



"What's In Your Medicine Cabinet?" Exploring the Cultural Heritage of Our Personal Belief Systems

Curriculum Unit 00.04.05

by Leigh Highbridge

Background of Unit's Inception

The seminar course from which this unit grew was entitled, "Ethnicity and Dissent in American Literature and Art." Nine fellow New Haven Public School System teachers and I perused novels and poetry, and examined visual art, comparing thematic treatments of growing up with a cultural heritage and beliefs different from those of the prevalent culture. We looked at the power of culture to determine roles and even identities through acculturation, hegemony, deracination, normalization, and the telling of selective histories. We surveyed cultural histories of African-, Hispanic-, Japanese-, and Native-American writers and artists. All told stories of opposition, resisting the identities forced upon them.

I teach Theater at Connecticut's only public arts high school, Cooperative Arts and Humanities Magnet High School, (Co-Op.) The students come from fifteen different towns, selected through a lottery system, to train themselves in a discipline of the performing, visual, or writing arts. The student population is broadly diverse in all respects. Many ethnic, educational, and economic backgrounds abound. The biggest challenge, in all of the five classrooms I facilitated this past year, was getting the students to work respectfully and cooperatively.

The students, when asked to divide themselves into work groups, or when eating lunch in the cafeteria, socializing or seating themselves at school assemblies, will usually align themselves with the same race or ethnic background as themselves. In the classroom, many students display hesitance to speak freely of their own cultural values and beliefs. Likewise, they are very reluctant to take creative risks because they fear that their being different will exclude them from belonging to a particular group, or set of peers. Their reticence leaves them reserved to the point of not seeking self-actualization, and to the point of mocking differences among other students.

In the theater classroom, the imagination is viewed as a muscle that needs to be stretched. Stretching comes through taking creative risks. Taking risks can be scary, as it usually entails delving into the unknown. Each student must feel safe and supported to even consider taking creative risks. These kids are afraid of taking necessary leaps into their own imaginations. Reasons why they feel this fear, and allow it to dictate their reserved behavior, have been postulated for centuries. It is evident that mass culture acculturates them to not deviate from the mainstream. The teenagers internalize the values of extreme self-consciousness, instead of

self-actualization. An influential and insidious form of hegemony in the United States is perpetuated by the entertainment industry collectively represented by Hollywood, and by mass media creating mass culture. We are a society, according to mass culture's formative effect, of hypocrisy and paradoxes. Often, the student's decorum both at school and in society reflects mass media's influence. Their behaviors do not reflect the paragons of the public school system, nor the values which their families attempt to imbue, nor the ensemble environment achieved in the theater classroom. These examples of behaviors are generated primarily through the acculturative effects of mass media, industries whose primary goal is financial gain.

Television programming, the movie industry, and even the newspapers allegedly exist to entertain and edify viewers and readers. Their purpose is to generate financial recompense to the promoters and sponsors. Do adolescent viewers realize this? The writers of such television and cinematic scripts do not necessarily believe or proscribe to what the characters are saying, and very different principles may guide the writers' actual lives. Mainstream America has a set of values dictated by completely fictitious, and often scurrilous, characters. So how can the values of these characters be readily applicable to our lives?

In the case of public television and documentaries, students still require more exposure to systems of critical analysis to evaluate the premises and information purported. According to Dr. David Walsh, founder of the National Institute of Media and the Family, "who tells the stories defines the culture."¹ Today's children hear many stories, but usually through electronic media, and not in person. Dr. Walsh conducted a survey which revealed that the average American teenager spends 37.5 hours a week in front of a screen, including computer games, the Internet, and television, and only 1.5 hours per week speaking with their parents.² In my curriculum unit, the participants will learn the importance of questioning authority in the context of dispersing information.

Unit's Objectives

A productive ensemble work environment, and likewise a concordant society, cannot be attained until each individual scrutinizes their own systems of ethics and beliefs, and then respectfully compares those systems with dissent in the public sphere. This comparison, this curriculum unit, and all cooperation, require an abeyance of negative presuppositions and presumptions, and a critical look at the heritage of our belief systems, to determine their current relevance and validity. Comparing and contrasting particular facets of self and community will lead each child to greater personal insight, and greater self-confidence. Only by knowing and accepting themselves can children begin to appreciate, and ultimately embrace, the diversities inherent in a classroom comprised of many ethnicities.

