifically for students in K-12 simply due to these techniques focusing on product, rather than process. Process is where students are learning skills and creating works with their input.

[Styles of Director Slide] Directors can choose any strategy on the continuum but the actual style of director depends on their personality and experiences. It's almost always pretty easy to spot and differentiate a professional from an amateur. Usually, directors will more closely align with one of four different styles of directing.; Dictator, Negotiator, Creative Artistic, and Confrontationalist.

First, is the dictator. The dictator director has a very aggressive and assertive role and is, well, a dictator. Rehearsals with this style of director are typically fully controlled, more predictable, and

the actors have little or no say. These directors typically use “I” and “My” statements. Second is the negotiator. The negotiator type of director will focus on a more immersive, improvised form of rehearsal. They usually use the ideas of the production team and the actors to shape a theatrical work. These directors will use a more democratic style of control. The third style is the creative artist director. This director sees “themselves as a creative artist working with the ‘materials’ of dramatic creativity”. This could mean they take inspiration from the process, the actors, and designers. Ultimately, they will want to have the final say over the production. They decide what is included and incorporated into a theatrical work. The final style director is the confrontationalist. This director will be in constant argument with the actors and designers in terms of decisions and interpretations. This director will actively engage in conflict with their actors and are generally very heated. I have high hopes of seeing this style of directing completely eradicated in my time. I would hope that a school would not hire this type of director especially, although it happens. Directors who work with this kind of style are typically amateurs and are insecure about their role. To compensate for this, they take on the “in charge” persona and become too busy managing to develop through the creative work, and they suck the joy out of cultivating a production. As an actor and director, I have worked with these types of fellow directors. Many of these kinds of directors are burnt out and full of ego; they are comparable to a few of the styles mentioned previously. This type of approach no longer suffices as an appropriate or effective directing style and will not keep middle school students engaged in the world of today.

[Harmful Practices Slide] There are certain signs that a director has been trained in traditional methods. Much of these directors run their departments by use of antiquated casting techniques, such as typecasting and others, which is more or less a dated and elitist practice.

Typecasting is usually casting students based on their body types. For example, casting the petite student as the child, and the larger student as an old lady or comic relief. In some schools, it has even been a topic of conversation that students of color are repeatedly cast as villains, which is an extremely harmful message being sent to those students, as I have been witness to this practice. Typecasting is eliminating opportunities and creating disparities in theatre departments, squashing dreams too early before they can participate in high school productions or in their community, I have seen this at play first hand. Even worse, if a student does not fit any “traditional” character body type, they may be excluded from the production entirely. It is viewed as putting limits on actors and this is allowing gatekeeping in theatre communities. This approach may allow students who may not be the most skilled or put in the most effort to be cast repeatedly in the same type of role. Due to these practices, theatre departments dwindle and eventually there are no actors within the casting pool. Students are also being shown that their learning and experimenting is limited in this capacity. One of my favorite quotes by PR Wojick is, “Type is relatively simple, shallow, and unchanging, whereas character is complex, deep, and

developing”. Directors are offering students a sub-par experience using this traditional method. Other harmful casting practices used are favoritism and colorblind casting.

Favoritism in theatre typically implies that the students that have spent the most time in the program are the most talented, and favorite students of the director are cast in the lead roles time and time again. This is called *program incest*. Running a theatre program in this fashion will guarantee that the department will dwindle once those students graduate. David Grote further explains the dangers of this when he says, “ The danger in this is that other students will believe that you are so committed to your favorites that there will be no room, or more importantly no parts, for newcomers. Once they begin to believe that, you won’t have any newcomers”. These directors ultimately wield much power in who will be included and excluded from the creative process. There are more options for casting in school productions. Directors in schools and community based programs typically have more autonomy in their casting choices, unlike their professional and film counterparts whose casting procedures are sometimes dictated by marketing, budgets, and scheduling. Yet, casting favorites is still a common practice in theatre departments, even though schools need not consider those same aspects. The downside of exclusion is it is a way of gatekeeping the theatre community and in turn creates elitist attitudes. This is harmful to middle school students, since at this level we are trying to instill a sense of appreciation for theatre. If they see theatre directors and educators will not teach them the necessary skills, they will not put themselves out there to audition. In my experience, I have witnessed middle school students become discouraged from participating in theatre productions due to Favoritism. Another kind of traditional casting method that is more-so outdated is Colorblind casting.

