Engaging aliterate students: A literacy/theatre project helps students comprehend, visualize, and enjoy literature

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Theatre experiences can make reading meaningful, attainable, and enjoyable for reluctant readers.

Two diverse groups of adolescent reluctant readers from an urban and a suburban school in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area enthusiastically discussed a performance of *A Wrinkle in Time* they just saw. For many of these students, it was their first experience with the theatre. What was even more important, though, was that this was the first time those students completed, comprehended, and enjoyed a work of literature assigned in school. The program that created those results was a four-month study that investigated how a collaborative program with a teacher and a theatre director can improve adolescents’ skills of comprehension and visualization along with reviving their enjoyment of reading.

The following excerpt is a brief composite of the students’ verbal responses and written comments. The names were nicknames they chose for the study:

JR: This is the first time I’ve understood a book.
SpongeBob: My favorite characters were Charles, Meg, Mrs Whatsit, Who, Which. The Mrs W’s were great.
A-Stara: The characters were alsome how they work together to find and save Mr. Murry. I was really proud of Meg for saving Charles Wallace from It. It was so much for me imagining Camazotz and all those different worlds. I hope that I get to read more books like that. That was a really fun book.
Jazz: Now I know what the dimensions and the tessering meant.
Supra: I would like to reread the part when Meg meets Aunt Beast.
Muffin-Man: The Man with the Red Eyes was exactly what I was thinking he would be. When Mr. M. was in the collum and the Zap!

Watching the delight of those students as they made discoveries in the literature through theatre was a highlight of the study for the teachers and me. Other highlights were identifying collaborative, theatre-based interventions to guide and support the reading and responses of those reluctant readers. The strategies successfully helped two teachers introduce these students to new ways of comprehending, visualizing, comparing, discussing, and enjoying literature. The program also included preparations for seeing a theatrical adaptation of *A Wrinkle in Time* after they read the book.

Theatre is more than drama

The primary goal of the program was to help teachers reignite the pleasure of reading for
aliterate students and those who struggle with literature. Instead of trying to cover a book in a short time period, the experiences were designed to “un-cover” and “dis-cover” a book at their pace. Harste (2001) wrote, “Because literacy is fundamentally about learning to use language to mean, drama and good books go together” (cited in Smith & Herring, 2001, p. vii). Providing experiences for young students to become immersed in theatrical presentations of literary works can spark insight, reflection, self-knowledge, and imagination (Johns & Davis, 1990). These are the same skills educators want their students to acquire when reading literature.

A significant difference between this study and studies that use drama to improve reading is the difference between the performing arts and creative dramatics presentations. Compared with dramatic experiences in classrooms, Sauter (2000) defined theatre as a “communicative intersection between the performer’s actions and the spectator’s reactions” (p. 53) that occurs in environments designed to facilitate the imaginative creations and interpretations of trained artists. This art form creates multisensory, imaginative experiences that transport students into deeply personal interpretations of what was formerly the printed word. Audiences see living collages of words, images, sounds, emotions, and ideas all presented at once.

Theatre activities done in the classroom and theatre field trips are pedagogically sound methods of addressing literacy issues. Teachers and students, however, need to see these experiences as more than drama and entertainment. They should view theatre as “a virtual world—or mental model—from the textual symbols called words” (Wilhelm & Edmiston, 1998, p. 31). By combining reading with seeing, students found ways to immerse themselves in the actions, thoughts, and dialogue of characters, as well as the settings, sounds, and symbols in the literature.

Reading as theatrical art

Typically, aliterate students have not discovered how to lose themselves in a book. One reason, found by Sumara (2002), is that schools tend to implement curriculum in which students quickly read several books and then teachers create tests to assess the ability of students to recall facts from literature. He believed this approach to reading defeats any chance of students’ finding enjoyment or meaningful experiences in literature.

Tovani (2000) also found that when reading strategies fail to incorporate things from students’ personal lives, students assume they know very little about what they are reading. As a result, “they complete their assignments but get little out of the material because they aren’t able to use it” (p. 14). When reading becomes frustrating, many reluctant readers typically give up. Tovani continued, “Decoding is not enough...learning how to employ comprehension strategies will help [the student] understand the words he reads” (p. 16).

