

LESLEY UNIVERSITY

A Letter of Support

The role of TLD in promoting diversity and social change educational programs in schools and communities

Lindsay 'Jag' Jagodowski

Dear members of the Massachusetts Cultural Council,

You have to opportunity, through your grant funds, to have a broad positive effect on the many populations of our state. I am certain that the decisions you make as to who receives funding are based on what art forms, artists and programs will have the most in depth and long term positive effects on the people of Massachusetts. This is why I am writing to you, in order to advocate for the funding of applied theater practitioners and projects across the commonwealth.

You may be asking, how applied theater is different from classroom drama or after-school theater as it stands in our schools and community centers. “Whereas traditional mainstream theater is most often centered in the interpretation of a pre-written script, applied theater, in contrast, involves both the generation and the interpretation of a theater piece that in performance may or may not be scripted...” (Pendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 7). The focus of applied theater is on the inclusion of multiple perspectives through improvisation, movement, issues that hold personal importance for those involved and audience participation in the theatrical presentation. It is not, in the end, theater in its traditional definition, but a collection of scenarios developed by the actors to process an issue and look for resolutions.

I am writing to you today, in support of funding for applied theater practitioners across Massachusetts who are looking for grants that will allow them to do this important work and benefit the constituents of our fair state. Through applied theater a safe place can be created for inclusive, respectful and culturally responsive learning about issues that affect people every day. According to Albers and Harste (2007):

“Education is a process of enabling a person to become different, breaking with the taken-for-granted, what is normal and natural, and looking through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing and feeling in a conscious endeavor to change perspective on the world” (p. 9).

I am asking that you take a serious look at all applications for applied theater grants and take into consideration the following examples and research that support the positive effects this work will have in our communities. Throughout this paper I will look at four populations within our greater community that will benefit from your funding of the applied theater grant applications.

One population throughout Massachusetts that would benefit greatly from the experience of applied theater is our elementary school age students. Theater in general and applied theater in specific is ideal for working with this age group to look at their social issues and their place in society. Chris Cooper (2004) shared his insight that,

“The arts, and in particular theatre and drama, are ideally equipped for learning because they engage children as individual, social and cultural beings. Dramatic situation gives learning a context. Like all stories, it gives them something, someone, a dilemma to care about; it matters and it resonates with their lives... To be human, young people must create themselves through the imagination in order to have self-ownership. Through responsibility for ourselves we become socially responsible” (p. 4)

Elementary aged students are dealing with social issues ranging from peer pressure and bullying to home problems and feelings of being excluded due to their culture. Through the practice of applied theater, they can express their feelings about these situations as well as learn and teach each other ways to resolve conflicts.

Applied theater also addresses multiple State Standards for the Elementary grades. Some of the arts discipline standards for theater that are specifically touched upon are 2.4 Reading and Writing Scripts: Create a scene or play with a beginning middle and end based on an original idea, 3.1 Directing: Experiment with and make decisions about the visual configuration of the

acting space, and 5.3 Critical Response: Articulate reasons for particular emotional responses to drama. Through the work of applied theater students are given the time and space to learn about their own emotions about the subject as well as to see the view points of many others. Because of the special nature of this work students are able to work in a safe space and have respectful and inclusive conversations that can lead to social change. Beale (2001) had the insight that,

“Because drama does not resolve all the conflicts it depicts, students are free to explore and evaluate possible alternative solutions and actions. Perhaps, more than anything else, the drama serves to clarify the universality of human fears, weaknesses, and difficulties – the fact that one is rarely alone with a problem or concern. This is particularly true when the issue is bullying” (p. 304).

For the elementary aged students in Massachusetts, applied theater would provide an inclusive and multicultural aware mode for them to discuss their fears and problems. When looking at what projects you will fund, I believe these would be the most beneficial and have the most long term learning for all involved. Fowler (1994) summarized the need for this kind of art in our schools when he said that “One of the most important contributions the arts make to the development of young people is the cultivation of their emotional and spiritual wellbeing” (p. 8).

Another population that could greatly benefit from the work of applied theater is our high school age students throughout Massachusetts. Just as in the elementary grades these students are dealing with social problems like bullying and peer pressure, but they have mounting social pressures with relationships, drugs and achievement culture or the pressure to be better than the rest. What applied theater offers these students is a way to communicate openly about these pressures and the effects that we as adults may not see that are happening. We want our youth to be open to learning about others, becoming happy, whole multicultural beings and to this end we

must offer them opportunities to learn more than from books, but from each others' experiences and cultural knowledge. "How is it possible to create this kind of learning? I think it is possible only if we are willing to have a curriculum that says everyone has the potential to understand, and everyone brings meaningful experiences to the classroom ... I think that multicultural education means looking at the possibilities for locating identity and experience in different ways" (Cahan & Zoya, 1996, p. 40). By funding applied theater practitioners to come to the schools you can open up the opportunity for our high school students to talk about the issues at hand and multiculturalism in an open, safe and inclusive forum. They will be able to expand their understanding not only of theater, but of humanity as well.

High school students can also achieve State Standards through the practice of applied theater. Some examples of the standards met would be; 1.20: To demonstrate sensitivity to audience responses, 2.13: Collaborate on an original script, and 3.8: Perform for a variety of audiences. Just as important as the standards of learning, is the human growth that can take place. Applied theater can be used as a form of intervention that will create sustainable change through open discussion of the issue at hand. During the process of applied theater students will decide on a subject or a problem that is personal to them and look into it deeply for solutions and try to find the root of the problem if there is one. For example, Kemeh (1996) worked with high school students in Washington State. The students chose to focus on the issue of gangs in their community and the pressure to join. "Through intensive questioning, discussions, and improvisation exercises, the students developed a story-line. This was transformed into scenarios with conflicts, situations, characters and dialogue" (p. 51). The students aim was, through audience participation to open the lines of communication with the adults in their community and

“elicit more direct school-community cooperation for taking action and finding solutions for concerns” (p. 52) that came up through the discussions after the performance.