Colorblind casting is a term that essentially means the director can use their own discretion to cast roles that should belong to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students but instead cast students who do not have the cultural background that the role is calling for. Rome and Dillard even encourage this harmful practice in their book (which is the one general problem I have with the book). The passage explains that a student’s race or culture is irrelevant to the role in casting unless the play centers around race, and even then, theatre educators can choose to use Colorblind casting. Colorblind casting exhibited in two ways. First, “... a white actor getting cast in a role meant for a person of color” and secondly, “ ... a person of color being cast in a role their race exacerbates in the negative perceptions of the character”. This is similar to students of minority ethnicities being cast as villains or antagonists. Colorblind casting is seen as harmful because it has the ability to take away roles and representation from the already limited selection for people of color.

As traditional methods begin to give way for better practices, we start to see a shift in the thinking patterns of directors as we look into the next section for thoughts and advice from commendable directors.

[Collaboration, Admirable Mindsets, and Shifting towards the New Direction Slide] A directing approach taken on by Robert Knopf sees the director as a collaborator. This counters the works of William Ball, David Grote, and Jim Patterson, respectively, who put the director as the absolute overall center of the production. Their works serve as guides for how the director should run all aspects of the theatre and every department. This is extremely helpful for directors first starting out. Once the basic directing skill is mastered, the director can begin to work on cohesive approaches. Knopf's aim is not to command a precise collaborative process but to help one develop the skill and range of their collaborative skills. This approach means the director must accept the feeling of losing control, after establishing their boundaries and clearly stating their responsibilities to the production. Using this method allows for the designers and actors to have more creative avenues within the director's interpretation. Collaboration as a directing method begins to level the playing field of the theatrical hierarchy and challenges the notion of the director being the only deciding party throughout the whole process. However, within this method many hold the idea that in the overall production, the director makes the final decision. Since we are working with students, we of course have the overall final say, just as a precaution and coupled with that we just have more experience to base our endeavors on. Choice-Based Directing couples with the idea of Collaboration to build a better acting experience. Collaboration goes hand in hand with respect. Embracing a Choice-Based Directing style requires respecting others and their ideas. Listening to others' thoughts can create a new perspective on the piece or scene and can be seen as an opportunity to learn something new. Listening to the ideas of others not only helps the director create an atmosphere of respect, but also displays confidence in the director's own ideas. The director has the ability to be open to other thoughts because they have the final decision-making power.

[Director-Centered vs. Learner Centered Slide] In schools, our job as directors and educators is to first and foremost serve our students and community. Most theatre educators and directors who use best practices tend to rotate between director-centered and learner-centered styles of instruction, as coined by Joan Lazarus. Director-Centered practice is where the director has all the answers and tells students what to do, and often how and when. The director in this practice may also ask certain students for feedback, only at selected times. Learner-Centered practice is where the director has final say of the show but they include students in the decision making processes or decisions are made collaboratively. Some directors are unaware of how to transfer learning-centered practices to the theatre from the classroom. The next section of this session looks further into techniques and developing a more inclusive and learner-centered practice in the world of theatre and directing.

[The New Direction (Inclusive Practices & Change) Slide] Recently attitudes and practices in the theatre have been shifting, incorporating new understandings of student teaching and learning. Theatre teachers are often tasked with teaching schedules, after-school obligations, and programs

to run which can make challenging old habits and creating new ways of engaging students a daunting task. Thankfully, many theatre educators and researchers (and myself) have constructed guidelines for new ways of running a theatre department and overall a change in climate, resulting in students becoming more involved in productions and their learning.

Commonly, theatre directors run their departments on the grounds of exclusion, rather than inclusion. Typically, auditions are a grueling process for the actors and ultimately a cast list with very few names on it appears, posted publicly in a hallway, resulting in much disappointment and feelings of rejection. Grote guides theatre department directors in a direction of being encouraging and welcoming. He says, “Develop a program with easy entrance, but difficult advancement”. In order to develop committed students, start with welcoming all at the beginning, and gradually weed out those who do not improve or do not put in the work and effort. By being more inclusive, theatre departments will be more diverse and have more participants.