However, when teachers provide experiences in which students find themselves “absorbed by an aesthetic experience” (Sumara, 2002, p. 157) students become engaged in multi-layered, positive literary experiences. Gangi (1998) wrote, “An encounter with a theatre production has the potential to emancipate students who may not participate in their own educations in any other areas” (p. 79). Using a defined series of easily adaptable theatre-based strategies along with providing opportunities for students to hear and see actors speak and to react to the narrative helped students understand the text. Teachers and students made discoveries by going beyond merely decoding words to decoding ideas. Students developed skills of building on prior knowledge either from reading the literature or recognizing universal truths in their own lives being expressed in the literature and in the performances.

Nell (1988) believed the ultimate source of a book’s power is that “which is inside the reader’s head” (p. 54). I wondered how teachers could tap that power in aliterate students. Caine and Caine
(1991) and Esslin (1987) supported the need for teachers to stimulate students’ imaginations with enhanced methods of reading that use theatre and theatrical experiences. In *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain,* Caine and Caine noted, 

Effective learning always involves the alternation of several states of arousal. One of the fundamental reasons schools fail is that they impose on learners a single state of unrelieved boredom. Intelligent orchestration in teaching includes an understanding of these states of arousal and borrows from theatre such elements as timing and the ability to create anticipation, drama and excitement. (pp. 31–32)

Esslin (1987), professor, producer, script writer, journalist, adaptor and translator, critic, and academic scholar, wrote extensively on how theatre stimulates, enacts or reenacts events that have, or may be imagined to have, happened in the “real” or in an imagined world. A dramatic text, unperformed is literature. It can be read as a story. The element which distinguishes drama from those types of fiction is, precisely, that of “performance,” enactment. (p. 24)

Those notions were affirmed by Farnan (1996) who suggested that teachers show their students how to look beyond the literal text and encourage [them] to consider the big ideas (themes) in reading, not simply for the sake of identifying “theme” as a literary element, but to reflect on their own feelings and attitudes in the context of ideas that emerge from a reading. (p. 439)

Reeves (2004) wrote, “Reading literature is an art itself and needs not only extensive instruction and practice, but also instruction and practice in an environment in which education and imagination are not separate” (p. 255). To accomplish those goals, Farnan (1996) suggested that teachers show their students how to look beyond the literal text and “consider the big ideas (themes) in reading...to reflect on their own feel-
ings and attitudes in the context of ideas that emerge from a reading” (p. 439).

These were the foundations on which the study was based. Could a series of theatre-based activities in which students closely interact with text and then see the literature adapted and produced in a theatrical facility with settings, costumes, lights, and sounds help alterate students comprehend, visualize, and find enjoyment in an assigned work of literature?

## The adapted, alternative strategies

A key factor of this study correlates to the work of Saldaña (1995) who confirmed that it takes more than one theatrical experience to build comprehension and enjoyment of theatre. Reluctant readers need multiple interventions to guide and support their discovery of reading being a worthwhile experience (Moore et al., 1999). Over four months, I investigated three research questions: (1) According to sixth-grade reluctant readers, what causes them to dislike reading books assigned in school? (2) What theatrically based techniques could activate the students’ interests, sustain their curiosities, and engage them in the literature? and (3) How significantly can the experiences of preparing for and watching a theatrical adaptation of literature transform the reading skills and attitudes of reluctant readers?

Results from those research questions supported the use of four strategies that can be easily adapted to any curriculum that incorporates reading. In response to the first question asked (According to sixth-grade reluctant readers, what causes them to dislike reading books assigned in school?), the students affirmed the importance of relevancy, of helping them enjoy the process, and of providing choices:

**Jazz:** It has to be fun and it has to mean something to me.
A-Stara: I want to read books that I like. If I have to read a book that I’m not interested in, I read it and never look at it again.

Supra: If it’s not boring. If it had action—things like that. Things I like.

Bre: When I read I don’t want to be stressed.

Nitro: I want to read for my enjoyment.

Plankton: Can’t we just choose whatever we want?

Teacher: Not all the time.

Bre: But you get to choose the books for us.

Teacher: Sometimes I don’t get a chance to make a choice either. Sometimes I’m told what to do, just like I tell you what to do. But we will work through this together.

JR: Then how about we vote on how we read the book?

**Production team strategy**

The first strategy, adapted from literature circle models and the process of designing theatre productions, fulfilled the previous comments and answered the second research question, What theatrically based techniques could activate the students’ interests, sustain their curiosities, and engage them in the literature?

