

Running Head: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN

**What Happens When I Use Journals and  
Issue-Based Drama in a Dysfunctional Classroom?**

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EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice

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(U) Drama + Journals

### Question in Context

I teach two honors 10<sup>th</sup> grade courses (Scene Study and Musical Theater) as part of the University Program of Theater Arts at Ramapo High School. The University Program is, according to its website, “an integrated program of dance, theatre and vocal music classes balanced by related electives and other core academic courses to help students become creative, multi-faceted performers who are well prepared for rigorous college programs” (Ramapo Indian-Hills, 2006). In four years of teaching in this program, the students have been very similar. Generally, they are a very positive group who are friends outside of school. In addition, they audition for (and usually get leading roles in) the school plays. Although they may not be the most talented students, they genuinely want to work on their crafts as actors. They claim that their performance classes are the highlights of their days. Indeed, the performance classes are usually the highlight of *my* day. I am surrounded by students who *want* to be in the classes and *enjoy* the company of their peers. My classroom management and discipline usually involves quieting excited voices or quelling some jealousy among students competing for a role.

In September of 2005, however, a very different group of students entered my classroom. The most noticeable difference was the number of students in the class. The typical enrollment for the second year of the program is twenty; this sophomore class started at eight and quickly became a class of seven. During their freshman year, a “powerful” student disputed her grade in the Introduction to Theater course. When her dispute proved unsuccessful, she left the program and took fourteen students with her. The students who remained were sad at the start of the year and questioned their involvement in the program. This disillusionment was amplified when, one week into the

school year, a young man left the program because he was called “fag” as he entered the dance studio. The remaining seven, with few exceptions, did not spend time with each other socially outside of the classroom, and their way of relating to each other was mocking each other in a supposedly good-natured way. Unlike their predecessors, most did not audition for productions outside of school and viewed the upperclassmen who participated in the drama club as “geeks”.

The six women in the class were an assortment of Ramapo High School girls. “Liz” and “Anne” were cheerleaders. They were closest thing to “friends” in the classroom. Their bonding, unfortunately, took the form of obsessively talking about boys, celebrities, clothes and, of course, making fun of other students. “Beth” and “Libbey” were both new to the school district. The other students in the class had gone to school together since elementary school—Beth and Libbey were outsiders. Although Beth and Libbey did not dress like the cheerleaders, they sometimes created a foursome with Liz and Anne. Liz and Anne were the perpetrators, and Beth and Libbey were the bystanders. “Margot” was a little overweight, but she was smart and sarcastic. She could generally hold her own amongst the cheerleaders and was included in some of their social events. “Trish” was a straight-A honors student with a beautiful voice and wonderful work ethic. During the school year, Trish starred as Fantine in a local youth theater’s production of *Les Misérables* and was featured in two school plays. Trish treated every student in the class with kindness and respect. Unfortunately, Liz and Anne did not reciprocate Trish’s consideration.

The only boy who remained in the class, “Bob”, was the main target of ridicule. “Bob” was obviously different from most students at affluent Ramapo High School. His

clothes were ill-fitting and out of style. His hair was long and messy. His skin was pimply and flaky. On the first day of the class, Liz and Anne openly mocked his first-day outfit and chastised him for not cutting his hair over the summer. I was appalled and, frankly, caught off guard by their meanness and the openness—how could they mock him front of *me*? Somehow, I was able to curb the public harassment in my classroom, but I know that Bob dealt with harassment from University Program classmates and countless other students on a daily basis. In November, the theater arts teachers (and, unfortunately, students) became aware of Bob's acute order problem. We reported it to his guidance counselor and the school nurse, but the only result seemed to be that he was even more self-conscious and defensive.

In addition, Bob's home life was also horrific. His parents had bitterly divorced ten years earlier. The bizarre custody arrangement, in which he alternated two days at one parent's house and two days at the other parent's house, further added to his personal issues. One obvious outcome was that he literally lived out of bag that he stored in my classroom during the day. In February, one of Bob's friends, a junior in the University Program, attempted suicide. Bob gave me a card to give to her during one of my visits to the hospital. The card said, "I know how you feel. I think about killing myself all the time." Greatly concerned about this comment, I gave the card to the school counselor and, thankfully, his home situation improved. School remained difficult for Bob.

Although I knew it was both unethical and unprofessional, I wanted to tell his classmates about Bob's life. Perhaps if they understood the daily hell of his life, they would have empathy and treat him with kindness.

Although I have described the girls as being semi-demonic, there was a sweetness in them that emerged every-other day when “Dorian” visited. Dorian was a student from a self-contained class for students with significant special needs. Dorian was obsessed with musical theater! He was happiest when he was performing, listening to show tunes or sitting in a Broadway theater. Dorian was 19 years old and had been auditing my Musical Theater class for four years. The usually embittered 10<sup>th</sup> graders lit up when Dorian arrived. Everyone treated him, and miraculously each other, with respect. They volunteered to be his partner and helped him with tasks that required small motor coordination. Outside of my classroom, they said hello to him in the hallways and, as a result, befriended other students in Dorian special class. Dorian presence showed me the girls’ aptitude for compassion and understanding. How could I show them that Bob is also, in a sense, disabled?

In the context of this dysfunctional classroom, teaching acting and singing seemed trivial. If they were to leave my classroom in June as terrible performers but more humane people, I would be thrilled. However, I could not ignore the fact that these student voluntarily applied and enrolled in a theater arts program. Clearly, they had some interest in the performing arts. Perhaps, I could capitalize on the interest they had in acting and use it to improve the mood of the classroom and build classroom relationships.

Could the key be journaling? Journaling had always been a part of the Scene Study course. Traditionally, the journals had been used to explore dramatic characters and reflect on performances. For this class, however, this emphasis quickly moved away from the journal as an acting tool and became a form of introspection and therapy. The students used the journal to communicate their feeling about the class, their classmates

and the struggles of high school in general. Through writing, they shared that they were afraid of being ridiculed by their classmates. Journals provided a means of communicating intimate feelings that they could not express openly. In terms of performance, the sophomores resisted character work and memorizing and performing scenes but enjoyed short improvisations that they performed as part of a warm-up or characterization exercise. I decided to exploit their interest and develop an improvisation unit. I had been working as an actor with a company called Creative Interventions, headed by William Patterson associate professor Staci Block, which uses “psychodrama, sociodrama, playback theater, improvisation and the use of other action methods in working with clients” (William Patterson, 2004). Certainly, some of these techniques could be used in my classroom (under the guise of an acting exercise) to help the students recognize and modify their behaviors. Using journals and improvisation, I hoped to change the sophomore class and make the second half of their high school experience safer and more enjoyable. I began to research the question, “What happens when I use issue-based drama and journals in a dysfunctional classroom?”