Inclusivity is the continual practice of including those who are commonly excluded and marginalized. In this capstone, inclusivity will also be used as a definition for including new directing practices, incorporating student ideas and choices, and implementing learner-centered practice. To build a diverse actor pool, one must include works by BIPOC and cast those students in roles that are meant for them. If directors must use colorblind casting, it is encouraged that they use a strong level of discretion when selecting material and casting plays. Essentially, if a director does not have the appropriate bodies of color to cast a role, specific to an already limited opportunity that is presented to actors of color, select another piece. In 2011, Bethany Nelson conducted a study with an urban middle school population, in a drama class. In the study, the class created a play themselves, bringing in their shared experiences as the basis of their story. Some feedback received from students was affirming the belief that underrepresented populations need to see themselves on stage. “In interview, they talked about the fact that ordinary people, who looked like them, and their family members, came together to make change and that it made it seem more possible for them”.

Allowing these kinds of opportunities makes theatre more accessible to a larger audience. Theatre not only is a form of entertainment, but is also serving humanistic needs. In order for those needs to be met for every student, they must be allowed the same types of experiences that theatre has to offer. Nicole Rhine states that it is starting to look like theatre is a way we regulate and balance our intellectual, emotional, and social needs through various stages of life. If that is the case, and theatre is shown to have intrinsic value beyond a shrinking elite, it will be seen as important to our well-being as clean water and fresh air. If more people can see the needs that theatre meets beyond entertainment, it may allow it to become more accessible.

Historically, the context of theatre and directing suggest that actors do as they are told and worry about themselves. They are usually less involved with the production as a whole and don't question the status quo. Moreover, the belief has been that if students wish to be in theatre productions, they must prove their worth by subjecting themselves to directorial methods such as yelling, weeding out the weak by holding standards unnecessarily high, and excessive reprimanding. Some examples of this include: not giving students any say or giving them constructive feedback, "that was terrible" or "you missed your line" without giving them any context or thoughtful suggestions. This is possibly the worst experience any student could go through in theatre and holding attitudes like this will ultimately lead to not future fans of theatre, but ones who feel indifferent to it or decide to avoid it altogether. Accessibility goes hand in hand with Inclusivity, adopting accessible and inclusive ideals will ultimately avoid a diminishing theatre department.

Devised theatre is a modern term for engaging students in more abstract ways of creating theatre and performance pieces. Using this approach, the director puts on an additional hat as a facilitator. Some pieces of inspiration for creating original pieces were things like poetry, newspaper articles, and art works. Traditional play texts may not speak to everyone, and generating organic material may be the key to keeping students actively engaged.

Speaking on student engagement, there are obviously more ways to go about it than just writing or including students' individual and shared experiences on stage. They can be involved in the planning process as well as the performing one. Just a few ways are asking for student feedback, considering their ideas for piece selection, and delegating student directors, choreographers, and designers. There are many ways to honor students and put their ideas into the production, but one of the largest ways is by giving choice.

[Choice & Sphere of Power Slide] Choice is an incredible source of power for middle school students. I have seen student morale increase when choice is given. Along with being welcoming and accessible, theatre educators must also be considerate of their student body and develop more inclusive practices. An actor, storyteller, and co-founder of *Artists Striving to End Poverty* says, "One thing I learned when it comes to organizing communities of people, to address institutional issues, is the importance of organizing spaces of power-organizing students who seemingly lack power, organizing faculty who have another level of power, and organizing administrators. Success is dependent on having people in every level engaging within their sphere of power." Students need to feel powerful in order to act. Nelson states, "Power and control, as defined by meaningful decision-making power, voice, and choice, is a physical and psychological wellness factor for children". Actors can become more confident in themselves if their choices are reflected in works. Nelson discussed in the 2011 study a situation in which student's choices in song were incorporated into the play. "This early indication that they had real power to make decisions, and that their cultural choices would be reflected in the finished

play, increased their commitment and risk-taking substantially”. This choice was a technical element but student choice can also be used in blocking and many other areas of production.

[Process vs. Product Slide] Choice-Based Directing closely aligns with learner-centered practices in theatre. Focusing on the process centered rather than the product centered parts of a production is the best way to culminate everything learned in a theatrical experience. Viola Spolin explains how process centered practice places importance over product centered practices, “It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts towards reaching a goal, we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a goal is superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it. When the goal appears easily and naturally and comes from growth rather than forcing, the end result, performance, or whatever, will be no different from the process that achieved the result. [...] How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself.”

As we see creative practices among directors and students improve, we have also seen attitudes in casting choices take a more inviting and sensible approach. Typecasting and favoritism in casting has become more scrutinized. They have become toxic practices, compared to newer guidelines further discussed later. Contributing to the New Direction, are improved casting practices.