Once the students have expanded their awareness to consider Shakespeare's advice from Hamlet to Horatio, "there are more things in this heaven and earth... than are dreamt of in your philosophy..." then they must learn how to disagree in a respectful manner. They must learn how to keep working cooperatively with a person, even when the two students have unlike and even antithetical opinions. Students participating in this curriculum unit optimally will discover many idiosyncrasies which make them unique and interesting, by identifying which traditions, customs, and beliefs dictate their own and others' behaviors. The readings and improvisational exercises lead the students to explore their own idiosyncrasies and specialties. The exercises require demonstration of how to not allow presuppositions or prejudice to interrupt or halt creative growth.

This curriculum unit seeks to reveal each student to his or herself through awareness expansion. From very

early in our lives, we learn to judge or to estimate the value or worth of a person or thing, and this judgement becomes our opinion. When an opinion is reached, it can become a decision with unalterable resolve. Sometimes decisions become such strong beliefs that they remain fixed as convictions. All of this usually happens without consciously deciding to formulate a conviction. Through the exercises and activities in this unit, the student will critically evaluate why they believe something, and not just what they believe.

National Theatre Standards Addressed

For the purpose of summary, this is a unit about options. In the theater, there are as many options and approaches as there are people. Diversity is not just welcomed, it is necessary. Everything the actor does to prepare a character involves an exploration of human behavior. The actor seeks first to know one's own behavior, and to refer to this knowledge as a springboard for ideas, and as a point of reference when considering another's real or fictional character make-up. The actor studies how to consider other options, ways of thinking, perspectives, motivations, and methodologies.

Not every theater student at Co-Op wants to pursue acting as a career. Nor do those uninterested in acting necessarily want to pursue a career in the theater industry. Fortunately, their studying of acting prepares them for just about any profession. As mentioned above in the section on objectives, many academic and work skills naturally develop. The students can immediately apply all of the skills cultivated in the study of theater to related areas including philosophy, psychology, communications, journalism, foreign languages, any visual art history or production, and education. The systematic approach to studying theater also lends itself to studies and careers in computer science, social work, business and law.

Theater brings together individuals in a group who work together to establish and achieve goals, through problem solving. Each theater class is a "collective." Any and all experience gained while working in a theater-type collective can be directly applied to our lives in today's global community.

The primary objective of this unit is to create an effective group dynamic. The intended resulting dynamic emphasizes group utilization of each individual's strengths and weaknesses in an environment based on support, trust, respect, cooperation, and creative expression. Many other academic and work skill objectives abound and receive attention in this unit. Almost a dozen achievement standards as dictated by the Federal government's National Standards for Theatre are addressed on the level of ninth and tenth grade proficiency.

Each student who participates in this unit develops their skills of concentration, independent thinking and critical analysis through the exploration of the medicine cabinet, play, improvisation exercises, and handouts of materials. Analysis skills will be extensively utilized through the cultivation of the physical, emotional and social dimensions of the characters found in the play and improvisations. Students will identify authors' and artists' premises in the context of cultural and historical perspectives, and compare these perspectives to each other and to their own. Small work groups will provide diversity in the comparison of how similar themes are treated by various cultures, and to evaluate the current validity and practicality of the treatments. From this, they can construct social meanings from other cultures that relate to their current personal, national and international issues.

As young actors, each student develops their creativity, resourcefulness and originality as they participate in the games, play reading, and improvisational exercises. The small work groups of no more than five students

will collaboratively design and produce a mini play, or skit, by first conceptualizing and realizing their own artistic interpretation of what they have studied, and what it means to them. Then as they collaborate to write the skit, they will practice oral and written communication, and learn new approaches to group problem solving. The latter flexes their ability to give and take direction, and how to respectfully disagree with a directive. The students must employ increased self-discipline and self-control, resulting in a professional demeanor. Perhaps most importantly of all, the students who participate will gain insight into their own character. Consideration of their own character will hopefully lead them to more constructive than destructive criticism.

As the improvisations are developed, each group will use initiative to identify and develop strategies to define their objectives and to reach their goals. They will produce a coherent scene with a beginning, middle, and end, which uses all of the performance elements they have already been introduced to effectively convey their opinions. The students will have to accept personal responsibility for their statements and actions.

Teaching Strategies

Primarily, I instruct freshmen, which take Acting I, Voice for Stage Speaking, and Theatre Foundations, a literature course which explores world mythology. I also teach Acting III to Juniors, and an Acting Shakespeare workshop to Seniors. This curriculum unit will be useful for all high school grades, and will at least in part supplement the curriculum for each of the above mentioned courses next year.

I have chosen the Freshmen Acting I class as its primary audience, and the end of the first semester as the best time to teach it. This allows a couple of months for the students to settle into their new school, and in theater class, specifically to develop skills of focus and concentration. This unit will be taught as an approach to creating a character, specifically in terms of "Motivation and Justification," in determining a character's gestures and dramatic actions.