### Review of Literature

When I became a high school teacher, I didn't realize that I would be responsible for teaching students to respect each other. I naively thought that I could simply teach my subject matter. I now realize that I am educating in a time that author David Elkind defines as "Postmodern Cosmopolitanism" (2000/2001, p. 13). In the postmodern world, students have less substantial contact with their parents. Adults (parents *and* teachers) assume that children, because of the Internet and television, are world-wise and relatively self-sufficient. Thus, students often lack the values that they would have learned at home during what Elkind calls "Modern Provincialism" (2000/2001, p. 12). The postmodern school, in response to these changes, has been forced to develop innovations to remedy the sociological necessities that arise in the cosmopolitan society. Although many educators have debated the necessity and educative value of these "improvements", Elkind argues that the postmodern teacher must embrace these programs as a means of teaching social roles and values. I have observed the effects of "postmodernism" in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in the University Program of Theater Arts at Ramapo High School. My students do not treat each other with respect and seemingly go out of their way to be mean or rude to each other. It is my hope that integrating intimate journaling and issue-based improvisation activities (like sociodrama and playback theater) will encourage an atmosphere of safety and empathy in my classroom and, perhaps, increase my students' creativity and interest in theater.

"Making Actors: A Paean to the Acting Journal" by Lissa Tyler Renaud espouses the power of physically writing in a journal. Renaud begins with an excerpt from *A Circle of Quiet* by Madeleine L'Engle that champions the corporeal act of writing:

Van Vechten was approached in a restaurant by a young man who fired earnest questions at him about his writing habits. The questions climaxed within this: 'Why do you write with a pen or on the typewriter? Why don't you dictate?' Van Vechten replied, 'An author doesn't write with his mind, he writes with his hands'. (Renaud, 2004)

I agree with Renaud and L'Engle, and I find the act of hand writing incredible powerful and personal. Renaud, an acting teacher, cites a medical study from Stanford University that tells of "growing evidence that stress management through writing can make medical treatment more effective" (Renaud, 2004). The act of writing "makes sense" for an actor because an actor must (a) access deeply-felt emotions and (b) return to different extreme states of emotion (Renaud, 2004). Renaud noted that her best acting students kept the best acting journals and this realization inspired her to contact other acting teachers to see how they and their students used journals. Her correspondence with her colleagues is enlightening. Michelle Cuomo used journals at the end of each class—students simply wrote down everything that had transpired for them during that class. Pat Cronin had students attack various "ego states" of a single character. Bill Smith had students take journals into the "real world" and write detailed observations of strangers (Renaud, 2004). All of these techniques had potential for success in my Scene Study/Musical Theater class. Although these journaling ideas were presented to Renaud as tools for the actor, the practices helped my students express what made them annoyed or uncomfortable during a single class period, explore the various "ego states" of someone other than themselves, and observe someone of a different race, age or social class.

While "Making Actors" focused on the journals of graduate student-actors and professional actors, "Writing In Imagined Contexts: Research Into Drama-Influenced Writing" by Jonothan Neelands (1993) studied the effect of integrating drama and writing



with high school students in Toronto, Canada. Many of the research subjects closely resemble the population of my classroom because they were 10<sup>th</sup> grade drama students (Neelands, 1993). In the study, teachers created opportunities for students to write plays or to write about dramatic themes in journals. The intention of this study was not to reform the behavior of the students but to change students' attitude towards writing (Neelands, 1993). However, one of the resounding results of the study was that students had "enhanced empathy and understanding for a range of people" (Neelands, 1993, p. 34). This was achieved "accidentally" when students were invited to take on several roles with conflicting values or positions. Students were then challenged to write in that unfamiliar voice in their journals. The journals revealed genuine sensitivity for different points of view (Neelands, 1993). The activity was used in my classroom. Journaling in another's voice, and at times the voice of a classmate, may have fostered empathy in the dysfunctional classroom.

Taking on characters that differ from the actors is a major part of issue-based drama. In "Improvisation Theatre and Personal Freedom", dramatherapist Teresa Steinfert explores the therapeutic possibilities of improvised performance including Theatresports, Psychodrama, Forum Theatre and Playback Theatre (Steinfert, 2004). Theatresports are competitions between teams of improvisers in games or scenes. Steinfert notes that the competitive nature of Theatresports and its comic tendencies often interfere with the curative benefits of improvisation (Steinfert, 2004). Theatresports, therefore, did not have a place in my classroom. Psychodrama, a synthesis of improvisation, group psychotherapy and sociometry, asks participants to draw emotional strength from the psyche of the group (Steinfert, 2004). Because of my inexperience

with Psychodrama, I would not attempt it in my classroom without a trained professional. Guest speaker, Staci Block, associate Professor of Sociology at William Patterson University, visited with my students and explained how she used Psychodrama with her patients. In addition to experience with Psychodrama, Block described and demonstrated Forum Theatre. Forum Theatre involves turning improvisation into “a rehearsed play with an unresolved problem” (Steinfort, 2004). The play stops at the ‘crisis moment’, and audience members replace the characters on stage until the issue is resolved (Steinfort, 2004). Ideally, Forum Theater helps the participants feel unified as they work together (and even share characters) to resolve an issue and finish the play. Playback Theatre was another element of therapeutic drama that was explored by Steinfort’s article and illustrated by Block’s visit. The Playback Theatre process “integrates image, sound, rhythm, embodiment, and narrative” to improvise an audience member’s story (Steinfort, 2004). The appeal of Playback Theatre is that it does not search for the solution in any given story, it simply uses improvisation as a “discussion starter” (Steinfort, 2004). Forum Theatre and Playback Theatre were the ideal improvisation modes to use in my classroom. Even Steinfort’s description of improvisation seems like an antidote to teenage self-involvement:

[Improvisation] demands participants to put aside expectations of success/failure and concerns about others' approval/disapproval for their actions. Paradoxically, it is with self-abandonment and an intuitive awareness of the present that the improvisers gain feelings of certainty. (Steinfort, 2004)

Ideally, improvisation has power to help students become less self-conscious and feel a sense a safety within a group.