After I introduced the students and teachers to differences among theatre, film, and television, the classes were arranged into small-group “production teams” made up of a director, set designer, lighting designer, sound designer, costume designer, and actors. The students chose the role they wanted to play as they read the book, which satisfied their need for choice. Collaborative units were formed to help them comprehend the book. Now, instead of being just students, they became a team of creative artists who would bring literature to life through sketches, models, and readings of the text. Through this strategy, the students helped one another with vocabulary, shared responses, and found relevant purposes for reading.

This strategy included having guest artists from *A Wrinkle in Time* read with the students and discuss the story. An important part of this strategy was the involvement of the teachers, Ms. Roy and Mrs. Bresso. It did not take long for the students to identify the actress’s role.

**Production team strategy**

JR: I want to show you my drawing of your costume. I have a lot of colors and a hat.

Actress: That’s a great costume. Our costume designer has a little different idea. The other characters look very much like your characters. Every costume designer has a different idea, so when you do your production these would work very well.

JR beamed and was encouraged to continue his role. The other students and teacher were also encouraged and shared in the celebration and discoveries of what JR could now accomplish as an active reader.

The conversation among the students and guest artist evolved into a lively discussion about the characters of Mrs Who and Mrs Whatsit in the novel.

**Production team strategy**

Jazz: She has to be Mrs Whatsit. Look at her smile.

Bre: But she’s not as old as Mrs Whatsit in the book.

JR: (He chose to be a costume designer). What about her clothes? She’s not wearing those clothes and scarves.

Chris: Or the hat and boots.

SpongeBob: She doesn’t have to wear them all the time.

Monique: So, is she Mrs Whatsit?

Actress: That’s me.

Jazz: I knew it! That was my guess as soon as she walked in the room.

As everyone enjoyed that moment, JR, who was usually quiet in the production team discussions, proudly displayed a detailed sketchbook that he had been working on since he chose to be the costume designer.

**Production team strategy**

JR: I see Mrs Who as like a shadow.

Actress: That’s a great idea. How would we do that on stage?
Jazz: You could have her wear black and do something with her voice.

Mrs. Bresso: Does she seem like Mrs Whatsit from what you read in the book?

Patrick: That’s what I imagined her voice to sound like.

Chris: No, I thought it would be higher.

Plankton: I think it should be amplified and be all around.

SpongeBob: I love the way she changes her voice.

Bre: She seems so happy. I can see her now.

Actress: These kids are bright. They have to know the book to do this.

Ms. Roy: Yes, they are. Thank you.

Another guest artist was a set designer who discussed with students the models they created based on scenes from the book. Many ideas were eventually used in the production that the students attended:

Designer: What do you see or hear? What are the “given circumstances”?

Simpson: What I see are lasers.

Designer: Well, how could you do that?

Simpson: I could have lasers shooting down from all sides.

Designer: What if you put [the father] in a circle?

Subzero: Yeah, then they see him looking out from like bars.

Simpson: So, this place is a cell! So it would look like a jail cell.

Designer: You like that idea?

Simpson: Yeah. Yeah.

Students: That’s great!

Director: Muffin-Man, as a director what do you want to hear?

Muffin-Man: I’d hear electricity buzzing.

Director: Simpson, how would you create it?

Simpson: What do you mean create?

Director: How would you make it happen?

Simpson: I would put two speakers in the audience so the audience would feel the electricity all around them as I create a...uh...buzzing sound. I would put one speaker here in the inside, then I put another here, here, and here, and four in the audience, two in the side so, the sound would travel and feel like it’s coming at you. Like, maybe like after each laser, the sound would go with each speaker and travel around.

Subzero: That would be awesome!

Director: So, what was this experience like for all of you?

Muffin-Man: It was different. I liked it.

Kay-Kay: Can we do this again next time?

Supra: When we are making those models I got more of a clear picture of the dome with the purple flames.

Nitro: I think it has helped because I get to pertisapate and talk about what I read.

Ferrari: It was a lot of work, but it was fun.

Simpson: I learned that, like, you can work with others to make things happen.

The production teams discovered that literature is filled with moments that are more than answers to tests. When students are given active forums to share their questions and ideas, reading becomes an exciting creatively social experience with very enjoyable outcomes.

The wow moment or moment that confused

Another strategy was used to generate discussions. It was taken from rehearsal strategies in which the director and actors find key plot or character revelation moments or when there is confusion about vocabulary or concepts in the text. I asked students to share a wow moment or a moment that confused them in the text. The following excerpt illustrates how the director, teacher, and a reluctant reader illuminated one of the more subtle moments in the book:

Director: Muffin-Man? What is a wow moment for you?