Newer casting practices are less inherent in going for the physical “type” for a role, and are more focused on skill and dedication of the actor. Casting guidelines that place more advantage on the attributes that matter, rather than how the actor looks is more efficient in the long run. Talent, work ethic, focus, and commitment are qualities I would rather have among actors in my program, than a certain type of aesthetic. If all things are absolutely even, a theatre student gets the role over someone who isn’t officially enrolled in your program, and upperclassmen trump lower classmen, are some unwritten rules I live by. Always cast the skilled actor. Even though they don't seem like the exact type, the skilled actor will always pull you through. If you hire the type, you will spend the entire rehearsal period begging and pleading and pulling teeth, and frustrating everyone else in the cast. These casting guidelines will put any theatre department in a better position to thrive and maintain a steady base of student involvement.

My research served the purpose of further developing a substantial support for Choice-Based Directing, which is a concept I developed and pioneered. A large part of my research was matching findings to the population it was created for which was secondary education, more specifically middle school. Much of what I found supported what I was already fully aware of, which is theatre is a very useful tool for the development of adolescents in this age group. The research supported my initial bias that certain techniques were harmful, especially the types of directors and casting practices from traditional methods.

Choice-Based Directing is not only an approach to directing shows but also a formula for change in middle school theatre departments.

[15 min break] Alright, let's go ahead and take a 15 minute break!

[Activity Slide] Welcome back everyone! We have an activity to get everyone up and moving and to try one of the techniques used in Choice-Based Directing! With your table groups, each group will get the same script. Your group is deciding on blocking for exiting the stage. Once that is created and rehearsed a few times, we will gather as a large group and view each group's blocking choices. In the end, we will vote on which one is the best and talk about why! Ready? GO!

[Allow 10 minutes or so] [Set up staging area and call all groups back to their tables and complete activity] So which group had the best blocking for this script? Why? Okay so that's what we would go with for our show.

[Tools Handout Slide] This is a list of group fundamentals and techniques that make up Choice-Based Directing. This is a copy of the handout that I will be giving you and I will speak very briefly about them as we get ready to close this Professional Development.

- ❑ **Organic blocking-** is allowing the actors to develop trust in their own intuition and watch where their instincts take them. Of course, there is an objective, such as “your character needs to come in and cross by the window” but being encouraging of actors having ideas. It also allows students to internalize dramatic action. Of course, adjustments may be made for visibility, intent, etc.
- ❑ **Asking questions-** I ask my students to justify their choices, using questions such as, “do you think your character might sit down? why?”
- ❑ **Concept board-** this is a fun one, where students can already create a sense of ensemble by creating a concept or mood board for the show. This can have costume inspiration, lighting, art pieces, links to sound clips, etc.
- ❑ **Student work-** Allowing for some point in the year or as a classroom unit, to have students display their own works. Some examples are poetry slams, staged readings, student directed plays, etc.
- ❑ **Technical-** letting students choreograph a piece or part of a dance number for a show, get them involved, jobs, etc.
- ❑ **Rotating rehearsal-** This is a technique I used because I was lucky enough to have some high school acting assistants who were able to run differing parts of rehearsal. We would warm up with games together, and then I would work with a group of actors on

their blocking while another group of actors went with one of my assistants to practice choreography and another to practice singing and memorizing. They would continue to switch throughout the rehearsal and I would give the job to one of my students to rotate the groups when I was ready.

- ❑ **Not calling all cast members unless needed-** This I think is just general good advice, especially if you have students involved with sports or a show happening over the summer so the students can still enjoy their time and not feel as though it is not valued. I split up which actors I called via scenes in the script. I also specified what we would be working on for each rehearsal on the schedule so students would wear appropriate attire.
- ❑ **Carve out specific blocking for students to vote in groups-** just as we did with the group activity, it allows students to develop ensemble skills, look at differing perspectives, and fine-tune choices for blocking.
- ❑ **Choice on Aspects of Production-** such as costume (however small or large choice dependent on production) or sound.
- ❑ **Group Auditions-** for middle school, this is a less intimidating and more comfortable way to audition. I had my students read together from the script, but I also did pantomime activities and a few games.
- ❑ **Constructive feedback-** this approach is much favored over, “that was terrible!” The students typically don’t know why it wasn’t an ideal choice or what went wrong. I usually say something along the lines of, “that didn’t work because of__ (not using upstage hand, blocking someone else, we can’t see you, etc.) let’s try something else!”