Improvisation for teenagers is more thoroughly described in Elizabeth Swados’ “A Theatre of Their Own” (2006). Swados is an awarding winning composer and

playwright. Much of her work, including the young-adult drama *Runaways*, deals with teen issues. Swados cautions teachers of improvisation against turning “issue-oriented theatre work into bad therapy” (2006, p. 5). Although Swados recognizes the value of performing pieces that are easily relatable for teens, she notes that teachers are not “qualified to deal with the consequences of provoking a troubled child or teenage—or any child or teenager, for that matter—as he plunges into a nightmarish reliving of moments of terror or pain” (2006, p. 5). She offers two teaching specifics that were invaluable as she entered the process of teaching issue-based improvisation: (a) create rules that respect the art of acting and the actors and (b) balance difficult moments with fun moments (Swados, 2006). Swados suggested many rules for the acting classroom that involved respect. Her rules included the following:

1. No attitude. My message to actors is: you mouth off to me or someone else in the group or disrespect the work and you're out.
2. I care very much about how your day-to-day life affect you, but I won't allow moods and acting out during the workshop hours.
3. You will not criticize or make fun of one another's work. First of all it's rude, and second, you don't know enough. (2006, pp. 4 – 5)

The rules above helped create an environment that stressed safety and respect. The concept of balancing sensitive moments with lighter moments ensured the emotional safety of students. One of Swados' suggestions that I used regularly included dancing to loud music after a particularly dark moment (2006). I found that this distraction often ended any bitterness that may have been carried from a scene into the remainder of the school day. I also used journaling, which this group of students viewed as a treat, to “get out” the emotions they may not have been released in the improvised scenes.

“Urban Odyssey: Theatre of the Oppressed and Talented Minority Youth” by Michael Sanders chronicles a community-based research study and theatrical project that employed creative writing, drama and music to combat social problems. Although the student demographics in the study and Ramapo High School are very different (“Urban Odyssey” looked at African-American, underprivileged students from the city of Cleveland and the students in my Scene Study/Musical Theater class are all Caucasian, upper-middle class suburbanites), the students had a similar problem: for a variety of reasons, they did not feel safe. The study sought to give students comfort by exposing the problems that plagued them (Sanders, 2004). Using the work of teacher, actor and activist Augusto Boal and Philosopher Paolo Freire, the young people were able to “dialogue and act around issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and other social problems that they face as part of their everyday existence” (Sanders, 2004, p. 218). Using the Theater of the Oppressed model, the students developed the social skills of observation, analysis, cooperation and consensus building (Sanders, 2004). The article contains a detailed methodology that called on students to be writers, actors, singers and directors. The method was easily tweaked to incorporate the problems of suburban youth. Example questionnaires, included as tools for reflection on the project, were easily translated into journal prompts for students in my Scene Study/Musical Theater classes. “Urban Odyssey” shows that writing and acting can be powerful tools in social reform with young people.

In “Boredom and Its Opposite”, authors Richard Strong, Harvey Silver, Matthew Perini and Greg Tuculescu note that students need to develop interpersonal interest in order to develop empathy for each other (2003). They believe that boredom in the

classroom, which is fueled by the drive toward content mastery and higher test scores, is what causes behavioral problems. As students become increasingly depersonalized in the classroom, they have less respect for each other and mistreat each other (Strong, Silver, Perini & Tuculescu, 2003). Strong, Silver, Perini and Tuculescu suggest inventing situations that help “students learn about and change the world around them” (2003, p. 28). The article also proposes a “culminating event” that allows students to display their efforts in the community project (Strong, Silver, Perini & Tuculescu, 2003). During my improvisation/teen social problems unit, I never stated that our goal was to heal the social problems that existed in our classroom. Instead, I presented a question to the class: can the performing arts make the world a better place? The students took on the question and formulated improvisations that dealt with the social problems they had observed at Ramapo High School. Our “culminating event” was a show with an invited audience of mostly parents and siblings. In preparing for this event, the students came together and fulfilled their drives for “mastery, understanding, self-expression and interpersonal relationships” (Strong, Silver, Perini & Tuculescu, 2003, p. 29)

Although ultimately I worked with theater arts students, the goal of the project, teaching empathy and respect, is a universal educative goal that could be found in non-performance classes. Creating a safe classroom is emphasized in Stephen L. Wessler’s article “It’s Hard to Learn When You’re Scared” (2003). Wessler notes that all students, regardless of academic achievement, receive an inferior education if they are worried about being mocked or harassed in the classroom (Wessler, 2003). The responsibility for classroom environment, according to Wessler, falls on the teacher. He believes that “a respectful classroom requires a teacher who notices the interactions between students,

who follows up to learn why something unusual or harmful has occurred, and who does not tolerate harassment or social exclusion” (Wessler, 2003, p. 40). This statement inspires me to carry on the efforts made with the sophomore class into future classes regardless of their level of “dysfunction”. As I begin the 2006 -2007 school year, I hope to use the results of my research in performance-based classes and well as English classes to create a safe environment for *all* students.

### Methodology

In order to discover “what happens when I use journals and issue-based drama in a dysfunctional classroom”, I reviewed interviews, journals and detailed field notes of the Scene Study/Musical Theater classes.

I interviewed three people, Staci Block, Jonathan Samarro and Jamie Sporn. An interview with Staci Block, a social worker, psychology professor and director of an issue-based improvisation troupe, acquainted me with the essentials of teaching/directing improvisation. Block also gave me specific activities to use with my students. I also interviewed two of my University Program of Theater Arts colleagues about their experiences with the sophomore class. Jonathan Samarro was their Introduction to Theatre course instructor during their Freshman year and Scriptwriting teacher during their sophomore year. Jamie Sporn was their Stage Movement and Health for the Performer teacher during both their freshman and sophomore years. Both Samarro and Sporn were able to enlighten me about how the students’ behaviors change in different contexts. Samarro’s classes are much more “academic” than other Theater Arts courses and the Scriptwriting course includes “outsiders”, students from the University Program of Communications. Sporn’s courses fulfill New Jersey’s Physical Education requirements and necessitate changing clothes and health instruction. Both Samarro and Sporn were re-interviewed at the conclusion of the school year to see if they observed any changes in the sophomore class. In comparing my experiences with the sophomores to that of my colleagues, I was able to see if my efforts reached outside of my classroom.

Student journals and my personal journals were used almost daily from March to June of 2006. As students entered the classroom, they sat down and wrote responses to

daily prompts in their journals. If appropriate, I would sit with the students and respond to the same journal prompt. I would also use my journal after class to turn my field notes into a narrative. The student journal prompts ranged from questions about the class (“What is the best part about being in a small class?”) to questions about the school (“What are the biggest social problems at Ramapo High School?”). Other prompts asked students to relate to the characters in a scene, play or improvisation while others simply requested that they “free write”. I read and “graded” the student journals every two weeks. As I evaluated the journals, I put a small symbol on entries that could be significant to my research. I also used their responses to gauge their interest and create class activities. At the conclusion of the school year, I collected the journals (which included entries from the first day of school until the last day of school) and reviewed the marked entries. Eventually, I read the students’ individual journals from beginning to end and reread the journals by reading the various student responses to the same prompts. Reading the student journals and comparing their responses to my own entries was very revealing.