The third population I would like to look at is the often marginalized English Language Learners. Because applied theater uses movement and action more heavily than scripts it creates a unique opportunity for the ELL community to express their concerns to the greater community. Whether we are speaking of students in an ESL classroom, showing their learning about a subject or adults who have immigrated and are learning English as a means to better their job position, it is important to hear the concerns of these often unheard voices. Some of the issues for the ELL community that could arise are access to education, access to employment or being marginalized by the wider society and made to feel like outsiders. Through applied theater, these communities would have the opportunity to reflect upon what they view as social issues they are dealing with and discuss them openly and process the issue.

If we look specifically at an ESL classroom, or ESL integrated classroom this raises in specific the concept of multicultural education. Applied theater employs all of the art forms (music, dance, visual art, etc.) as part of the communication. This creates a welcoming and safe environment for students to express their thoughts and feelings. Powell (1997) said that,

“I don't believe that it is stretching too far to say that, having experienced yourself as a creator in the arts, you will be a better teacher in a classroom like this. For one thing, the arts help teachers become multilingual, because the arts are many languages. You can say things in music that you cannot translate into words; when you dance a concept, it is not the same as when you speak about it. The visual arts are their own particular language, not a shortcut for words ... The more languages a teacher can use, the better chance he or she has to speak (and listen) to diverse students” (p.6).

It is important that all students feel that their concerns are heard and that we are focused on what they need and what they are learning. By funding applied theater, you would be extending another wonderful opportunity to these students to feel valued as individuals and as cultural beings. Some of the goals of multicultural education are to “depict each group as the group would depict itself and show the group as active and dynamic” (Grant & Sleeter, 2001, p.68). What better way to do this than to open a forum for the ‘group’ to express and celebrate their culture with the rest of the community through applied theater? By showing what is great about their culture to the rest of the population, students gain a feeling of pride and acceptance.

The fourth population that could be greatly served by the offering of applied theater practices is the homeless population of Massachusetts. This is a population that needs to be empowered and better understood by those around them. Many assumptions are made about people who are homeless by those more fortunate and the ability to educate others about their situation can better the homeless in many ways through building self-esteem and creating lines of communication. They face such social issues as unemployment and drug abuse, but also stigma and concerns about lack of universal healthcare. Through applied theater projects the community would have the opportunity to express their frustrations, wants and needs to each other and to the rest of the community. Through applied theater people can access their personal creativity. “Creativity involves drawing on sources from within, finding images, words, sounds, or movements inside oneself to express one’s perceptions. That is what artists do ... As they find these inner resources, they begin to affirm that what is in them is trustworthy and valuable” (Powell, 1997, p.2). The opportunity is yours, to fund these projects, that will help the homeless population access what makes them strong individuals and members of a community. Augusto Boal, a

theater practitioner who created the theater of the oppressed, said best the goal of applied theater with such populations when he said, "Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it" (Boal, 1992, p. xxxi).

When thinking of applied theater, the practitioners and those who will benefit from the projects it is important to remember that "Learning through drama is not always immediate. In fact, a rich drama experience often takes time to become internalized, and the impact the process and/or product has on a participant may only emerge some time later" (Belliveau, 2005, 24). As with many art forms, the outcomes can only truly be seen by talking to those who have benefited personally from the process. Kemeh (1996) shares some thoughts from a student about the process; "Words do help people in real life. It doesn't matter if your color is different. You're the same inside" (p.53). In a personal communication with Kemeh, students shared such thoughts as "Since we started making the play, I've noticed that every time I'm saying things stereotypical, I know it" and "It got us thinking. It makes you aware of people around you and yourself." This stands as proof that real learning happens through the applied theater process which helps students and people in general to grow as human beings and deal with problems. As an educator, an artist and a member of the Massachusetts community I ask for your strong consideration of all grants that support applied theater practitioners and projects. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lindsay Jagodowski', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Lindsay 'Jag' Jagodowski

REFERENCES

- Albers, P. & Harste, J. (2007). The arts, new literacies, and multimodality. *English Education*, 40(1), 6-20.
- Beale, A.V. (2001). 'Bullybusters': Using drama to empower students to take a stand against bullying behavior. *Professional School Counseling*, 4(4), 300-306.
- Belliveau, G. (2005). An arts-based approach to teach social justice: Drama as a way to address bullying in schools. *International Journal of Arts Education*. 3 (2005): 136 – 165
- Boal, A. (1992). *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. New York: Routledge.
- Cahan, Susan & Zoya Kocur (1996) *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. New York. Routledge.
- Cooper, C. (2004). 'A struggle well worth having': the uses of theater-in-education (TIE) for learning. *Support for Learning*, Volume 19 (number 2), 81-87.
- Fowler, C. (1994). *Strong Arts, Strong Schools*. Educational Leadership. 52(3), 4-9.
- Grant, C.A. & Sleeter, C.E. (2001) Race, class, gender and disability in the classroom. In J.A. Banks & C.A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues & perspectives* (pp. 59-71). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Kemeh, M. (1996). *Enriching multicultural education through the popular theater dimension*. Multicultural education, San Francisco, CA. Caddo Gap Press.
- Pendergast, M & Saxton, J. (2009) *Applied theater: International case studies and challenges for practice*. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press.
- Powell, M.C. (1997) The arts and the inner lives of teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 78 (6), 450-453.
- Salas, J. (2005) Using Theater to Address Bullying. *Educational Leadership*. Retrieved from http://www.playbacktheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Salas_PT-Addresses-Bullying.pdf