It has been said that music is a universal language. Regardless of the listener's native language, the meaning or tone of a musical piece can be inferred. A similar property of universality encompasses the performance of theater. I once saw Shakespeare's MacBeth performed in Paris, in French. At that time, I was familiar with the story, but had never read the whole play. My proficiency in understanding French extended to say, "I'm hungry," and, "I'm tired." Luckily, a performance relies on a collaboration of elements, techniques and spectacle, and not just the written word. Because the production was a successful collaboration of elements, I understood every scene. The settings, costumes, lights, sound effects and music, and physicality of the actors told the story. The actors' vocal intonations helped to communicate the playwright's intent. The performance of theater is universally comprehended insofar as the audience receives the piece's overall tone. A unified concept is the result of effective collaboration.

Theater closely resembles a team sport. All of the children have played team sports in school physical education class, so this analogy helps the newcomer to theater to allay their fears of studying something new and seemingly foreign. There are try-outs (or a lottery,) and a team is selected. The team agrees on a unified code of conduct, and sets of rules and regulations. Everyone meets in one place at a designated time for practice. Practice starts with warm-up exercises. Practice reveals and improves each player's strengths and weaknesses. Everyone pulls together for the big game, or performance, when the audience is there. Equipment (stage props,) and uniforms (costumes,) need to be in the right place at the right time, functionally

ready and useful. Every player is a necessary part of the team; the pitcher can not be the catcher, and the leading lady can not run the lights, too. Wins and losses, (or strong and weak creative choices) permeate the team as a whole. The team, or ensemble, is only as strong as its weakest link. Interestingly, the weak link in the theater ensemble comes from a lack of participation and cooperation, more than it stems from actual ability or aptitude.

The young student actor, and student of any subject, readily enjoys playing games. Some like high energy, physical games. Others prefer intellectual challenges. The carefully evaluated strategies of theater games combine the physical and the intellectual. Most games are set up like a team sport. There are players, sometimes on opposing teams, who have a focus, or problem, that the players can solve. For example, playing Tug of War, then repeating the game, and playing with only an imaginary rope. Another good example is one of Spolin's games, Difficulty with Small Objects. ³ The player must engage their complete attention on a small object of their clothing, or an accessory. They must keep coming up with new ways to handle the object, always striving toward creating believability. Theater games are easily modified to suit the particular needs of a lesson plan, or group dynamic. Because they are based on the paradigm of organized sports, including the teacher as coach, anyone can play and reap the benefits of theater games. The games are generally about exploring creative options in a familiar environment of healthy competition and fun.

Another form of theater game focuses on improvisation. The player must constantly create new scenarios. This form can be more difficult, and often results in comedic material, as it is funny to jump from one situation to another, while maintaining some common thread linking each impromptu scene.

A note is added here for the teacher new to coaching theater games: discuss with the students why real or feigned violence is not a creative option in theater games, and should be avoided.

Theater exercises specifically concern themselves with approaches with distinct methodological parameters to create portrayals of characters who exhibit believable emotions and behaviors. Any piece of literature can become a theater exercise, as students dramatize the material. An example would be asking the students to create and demonstrate a "road-map" of their actions as they (pretend to) cross a brook to rescue an injured animal. The student must be able to repeat the series of actions.

This unit starts with a metaphor, and takes the students through a step by step progression to evaluating the development of morality. The students will first examine common physical ailments and their remedies. The discussion that follows the first exercise will modify the metaphorical example to replace physical ailments and remedies with emotional or moral dilemmas. Throughout all the lessons, the students will be presented with opportunities to view behavioral responses as appropriate or inappropriate remedies.

Students generally respond well to metaphors, and also to improvisational exercises. This unit features three different improvisation exercises that the students develop in small work groups. Both the scenario topics and the challenge of working in groups increase in difficulty as the unit progresses.

Lesson Plans and Classroom Activities

Lesson 1, Part One: "What's in Your Medicine Cabinet?"

Exercise: For homework, students will inventory their medicine cabinets at home, grouping a dozen medicines or remedies into four categories: emergency, preventative, chronic/maintenance, and cosmetic (aesthetic.) Students will also attempt to identify the remedy's cultural heritage, both in terms of its suspected introduction into civilization, and into their own life. Who, or what, can they remember as being the first to show them that remedy? A sample inventory may look like the following.