My field notes included objective observations of the students’ proximity to each other on a daily basis and well as quotes from conversations that I overheard or participated in from March until June. Many of the observations in my field notes were discussed and interpreted in my personal journals. Many of the field notes are interesting to compare, especially my observations of physical arrangements during journaling time and warm-ups. The field notes also include proximity studies and conversation excerpts when the sophomores participated in rehearsals with the upperclassmen. When compared, the field notes showed the complexity of the evolving relationships of the



female students in the class. When cross-referenced with the dates of my lesson plans and school events, I could link specific classroom events to changes in proximity and conversation.

When examined concurrently, the interviews, journal entries and field notes tell the “story” of my Scene Study/Musical Theater students as I used journals and issue-based improvisation in the dysfunctional environment.

## Data Analysis

### Findings

On September 19, 2006, I posed the following question to the Scene Study/Musical Theater students: "Can the performing arts be used to change the world?" In their journals, the students responded with a resounding "YES!" Trish noted that the films like *Hotel Rwanda* "take major issues and take it to a personal level for the viewer." Libbey agreed that "books, films, plays and music can be powerful." Anne stated that the arts "show people different cultures and ways of life." Liz believed that the arts could "inspire goodness", and Beth, too, believed that a play can "motivate all the people to do something good". According to Bob, theater can "spread ideas" about "God, love, hate, despare [despair] and friendship." Margot answered that "theater can be used to bring out political issues and social issues" and added "theater is a great way to keep people's attention and make them listen." I was thrilled with the idealism of their responses.

However, almost nine months later and after completing an issue-based drama unit, some of their idealism waned and their journal responses to the same question were much more realistic and bleak. On May 26, 2006, Trish, who was often a victim in her University Program classes, wrote that audiences will "enjoy it while they watch but 2 wks later, it won't matter to them anymore." Libbey, a bystander, agreed that audiences "will forget about it later." And Anne, a perpetrator, said "no one can change their minds for them & a little show isn't gonna make them think." For others, however, their responses were still positive but certainly less idealistic. Liz, a perpetrator, wrote that "it really depends on the person/kid & how much they really care". Bystander Beth believed "it could make people more aware of situations others are going through." Bob, the main

victim, believed the arts could “effect change depending on the issue.” Margot, who was both a victim and a rescuer, noted that “improv might not change things totally, but it will make an impact and at least cause a little recognition.” Comparing the students’ responses in September and May left me with very little conclusive evidence to answer “What happens when I use journals and issued-based drama in a dysfunctional classroom?”.

However, throughout the year, there were major shifts in social dynamics that changed the mood and general interactions in the classroom. When the students began their sophomore year, they were, according to Jamie Sporn, their instructor for Stage Movement and Health for the Performer, “a complete disaster; it is very difficult for them to get along and touching and physical interaction is nearly impossible” (J. Sporn, personal interview, March 15, 2006). Jonathan Samarro, the Scriptwriting teacher, added that Liz and Anne “rule the roost” and “make the rest of the class very self-conscious” (J. Samarro, personal interview, March 15, 2006). My initial observations of the class in a September 15<sup>th</sup> journal entry echoed my colleagues’ frustrations:

The class is very segregated. [Liz] and [Anne] chat rudely while their classmates perform, and the rest of the class doesn’t seem to have anything to say to each other EVER! I feel like I am dealing with seven kids who have just met but they have been together for a year—in some cases ten years! The most aggravating aspect of the class is their reaction to each other’s work. [Liz], for example, never pays attention to her classmates’ pieces but freaks out if she doesn’t have complete attention when she’s performing. [Anne] actually chastises her classmates for doing good work and making her look bad.

These behaviors inspired me to use “therapeutic” journaling and drama to, ideally, alleviate some the power struggles and tension in the classroom.

The journals, which had historically been used for character development and to document musings about theater, became focused on the students’ emotional reactions to

the class and classmates. On March 13, 2006, for example, the journal prompted the students to explore the positive and negative aspects of being in a small class. Many students noted that they were thankful for the personal attention and extra performance opportunities. All of the students discussed the added social pressure of the small class. Anne, for example, stated "not everyone gets along and it is hard to avoid them." My records of their proximity on that day, however, showed more intimacy between the female members of the class. Usually, Liz and Anne would chat, while the rest of class quietly looked to me for something to do. The seven students spread about amongst the 26 chairs as they wrote in their journals but, as they completed their journaling, Liz, Anne, Beth and Libbey formed a foursome in the back of the room and Margot joined Trish at her desk. Only Bob sat alone (S. Buckley, field notes, March 13, 2006). This event inspired me to create more journal prompts that dealt with classroom dynamics, trust and friendship. With each entry, the women in the class came together, eventually forming a group of six (S. Buckley, field notes, April 3, 2006). Every-other day, when special education student Dorian joined us, he and Bob would pair up after journaling (S. Buckley, field notes, March 28, 2006). The female students wrote about how they felt uncomfortable working with Bob because of his body odor. Their "Bob journals" were both honest and gently composed. As the students came together socially, I observed less mocking and unkind comments (S. Buckley, field notes, April 3, 2006). There was, however, no consistent link between the "social journals" and student socializing. I attribute this, in part, to the social issues happening outside of my classroom.

Although I could not be aware of everything that was going on between the students beyond of my classroom, Sporn alerted me to one incident that happened in the

Dance Studio on April 7, 2006. Sporn observed Anne punching one of Margot's breasts. Sporn called out Anne's name in surprise, and Anne responded that her action was "an accident." After class, Margot came to Sporn in tears and confided that Anne and Liz had been harassing her for months. The harassment included comments about the size of her breasts and grabbing and punching Margot's breasts in the locker room and school hallways. Margot also informed Sporn that Anne and Liz would hide Margot and Trish's clothing and book bags in the locker room. After Anne and Liz left the locker room, Beth would tell Margot and Trish where their belongings were located. On a daily basis, Anne and Liz would say nasty and hurtful things about the way that Trish and Bob looked and dressed (J. Sporn, personal interview, April 7, 2006). Sporn and I shared Margot's allegations with the administration who called in local police officers to talk to the class, their parents and the University Program of Theater Arts teachers about bullying, hazing and sexual harassment. The necessary intervention was a social setback for the class, who shot each other accusing looks following day. When seated, they sat two or three desks away from each other. When I asked them to create a circle, they made a giant oval with huge gaps between them (S. Buckley, field notes, April 11, 2006).