[Closing Slide] Thank you to everyone who participated in the Choice-Based Directing professional development! I wish you well in your production season and I hope that I have given you some effective tools for use on your stage and in your classrooms! Goodbye!

Reference List:

[Once Upon A Broomstick by Sylvia Ashby Group Blocking Activity Source](#)



Choice-Based Directing

A Professional Development in 2 sessions
by Brooklyn Riggs

The Choice-Based Directing Backstory....

- Created 3 years ago.
- Approach was tested with 35 students in grades 5–8.
- Had 7 High School students assist with the production.
- The musical was *The Adventures of Robin Hood: The Musical–Sort of*
- It was the most incredible and life-changing experience for me.

Brainstorming & Discussion Activity

At your tables, brainstorm what student voice/choice means in your classroom or program? We will share out in 5 minutes!

What We've ALL Seen Before!

- Directors barking at their actors.
- Students asking to go home.
- Typecasting.
- A cast list posting and fallen faces.
- “Because I said so!”

Downfalls of Traditional Methods/Reasons to Adopt Choice-Based Directing

Why Middle School Theatre Departments Are Often Unsuccessful:

- No Student Voice or Choice Incorporated
- Traditional and Outdated Methods
- Not Understanding the Psychology of Middle School Students.
- Not Enough Inclusivity.
- Run as an Elitist Department.
- Not Enough to Feed into the High School Theatre Program.

Benefits to Adopting Choice-Based Directing:

- Incorporates Much Student Voice and Choice.
- New Casting Practices and ways to Improve Theatre Departments.
- Promotes Inclusivity.
- Better Retains Middle School Theatre Departments.
- Will Feed into the High School Theatre Program and will be able to handle the rigor of a High School program.

Choice-Based Activity!

3 Volunteers Please!

Exploring the Differing Levels of Choice

What did you notice?

Choice-Based Directing Definition

Choice Based-Directing: is a student-centered theatre production process. Choice-Based Directing empowers students to be equal partners in the process of creating dramatic work. Choice-Based Directing shifts the traditional role of the director from determining all creative choices for a show to becoming a facilitator of conversations and decisions. Choice-Based Directing focuses on the importance of process in creating a show rather than simply the product.

Levels of Choice

Level: No Choice

This is when a production element is specified a certain way in the script or just when giving choices is not safe or applicable to the production.

Example: You need to cross the room by marching and every third step, you must stomp your right foot.

Production Example: When I was in rehearsal for Robin Hood, I did not allow the boys the option of not wearing tights because it would compromise the integrity of the show.

Levels of Choice Cont.

Level: Limited Choice

This is a choice level typically used with less experienced or students with behaviors, for making blocking choices especially. Of course, you could use this for costume choice or sound as well as any other element of production that allows for student choice.

Example: You need to cross the room but you may do so by either skipping or hopping.

Production Example: I would ask my students if their character would be sitting or standing and why. This gives them a this or that choice. It is not an infinite number of choices and it sets limits while also allowing students a say.

Levels of Choice Cont.

Level: Choice with Factors

This is more about keeping options open for students to decide, but still giving them an objective or end goal to keep in mind or complete.

Example: You need to cross the room, you may choose how you move.

Production Example: There was part of the script where I had not decided how a certain group of actors would enter SR. Their only objective was that they needed to come through a door. I let the students get into groups and design blocking. Then, we presented and voted as a large group and everyone was happy with the result.

Thank You!

Thank you for attending the first session of the Choice-Based Directing Professional Development! There are copies of the Levels of Choice handout for everyone to take!

A photograph of a grand, ornate theater interior. The stage is the central focus, featuring a large, dark red, textured backdrop with a central golden emblem. The theater is filled with rows of red seats, and the walls are decorated with intricate patterns and gold accents. The lighting is warm and focused on the stage.

Choice-Based Directing

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Retaining Theatre Departments

Rome and Dillard (2015) comment on this precedent we set for secondary school students:

“In middle and high school, theatre is not a training ground for professionals. It’s about nurturing kids and their appreciation for an art form in which they can participate for the rest of their lives. Theatre without an audience is no theatre at all, and our students are the generation of theatre-goers; the more they can enjoy its fun, richness, and energy, the more they are likely to continue to participate as they mature. “ (p. 33)

Theatre Directing Styles

- Text-Centered
- Director-Centered
- Dictator
- Negotiator
- Creative Artistic
- Confrontationalist

Styles of Director

- The Dictator- this director has a very aggressive and assertive role. Rehearsals with this style of director are typically fully controlled, more predictable, and the actors have little or no say. They typically use “I” and “My” statements.
- The Negotiator- this type of director will focus on a more immersive, improvised form of rehearsal. They usually use the ideas of the production team and the actors to shape a theatrical work. These directors will use a more democratic style of control.