Medicine Cabinet Inventory

Medicine Emergency Preventative Chronic Cosmetic Heritage

Band-Aids	X				Allopathy/ Mom
Sun-block		X			Allopathy/ Grandma
Lipstick			X		Tribal Literature
Prescription	X		X		Allopathy/ Dad
Scissors	X	X	X		Industry/ Teacher
Tea Leaves		X	X		Tribal Game

Note that tealeaves are listed as a remedy. Students will be encouraged to select the least common items in their medicine cabinets, as their cultural heritage will most likely bring more diversity to the discussions and exercises, which are next. Students also will be encouraged to think of what other places they may find medicinal remedies. For example, I learned from a hairdresser that slices of cucumbers are often used to help moisturize and reduce swollen eyelids.

Discussion: The class will discuss their medicine cabinet inventories. Key points will include consideration of what causes need for a remedy. The class will consider how an injury to one area of the body affects other parts of our body and how we carry ourselves, our state of mind, and our attitudes toward other people.

Lesson 1, Part Two: "That's the Wrong Remedy!"

Exercise: The Instructor will divide the class into groups of three, and assign one of the following improvisational scenarios to each group. Each group will devise and briefly rehearse two different renditions of the improvisation. One ending should feature the use of an appropriate medicine or remedy, and the other rendition should feature the use of an inappropriate medicine or remedy. Students will perform their scenes for the class.

An elderly pheasant hunter is walking through dense woods and is bitten by a poisonous snake.
Improvisation One: The hunter screams for help. Hours pass before a bird watcher comes along and trips on him.

Improvisation Two: A ten-year-old is playing hopscotch alone on the sidewalk outside the store where her mother is busy working the cash register. A large dog runs toward the child, scaring her. She falls and breaks her wrist.

Improvisation Three: Two teenagers are crossing an old wooden footbridge, high over a ravine. A bird thinks they are endangering her nearby nest, and so darts at them. One teen gets their foot caught between the bridge's slats and sprains his ankle.

Improvisation Four: A dentist accidentally eats a muffin with raisins in it. The dentist is very allergic to raisins. The dentist's patient offers advice.

Improvisation Five: Two teenagers are cooking Chinese shrimp-chips, or French-fries, and one accidentally pushes the other's hand into the oil.

Lesson 1, Part Three: "Persecutor, Rescuer, Victim"

Discussion: The class will be introduced to Dr. Karpman's theory of the Drama Triangle, which purports that all struggles in life are struggles which involve a person's movement through each of three main roles: persecutor, rescuer, and victim.⁴ Students must expand the role of "persecutor" to include accidental, unintentional injury or insult.

Exercise: Working in the same groups as Lesson 1, Part Two, students should identify each of their improvisations' characters main influence on the scene by using the descriptions persecutor, rescuer, and victim. The whole class should discuss each group's results.

Lesson 2, Part One: "He Who Says Yes/He Who Says No"

Exercise: The class will read aloud only the first act of "He Who Says Yes/He Who Says No," by Bertolt Brecht.⁵ Six students should volunteer to take a part, and the rest of the class will read in unison the part of the Great Chorus.

Discussion: Questions for class discussion include: what does the Great Chorus's line, "Many say Yes without understanding," mean to each of the three main characters? Do the students reading the play think that the custom of throwing the weak person into the valley is necessary, or wise? What currently observed customs and traditions in our society can the class think of? Discuss their current validity and relevance.

Exercise: The class will read aloud the second act of "He Who Says Yes/He Who Says No," by Bertolt Brecht. Six students should volunteer to take a part, and the rest of the class will read the part of the Great Chorus. Discussion: Questions for class discussion include: do the students reading the play think the Boy acted in a morally upstanding way? Did he make the right decision? Obviously, the class will need to arrive at a definition for "morally upstanding," and "right decision." This should lead the discussion into considering what the Boy had to consider when making his decision to disagree with the ancient custom.

Exercise: Working independently, each student will write a one-page essay designating the roles of persecutor, rescuer and victim to the characters in Brecht's play. Students will use excerpts of dialogue and implications of actor's actions to support their designations.

Lesson 2, Part Two: "Maybe Yes and Maybe No"

Exercise: The Instructor will divide the class into groups of five and assign each group one of the following improvisational scenarios. Each group will devise and briefly rehearse two different renditions of the improvisation. One ending should feature the protagonist agreeing with the demands of the group, and the other rendition should feature the protagonist disagreeing with the demands of the group. Students will perform their scenes for the class.