However, anticipation of an April 20<sup>th</sup> performance seemed to reconnect the class. The subject of the showcase was adaptation. The premise of the showcase was to juxtapose excerpts of literature, memoirs and films and scenes from the plays that they inspired. Anne recited an excerpt from *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank, and Libbey, Margot, Beth and Dorian were featured in a scene from *The Diary of Anne Frank* by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. Bob orated "The Beatitudes" from *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, and Trish and Liz played Jesus and Judas, respectively, in a

scene from Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*. The sophomores performed also as a group in an excerpt of *Footloose* by Dean Pitchford. In previous journals, students had remarked that they were uncomfortable with their partners' work ethic or attitude. As they rehearsed for the showcase, however, the students wrote about how happy they were with their partners and expressed excitement about the upcoming production. Once the sophomores entered rehearsal with the upperclassmen, however, they realized how isolated they were from the University Program's theatrical community. In response, the journals were used to set daily goals for building relationships with the upperclassmen. Trish, who was already well acquainted with many students because of her involvement in the drama club, wrote that she would "introduce each of her classmates to one of the nice seniors." Liz decided to tell some of the soloists that they had "great voices." Bob was going to offer to help the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade boys with "quick changes." Libbey was going to "make a huge 'Break A Leg' card for juniors and seniors from the sophomores." Beth and Anne were not comfortable with the assignment. Beth wrote "maybe I'll help [Libbey] make the card but I think this is stupid." Anne wrote "I won't talk to them and you can't make me." The rehearsals were uneventful and few of the sophomores seemed to make any significant friendships with the upperclassmen.

The sophomores were thrilled by their appearance in the showcase and looked forward to another performance opportunity. I capitalized on this by introducing the issue-based improvisation unit as an chance to perform sans memorizing dialogue. On Wednesday, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, Staci Block, the creator and director of Reflections, a teen improv group that deals with adolescent issues, and two students from the Reflections group came to talk about their work and teach some improvisation activities. Block and the

Reflections performers met with all grade levels of Theater Arts students (grades 9 – 12) in two separate sessions. The sophomores and junior classes met together in hopes that the enthusiasm of the exuberant 11<sup>th</sup> graders would “rub off” on the often apathetic 10<sup>th</sup> graders. The sophomore students sat in three distinct groups among the twenty-two 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Liz, Anne and Libbey sat together at the end of the large semicircle. Margot, Beth and Trish giggled and laughed at the opposite end of the semi-circle with Juniors who appeared in the school musical with Trish. Bob and Dorian sat in the middle of the semicircle with the two male Juniors (S. Buckley, field notes, May 3, 2006). In the course of the workshop, Block asked for suggestions from the audience for a scene that the Reflections members would perform; the sophomores did not contribute any suggestions. When Block asked for volunteers to perform their own scene, Trish’s Junior friends pushed her onstage and she performed with confidence. Block then described the psychological and dramatic importance of “de-rolling”, a process where an actor separates her identity from that of the character she is playing. At the conclusion of the meeting, Block shaped two circles and created revolving scene partners where each student participated in several improvisations (S. Buckley, field notes, May 3, 2006). Each of the sophomores performed happily—even when partnered with upperclassmen. Block mentioned that she “had never seen such a wonderful, involved group of students” and she “couldn’t tell the difference between the sophomores and juniors—*everyone* had a great attitude” (S. Block, personal interview, May 3, 2006). As the students left the auditorium, Anne said “that was so much fun” and Liz and Libbey agreed (S. Buckley, field notes, May 3, 2006).

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, the journal prompt asked students to create a list of “the top ten problems for Ramapo High School students.” Most students listed drugs/alcohol pressure and abuse, eating disorders and sexual pressures. However, the individual lists exposed the social problems relevant to the individual students. Dorian noted that students “make fun” of each other. Trish said that “bullying” is a problem at RHS. Anne said that students often “bully”, “make groups” and “don’t include someone.” Liz wrote that Ramapo’s problems include “the clicks”, “friends leaving *me* out”, “people taking behind *my* back”, “bullying”, “drama”, “being cool” and “fitting in” (*emphasis mine*). Beth cited “bullying” and “people trying to be cool but not achieving it” as the school’s biggest troubles. Libbey decided that “picking on people”, “bullying”, “lying”, “hazing” and “groups/cliques” are the main problems. Margot listed “bullying”, “name calling”, “friend issues”, “hazing” and “social awareness” on her top ten. Bob’s list, however, made me very concerned for him:

1. Don’t talk to new people
2. Don’t listen
3. Don’t try to make better relations
4. Make assumptions
5. Follow the crowd
6. Judge was they see
7. Bullying
8. Acting “cool”
9. Ignore
10. Leave people out



In reading their lists of the “top ten problems for Ramapo High School students”, I was aware that the social problems in my Scene Study/Musical Theater classes were only a microcosm of the issues these students experienced on a daily basis.

The lists the students created were used to inspire improvised scenes in the classroom and, eventually, inspired a small improv performance. The classroom scenes, however, provided the most interesting glimpse into the social lives of the students. The following excerpt from my journal details the events of a particularly revealing rehearsal on May 16, 2006:

Today I asked for suggestions for the ‘serious’ scene. The students in the scene were Liz and Trish. The suggested conflict: exclusion.

Margot adds—‘Let’s put a third person in the scene because exclusion is usually two on one.’

Dorian volunteers to join the scene.

I say ‘Let’s help our improvisers. What are some ways that people exclude others?’ The students (spearheading by Bob) create a telling list...

- Obviously whispering secrets
- Talking openly about private events
- Physical distance

Beth suggests the setting. The three are at Liz’s house. Ironically, the host was NOT invited to the big party the night before and Dorian and Trish keep talking about it. (Ha! Beth has made Liz, the victimizer, the victim and Trish, who was not invited to Liz’s Sweet 16 but was forced to hear about it, the victimizer.)

The scene itself is tame compared to real life. Trish and Dorian are too considerate of Liz’s feelings. Liz, however, takes on the physical attributes of a victim. Her shoulders turn in; she desperately looks to Trish for some sort of recognition. Is this good acting or a genuine understanding of the situation?

At the height of the drama, Margot (who has been elected director) stops them and asks them to make a general statement about how they are feeling:

Liz: ‘I can’t believe that I wasn’t invited to Alana’s party. That makes me feel bad. My friends make me feel even worse. I can’t believe that that they are just rubbing the party in my face.’

Trish cannot help but apologize for her character: ‘I don’t know why Liz wasn’t invited to Alana’s party. I guess it was kind of mean for Dorian and me to talk about the party in front of Liz.’ *I give her a look—I try to send her this question via mental telepathy: Would Liz be apologetic?* ‘But...’ she continues ‘It’s not my fault that Liz wasn’t invited to the party. Dorian and I were there and, if we want to talk about it, we have every right to talk about the party.’

Dorian misses the boat and tries to make the scene about his character's behavior at the party. 'I feel bad because I drank beer at the party.'

*I interrupt*, Dorian, let's focus on what just happened in Liz's living room.'

Dorian: 'Oh... I had fun at the party and I wanna talk about it.'

Margot addresses the audience: 'Does anyone have any questions, comments or suggestions for these people?'