Styles of Director Cont.

- Creative Artist- this director sees themselves as a creative artist working with the 'materials' of dramatic creativity. This could mean they take inspiration from the process, the actors, and designers. Ultimately, they will want to have the final say over the production. They decide what is included and incorporated into a theatrical work.
- Confrontationalist- this director will be in constant argument with the actors and designers in terms of decisions and interpretations. This director will actively engage in conflict with their actors and are generally very heated. Directors who work with this kind of style are typically amateurs and are insecure about their role. To compensate for this, they take on the "in charge" persona and become too busy managing to develop through the creative work, and they suck the joy out of cultivating a production. This type of approach no longer suffices as an appropriate or effective directing style and will not keep middle school students engaged in the world of today.

Harmful Practices

- Typecasting
- Favoritism
- Color-Blind Casting
- Making Programs Competitive and Difficult Entry

Collaboration, Admirable Mindsets, and Shifting towards the New Direction

- Robert Knopf–Collaboration Mindset
- Knopf’s aim is not to command a precise collaborative process but to help one develop the skill and range of their collaborative skills.
- This approach means the director must accept the feeling of losing control, after establishing their boundaries and clearly stating their responsibilities to the production.
- Using this method allows for the designers and actors to have more creative avenues within the director’s interpretation. Collaboration as a directing method begins to level the playing field of the theatrical hierarchy and challenges the notion of the director being the only deciding party throughout the whole process.
- Choice–Based Directing couples with the idea of Collaboration to build a better acting experience. Collaboration goes hand in hand with respect. Embracing a Choice–Based Directing style requires respecting others and their ideas. Listening to others’ thoughts can create a new perspective on the piece or scene and can be seen as an opportunity to learn something new. Listening to the ideas of others not only helps the director create an atmosphere of respect, but also displays confidence in the director’s own ideas. The director has the ability to be open to other thoughts because they have the final decision–making power.

Director-Centered vs. Learner Centered

- Developed and used by Joan Lazarus
- Director-Centered practice is where the director has all the answers and tells students what to do, and often how and when. The director in this practice may also ask certain students for feedback, only at selected times.
- Learner-Centered practice is where the director has final say of the show but they include students in the decision making processes or decisions are made collaboratively. Some directors are unaware of how to transfer learning-centered practices to the theatre from the classroom.
- The next section of this session looks further into techniques and developing a more inclusive and learner-centered practice in the world of theatre and directing.

The New Direction (Inclusive Practices & Change)

- Inclusivity
- Choice
- Improved Casting Practices

Choice & Sphere of Power

“One thing I learned when it comes to organizing communities of people, to address institutional issues, is the importance of organizing spaces of power—organizing students who seemingly lack power, organizing faculty who have another level of power, and organizing administrators. Success is dependent on having people in every level engaging within their sphere of power.” – Artists Striving to End Poverty

“Power and control, as defined by meaningful decision-making power, voice, and choice, is a physical and psychological wellness factor for children” – Bethany Nelson

Process vs. Product

“It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts towards reaching a goal, we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a goal is superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it. When the goal appears easily and naturally and comes from growth rather than forcing, the end result, performance, or whatever, will be no different from the process that achieved the result. [...] How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself.” – Viola Spolin

Directing Activity!

With your table groups, each group will get the same script. Your group is deciding on blocking for exiting the stage. Once that is created and rehearsed a few times, we will gather as a large group and view each group's blocking choices. In the end, we will vote on which one is the best and talk about why!

[Script Activity](#)

Choice-Based Directing Tools & Techniques

This is a list of group fundamentals and techniques that make up Choice-Based Directing.

- Organic blocking
- Asking questions
- Concept board
- Student work
- Technicals
- Rotating rehearsal
- Not calling all cast members unless needed
- Carve out specific blocking for students to vote in groups
- Choice on Aspects of Production
- Group Auditions
- Constructive feedback

Thank You!

Thank you for your participation in the Choice-Based Directing Professional Development! I hope this has been beneficial to you for your students, classrooms, productions, and departments!