- Improvisation One: A group of environmental science students is lost in the jungle. Two students have already left the group to explore escape routes, but never returned. One student wants to clear a large area and start a huge signal bonfire. The rest of the group wants to climb into the hills where there may be a village.
- Improvisation Two: An airplane crash-landed on an iceberg a week earlier. There is no food or fuel left. All except one of the survivors think that it is necessary to resort to cannibalism.
- Improvisation Three: During an hazing initiation ceremony, a student must set a dormitory broom closet on fire. Although the dorm is supposed to be entirely empty, one student is inside sleeping and dies from smoke inhalation. Only one of the fraternity or sorority members believes it is their responsibility to confess to the school dean.

Lesson 3, Part One: "Morality and Motivation"

Exercise: The class will read aloud and discuss the handout entitled, "Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development: A Brief Outline."⁶

Exercise: The class will divide itself into the same groups of five as in Lesson 2. Each group will be assigned

section A, B, or C from the handout entitled, "Moral Dilemma Scenarios."⁷ Each group will discuss and decide which answer best describes their collective response. Each group will also decide which stage of morality decision making the Boy was in for each of the two acts in Brecht's play, and share their answers with the rest of the class.

Lesson 3, Part Two: "Morality and Justification"

Exercise: The Instructor will divide the class into groups of three and assign one of the following scenarios. Each group will devise an ending for the scenario. The whole scenario must be written as a script for three characters, and up to five pages in length. Each group will read their script aloud to the class. The whole class will reach consensus on which two scripts are the best choices for further development.

Scenario One: The setting is in a household kitchen, where a teenager is beginning to make an art project for school. The project is a diorama box with pictures and other representations of the teen's cultural heritage. One of the teen's parents enters and is questioned by the teen about their cultural heritage, including nationalities and religious observances. The parent is very reluctant to discuss the topic. A grandparent living in the house overhears their conversation and enters. The grandparent reveals to the teenager that he or she was adopted.

Scenario Two: The setting is a middle school classroom. The teacher is introducing a new student who does not speak English. Most of the students in the classroom welcome the new student by helping them with their English, and being supportive. One student ridicules and plays tricks on the new student.

Scenario Three: The setting is a town meeting. The meeting is convened to discuss the potential need for putting all persons of one ethnic group in internment camps, since the USA is currently at war with the country of that ethnic group's origin.

Scenario Four: The setting is the living room of a middle-aged couple and their teenager. All are present discussing why the teenager is forbidden from socializing with another teen who is from a single-parent home, and of a religious background very different from theirs.

Scenario Five: The setting is a vacant apartment where an elderly landlord is showing a young newlywed the apartment. The two get along very well. The landlord leaves to answer the doorbell. The other young newlywed, who is of a different race than the first newlywed, arrives but is rudely sent away by the landlord. The first newlywed overhears both her or his new partner and the landlord displaying racial prejudice.

Exercise: The Instructor will divide the class into two groups. Each group will develop through rehearsal one of the agreed upon scripts written in the preceding exercise. It will be necessary for the students to add characters. Students may alter the endings of their scripts. Each group will perform their developed script for the other half of the class.

Endnotes

1 David Walsh, E-Mail, E-Commerce, E-Kids: Parenting in a Digital Age (New Haven, CT: lecture sponsored by the International Festival of Arts and Ideas, 2000), June 27, 2000. 2 Walsh, lecture. 3 Viola Spolin, Theater Game File (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), card A54. 4 Eric Berne, What Do You Say After You Say Hello? The Psychology of Human Destiny (New York: Grove Press, 1968), p. 186. 5 Bertolt Brecht, He Who Says Yes/He Who Says No (New York: Attorney Jerold Couture for

Stefan S. Brecht, 2000). 6 Deborah Stern, Teaching English So It Matters: Creating Curriculum For and With High School Students (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc, 1995), p. 260. 7 Stern, p. 261

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Preoccupies itself with personality change through an A-B-C system of

activating experience, belief system and consequence.

Perls, Frederick S., M.D., Ph. D., et al. Gestalt Therapy, Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality. New York: Julian Press, Inc., 1951.

Gestalt therapy attributes psychopathological behavioral disturbances to an external, environmental demand on people to actualize an ideal, rather than to actualize himself.

Keirsey, David and Marilyn Bates. Please Understand Me, Character &

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Reading List for Teachers

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Materials for Classroom Use

Brecht, Bertolt. *He Who Says Yes/He Who Says No*. (New York: Attorney Jerold Couture for Stefan S. Brecht, 2000). Stern, Deborah. *Teaching English So It Matters: Creating Curriculum For and With High School Students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 1995. Handout Three: Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development: A Brief Outline, p. 260. Handout Four: Moral Dilemma Scenarios, p. 261. Scenarios and Improvisations, as suggested in this unit's section entitled, Lesson Plans and Classroom Activities.

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