Bob asks: 'Liz, how does it make you feel when Trish and Liz leave you out?'

Liz: 'It makes me feel really bad. I'm already pissed off about the party and I can't believe that they would rub it in my face.'

No one else asks a question so I ask, 'Trish and Dorian, did you enjoy excluding Liz?'

Trish and Dorian: 'No.'

I continue: 'It doesn't make you feel special because you were invited and she wasn't?'

Trish: 'Maybe a little bit.'

Beth asks "Liz", 'Are Trish and Dorian acting like this for a reason? Have you ever tried to make them feel bad about themselves or left out?'

Liz: 'No. They exclude me! I don't exclude them.'

Margot: 'How many of you think that Liz should have stood up for herself or confronted her friends' rude behavior?' (Trish, Dorian, and Bob raise their hands.)

'How many of you think that Liz handled it well by pretending that she didn't feel excluded?' (Anne, who missed the performance, and Libbey, raise their hands.)

Margot asks them to de-roll.

Liz reverts into her former self: 'Hi, my name is Liz and I have NEVER had Trish and Dorian at my house and they don't exclude me.'

Trish immediately separates herself from the character: 'Hi, my name is Trish and I don't know an Alana and I would never purposely exclude anyone.'

Dorian mimics Trish's line: 'Hi, my name is Dorian and I don't know an Alana and I don't exclude anyone.' He obviously picks up on Liz's dig: 'Oh and I've never been to Liz's house.'

The entry typifies my experience with the class during the issue-based improvisation unit.

At moments, I truly believed that the students (particularly the students who I have labeled "perpetrators" or "victimizers") were having breakthroughs and then they would return to cattiness and rudeness.

As a culminating event, we invited family and friends to a performance the students entitled "Panic! At The Little Theatre: A Night of Laughs, Tears and Improvisation" on Thursday, May 25, 2006. We only had one after-school rehearsal, but

it lasted four hours. In that time, as evidenced by a journal entry, I was able to have a illuminating conversation with one of the “perpetrators”:

Tonight we staged Panic! At The Little Theatre. A lot of cool stuff happened...

- we all ate together at one table and, for the most part, everyone was included in the discussion (Bob sabotages himself because he seems to prefer talking to Dorian or me)
- the show was well received despite the ‘racy’ subject matter
- Bob used Lizs’ line when he de-rolled (‘Hi my name is Bob and I’ve never been in Lizs’ house.’) Ha!
- Liz and I had a heart-to-heart...

Liz was in a fight with Anne. The tension was evident! I gave Anne the task of hanging up posters, and Liz revealed a vulnerable part of her.

‘I hate the exclusion scene because I am always excluded by my friends.’

‘You?’

‘Not in my UP classes but my friends-friends... My lunch friends.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. They are like really mean to me.’

‘Like how?’

‘Well... Like at lunch. I purposely try to be the first one there so I can get a seat at the table. I put all my stuff on a chair and then I buy my lunch. When I come back, the table is packed, someone took my seat and my bag is missing.’

‘Oh no.’

‘Yeah, they like take my stuff and hide it. And when I finally get a chair, no one makes room for me at the table.’

‘Do they do this to anyone else?’

‘No, not Anne or anyone... just me. Everyone just laughs.’

‘Why do they target you?’

‘I don’t know. I guess they don’t like me as much. I’m never mean to anyone. They just like being mean and laughing at me.’

‘Why do you sit with them?’

‘They’re my friends... But I told them today that I’m not sitting with them anymore.’

‘Good. They don’t deserve you.’

‘Thanks.’

‘I can’t believe that.’

‘I know... Wait... What do you mean?’

‘I can’t imagine anyone picking on you.’

‘They always pick on me. Why don’t you think people would be mean to me?’

‘You just seem very... confident... very powerful.’

‘Thanks.... More powerful than Anne?’

‘Yes.’

Her face lit up. ‘Really? How?’

'Well, you seem to be the leader of the group.'

'Really?!?'

'Yes... People listen to you and follow your lead.'

'No, they don't. They're mean to me.'

'Well, I don't know what really happens between you guys but I've definitely *observed* you being mean to people.'

'Me? Who?'

'There are certain people in the class who you exclude sometimes. I've also heard you say mean things about people.'

'Who? Bob?'

'Well... yes. But I've seen you be less-than-nice to other people, too.'

'Like who?'

'That's not important. But I've seen it.'

'I didn't mean to.'

'I know.'

'Good.' (beat) 'I'm embarrassed.'

'Don't be embarrassed. Just try to think more about what you say and do. Just because your lunch friends are mean to you, you shouldn't be mean to people in class.'

*'That's not why I'm mean!'*

'I know. I meant to say that you should think about the way you feel at lunch and try not to make people feel that way.'

'Okay.' (beat) 'You know that I am friends with Trish and Margot.'

'I know. They're great girls.'

'Yeah.'

Anne reenters. Our conversation ends.

I was very encouraged by my exchange with Liz. I wish I could say that Liz made a total about-face and began treating her classmates with respect. That was not the case.

Both Sporn and Samarro reported incidents where Liz and her on-again-off-again best friend Anne humiliated and embarrassed their peers in the University Program of Theatre Arts (J. Samarro, personal interview, June 20, 2006; J. Sporn, personal interview, June 20, 2006). I can report, however, that I saw less incidents of divisive behaviors in my classroom. Liz obviously made an effort to curb nasty behaviors in front of me—perhaps as a result of our conversation (S. Buckley, field notes, June 7, 2006). Anne, in turn, generally treated her classmates with respect (S. Buckley, field notes, June 8, 2006). Libbey and Beth seemed to move away from their friendship with Liz and Anne (S.

Buckley, field notes, March 31, 2006). Trish continued to find solace in her relationships with the upperclassmen but worried about “what happens when they graduate” in her journal. Margot actually joined Reflections, the group that introduced my students to improv about adolescent issues! I worried about Bob who, in the final journal prompt of the school year (“What did you learn about yourself?”), responded “I can’t be mean very well but other people are good at being mean to me.” I hope that my classroom interventions somehow made life at Ramapo High School better for Bob and students like him.

### Implications

Throughout the 2005 -2006 school year, the behaviors of my 10<sup>th</sup> grade Scene Study/Musical Theater students did improve. Although the positive conduct did not extend outside of my classroom, I was able to create a safer environment for the students in my room. Perhaps this is because I made it clear that treating each other with kindness and respect is important to me. Wessler discusses the importance of the teacher’s social influence in “It’s Hard To Learn When You’re Scared”:

No teacher can create a completely respectful classroom in a school suffering from pervasive bias, harassment, and disrespect. But one dedicated teacher can create safety for most, if not all, students in his or her classroom and serve as a powerful role model for both students and other faculty. (Wessler, 2003, p. 43)

I would like to imagine that my efforts to create a more respectful environment had a positive impact on my students. Thus, my specific tactics (journaling and improvisation) may have been less important than my intolerance for disrespectful behavior.

Journaling was, however, very helpful to certain students who used the written medium to communicate problems that I didn’t see (“My scene part refuses to rehearse with me.”) or reveal emotions that they wouldn’t feel comfortable disclosing verbally (“I

just saw Tony walking down the hall with another girl—I can't concentrate and I want to go home"). Reading student journals certainly made me feel more connected to the class and individual students. Occasionally, I would write notes of encouragement or advice in the journals to show the students that I cared about them and their daily struggles.

Swados emphasizes the importance teachers showing that they care for students in "A Theatre Of Their Own" which says "create an atmosphere that is comfortable and personal so your students will feel more at ease than they do in their day-to-day classes" (2006, p. 4). My students understood that I genuinely liked and cared for them because of our exchanges in the journals. The journals created an intimacy that evolved into face-to-face interactions (like my conversation with Liz). I attribute many of the successes of this "experiment" to positive journaling experiences.

Improvisation, as evidenced by its mixed reviews from the students, had no impact on some students but had an incredible impact on others. For Margot, the exposure to issue-based drama was life-changing. She made contact with Staci Block, the director of Reflections, shortly after Block's visit to Ramapo High School. Margot, then, auditioned for the company and was immediately accepted. Her acceptance was not a surprise because Margot is quick witted and confident. However, her experience with issue-based improvisation started to change the way she used her wit. Margot was very opinioned and had a gift for sarcasm. A comment from her could cut down any student (or teacher, for that matter). Throughout our rehearsal process, Margot already used what Steinfort describes as "spontaneity and expressiveness in an accepting and supportive environment" (2004). The change in Margot was evident as she wrote the following as her final journal entry of the school year:

I have learned, through improv, that I can be different people and change my outlook on things just by taking on a different character. I learned to set aside my personal beliefs to get a point across.... Through improv, I learn that sometimes inside jokes can be hurtful so it has taught me a lot.

I am excited to see how continued study of improvisation in a positive environment will change Margot into a socially aware person.

The experience was also improved by the mini-production, "Panic! At The Little Theatre: A Night of Laughs, Tears and Improvisation". The students ran the event. They created the invite list, publicity materials, showbills, running order and costumes.

Though, admittedly, this is part of the curriculum and was not part of my initial proposal, creating a culminating event allowed the students to "draw the inspiration and ideas that they need to create products and performance that work in the world" (Strong, Silver, Perini & Tuculescu, 2003, p. 28). The students and the parents, remarked that the mini-show was the best of the year. It is my hope that by creating excitement around the event, the students internalized some of the content.

Journaling, issue-based drama and the culminating event contributed to the change in my Scene Study/Musical Theater students. However, it is an exciting prospect for teachers of all disciplines that an educator's attitude and intolerance for cruelty and mockery is the true deterrent of derisive behavior. Though "therapeutic" journaling and improv training had a positive impact on my students, it was my rejuvenated commitment to enforcing appropriate behavior that finally created a more positive environment in my classroom.

#### Emerging Questions

Although I am very encouraged by the outcome of my research, I am left with lingering questions that emerged in my personal journal and conversations with

colleagues. The questions involve the use of classroom journals, the students' involvement in performance opportunities and teaching empathy.

Reading the students' journals often made me suspect the students' candor: "Do students write what teachers want to read?". The September journal entries were certainly written by students who were trying to please their new teacher. The June entries, however, seemed to offer a more realistic picture of the student's thoughts. But can teenagers honestly communicate with teachers who are grading them? I would like to think that straightforward communication is possible, but I am not certain. I will revisit the inherent problem of using student journals in a subjectivity addendum.

The group performances obviously bonded the class. The University Program showcase provided a positive focus for the students. With "Panic! At The Little Theatre", the students worked together to create a successful student-run event. Both performance opportunities engendered the class with confidence and pride. Their obvious enthusiasm led me and my colleagues to ask, "Why do the students (aside from Trish) avoid performance opportunities?". Although we can certainly cite the typical excuses (stage fright, fear of rejection and being labeled as a "drama geek"), these students have atypical social issues that most likely contribute to their reticence. Another emerging question is "Will the performances increase their interest in the performing arts outside of the program?". I hope to answer this question during auditions for next year's school plays, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Stephen Sondheim's *Into The Woods*.

I attributed much of the students' progress to the classroom environment. However, I am left with a lingering question that had been troubling me since I conceived this project: "Can empathy be taught?" In my classroom, the students certainly learned to



be more considerate of each other but they did not necessarily internalize *why* people should be considerate. The “perpetrators” continued to mistreat their classmates; they just “perpetrated” outside of my classroom. I am left to wonder if empathy could be taught with more time or different tools.

I will consider these questions during the upcoming school year. I am doubtful that there is a methodology to determining the validity of student journals. Although I am unsure that I can reveal why the sophomores avoid performance opportunities, I will be able to see if their positive experiences on stage will encourage them to get involved in the school productions. The most troubling of my questions is “Can empathy be taught?”. The answer to this question would revolutionize the national initiatives to employ character education programs. I am satisfied, however, with my resolution that teachers can improve a classroom even if they cannot improve a student’s character.

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Running Head: SUBJECTIVITY ADDENDUM

**Subjectivity Addendum: What Happens When I Use Journals and  
Issue-Based Drama in a Dysfunctional Classroom?**

Stephanie B. [REDACTED]

EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice

[REDACTED]

My research question asked “What happens when I use journals and issue-based drama in a dysfunctional classroom?”. The question was objectively worded which might lead one to believe that I, the researcher, simply observed the students and drew conclusions from those observations. That view of this teacher-researcher is false. The truth is that I had an outcome in mind and a desperately wanted to see that outcome realized. My vision for my class included major realizations from the “perpetrators”. There would be tears, poignant journal entries and apology notes written to their victims. The “bystanders” would become “rescuers” and defend the defenseless. The “victims” would learn to stand up for themselves and gain the confidence to speak up for others. Of course I am being idealistic (and a bit tongue-in-cheek), but I truly am an optimist and I wanted a “happy ending” for my students. My vision was not brought to fruition, but I am pleased with the outcome of my research.

My optimism and faith in my students is, in part, responsible for the positive changes that happened in my classroom. My students knew that I cared about them and that I thought that they were good people. Initially, I feared that students would realize the motives of the journals and improv unit. The students who I viewed as “perpetrators” would, then, think I was targeting them. However, as many times as I referred to Liz and Anne as “perpetrators”, I also liked them. Liz was a lovely actress and always worked really hard. Anne was a dancer and gymnast so she interpreted characters in a really interesting, physical way. Both students collected many complements from me about their personal gifts. They also received many notes of encouragement in their journals. My relationship with Liz and Anne eased tensions in the class. They knew that if I reprimanded them for something they said or did, I disliked their action while still liking

and respecting them as persons. I truly believed that they were capable of acting with kindness and empathy and, although they rarely practiced kindness outside of my classroom, their behavior changed in my class.

My optimism, however, has its limits. I often question the validity of the students' idyllic journal entries. The final journal entry of the school year ("What did you learn about yourself?"), for example, demonstrated some blatantly honest responses and some overly cutesy reactions. Honest Anne wrote, "i didn't really learn anything about myself.... Yea, im mean to people who are mean to me. Also, i don't think that if i hang out with someone else, it's leaving someone out." But Liz's response, "And yes, [improv] did change me. It made me realize how serious everything is", gave me pause. It was hard to reconcile Liz's journal and Samarro's report that Liz was "meaner than ever" in his final interview (J. Samarro, personal interview, June 20, 2006). I often experienced disillusionment after reading their journals, believing that the writers were not being honest with me. I endeavored to include journals entries that I deemed genuine in my report.

Though I cannot consider all of the journals sincere, I am optimistic about the moments of kindness and acceptance among the "dysfunctional" students. My colleagues in the University Program of Theatre Arts, however, are admitted pessimists. During my initial interview with both Samarro and Sporn, both remarked that some of the students were "beyond hope" (J. Samarro, personal interview, March 15, 2006; J. Sporn, personal interview, March 15, 2006). The students picked up on their other teachers' distaste for them. Students mentioned on several occasions that "Ms. Sporn hates us" (S. Buckley, field notes, March 22, 2006, March 31, 2006 and May 10, 2006) or "We're Samarro's

least favorite class” (S. Buckley, field notes, March 22, 2006 and May 10, 2006). After sharing my findings of improved behavior and classroom respect with my colleagues on June 20, 2006, they were both hopeful and cynical (J. Samarro, personal interview, June 20, 2006; J. Sporn, personal interview, June 20, 2006). Sporn actually encouraged me to think about changes in my classroom management because she didn’t “think that pretending to be a victim makes you a nice person” (J. Sporn, personal interview, June 20, 2006). Upon Sporn’s recommendation, I reflected on my handlings on certain classroom incidents and decided that there was more than journaling and improvisation at work in the classroom.

I cannot determine if all of the positive moments in my classroom came from, forgive the cliché, the heart. Nevertheless, I did observe more students saying “please” and “thank you” (S. Buckley, field notes, June 7, 2006), students volunteering to be partners with Bob (S. Buckley, field notes, May 2, 2006), and students offering to help one another (S. Buckley, field notes, April 11, 2006). These positive activities that took place in my room were reassuring and reinforced my confidence in my intervention. It is also important to note that an integral part of the researching process included responses and advice from colleagues and friends, Samarro and Sporn. Though I labeled them as “pessimists”, they were also my sounding board. They often grounded me throughout the project and persuaded me to consider my teaching practices in addition to journaling and improvisation. My colleagues’ cynicism, when blended with my idealism, helped me come upon results that are, at once, optimistic and practical.

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Running Head: IMPLEMENTATION

**Implementation: What Happens When I Use Journals and  
Issue-Based Drama in a Dysfunctional Classroom?**

Stephanie B. [REDACTED]

EDUC 602: Inquiry in Practice

[REDACTED]



Although I intended to answer the question “What happens when I use journals and issue-based drama in a dysfunctional classroom?”, I ultimately answered an entirely different question: “What happens when a classroom teacher is committed to creating a positive classroom environment?”. While journaling and improvisation were used in my Scene Study/Musical Theater classes, I recognized that it was my dedication to improving the class setting that ultimately made my students modify the way they treated each other within my classroom. The outcome of my research has inspired me to use my findings with all of my students in the upcoming school year. The following implementation plan will outline my strategies for creating safer classrooms using journals, drama and, most importantly, my responses to harassment and disrespectful language.

Harry Berkheiser, the Supervisor of English and the University Programs of Theatre Arts and Communications, has recommended using daily journals in English classes to gauge student understanding of the course content (H. Berkheiser, email, September 5, 2005). In the 2006 -2007 school year, I will also use journals to gauge the students’ level of comfort in the classroom. Although I recognize that journaling may not appeal to every student, in her article “Making Actors: A Paean to the Acting Journal”, Renaud suggests that *everyone*, not just actors, can benefit from keeping a handwritten journal. The author cites medical evidences that supports “simply moving one’s hands—as in the act of writing—is allowing a person to think, as well as to know what he is feeling” (Renaud, 2004). Using journals in all of my classes will allow students to access and communicate feelings to me. It is my hope that the journals will be used, as they

were in my Scene Study/Musical Theater classes, to build trust between teacher and student.

Forum Theater, which was used with the “dysfunctional” class, certainly helped the students identify character faults and develop problem-solving skills. I would certainly use Forum Theater in an improvisation unit with the new crop of University Program students. However, I believe that Forum Theater has value in English classes as well. In “Urban Odyssey: Theatre of the Oppressed and Talented Minority Youth” by Michael Sanders, students read the texts of famous plays and had the opportunity to “replace characters in the scenes” and improvise “new solutions to the problems being presented” (2004, p. 226). The Forum Theater model could effectively be used with the plays and novels taught in my English classes, especially the 12<sup>th</sup> grade course, English IV. The English IV reading list has works that deal with youth-oriented problems including harassment and honoring friendships (*The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini), abusive and obsessive relationships (*A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams), and trust and manipulation (*Othello* by William Shakespeare). Forum Theater could be used to put the stories in a relatable context and by showing students appropriate ways to deal with their conflicts.

I am lucky to be able to use journals and drama to improve classroom dynamics because they can be implemented under the pretense of curriculum. However, teachers of every discipline can create an atmosphere of tolerance and safety by responding to inappropriate behaviors. As part of this project, I subconsciously changed my classroom management style. Whereas previously, I would ignore snide comments in order to address the needs of curriculum. Throughout my research, I recognized that the teacher

has the responsibility to address actions and comments that subjugate any student in the classroom. Most relevant were the guidelines found in “It’s Hard to Learn When You’re Scared”. In it author Stephen L. Wessler offers the following directions for creating safer classrooms:

1. Follow up on all allegations
2. Don’t stereotype and discriminate (that includes favoring “good kids”)
3. Value students’ emotions and lives outside of the classroom
4. Respond to degrading comments and slurs (Wessler, 2003)

I will use the principles above in all of my classes in the upcoming school year. It is my hope that my revived commitment to creating a positive classroom environment will inspire my colleagues and students to do the same.

**References**

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