Muffin-Man: The part when Charles Wallace comes between Meg and Calvin.

Mrs. Bresso: Why is that a wow moment?
Muffin-Man: Charles Wallace scares me!
Mrs. Bresso: Why?
Muffin-Man: How does he know so much? (The other students agreed.)
Director: Why do you think he does?
Muffin-Man: I don’t know, but I want to find out.

Muffin-Man showed interest in wanting to explore the literature to answer his question. The literature was no longer boring. What Muffin-Man eventually found came from a second reading of the literature done on his own and from seeing the literature performed.

The strategy and discussions transcended worksheets and tests. All the students saw relevance in the literature. The teachers commented on how these strategies improved the reading skills of their students. Ms. Roy reported the results of her *A Wrinkle in Time* test:

They all scored above 90% on the first try. This was the best they did for the year. It was unusual for even two of them to score above 90% on the first try. Even given two tries, more than half of the class would score below 80%.

Mrs. Bresso noted that during the program one student went from an F to a C grade and that another student went from a D to a B grade. Progress was also evident in the work, discussions, and participation of other students. Through implementing the strategies, difficult passages in the book became comprehensible, challenging ideas became accessible, and irrelevant topics became relevant.

**Experiencing the literature**

The third research question was answered by preparing students to watch a theatrical adaptation of the literature they were reading. How significantly can the experiences of preparing for and watching a theatrical adaptation of literature transform the reading skills and attitudes of reluctant readers?

Preparation for the field trip and the event itself became more than a vacation from class work. The event was the culminating activity of teams working together. Issues of etiquette that should be used at arts events were introduced, but because the students established camaraderie and had strong individual interests in seeing the play behavior was not a problem.

While keeping the students in production teams, discussion prompts and viewing anticipation guides focused on addressing their wow moments and moments of confusion and their models, sketches, and suggestions made over the past weeks. This excerpt illustrates how the students demonstrated their understanding of the book and their desire to see the play:

**Director:** At *A Wrinkle in Time* what do you want and expect to see?
**Jazz:** Um.... There are going to be real people wearing things like Halloween costumes.
**Director:** There may be some of that. SpongeBob, what do you think you will see?
**SpongeBob:** Lot of weird things...colors.
**Jazz:** The actors will act like the characters I see in the book.
**Director:** What do you think “It” will be?
**Patrick:** I see something big and dark.
**Director:** You are predicting based on what you know?
**Patrick:** Yeah, I guess so.
**Director:** So what other things do you predict will be seen in the play? You are the sound designer. What do you expect to hear?
**Simpson:** Well, in the part of the book where Meg comes back from Aunt Beast, in the book I heard a lot of...uh...fire and crackling and things like that. So, I want to hear what is in the play.
**Nitro:** I want to see how they go through the glass wall with the glasses and Meg’s dad. I was thinking how they would do that.
**Director:** How would you do that?
**Nitro:** Not sure.
**Supra:** I have an idea. You could do a kind of wall, like a mirror that’s a reflection of a
solid thing. Then have the audience look one way and see something else.

Director: Well, we shall see. Good!

Supra: I expect to see a lot of neat and crazy ideas with the set designs like blinking lights and transparent walls.

CWallace: My favorite character was Charles Wallace. I would like to see how he changes when “It” gets him.

Plankton: I thought the tessering was very confusing in the book. So I would like to see it come alive.

Jazz: I wonder about Mrs Who and Mrs Which because at the end they are like light. They do a metamorphosis; I think that’s the word. I wonder if they changed into “It”? Maybe they made the whole Camazotz thing for a training thing for Meg or for another book?

Director: Do you think Madeleine L’Engle did this?

Jazz: I think so. But I want to see the play first.

The response of Muffin-Man captured the essence of how the strategies and the program transformed the attitudes of at least one reluctant reader toward reading literature that is assigned in school. “I expect to see a play that brings the book to life. I expect the characters to look differently to what I think them to be.”

Muffin-Man, Jazz, Plankton, and the other reluctant readers took gigantic leaps beyond seeing the process of reading as looking for answers to traditional objective test questions. Now the students were seeking answers to conceptual thoughts. They discovered aesthetics in literature. Students, who once found literature without pictures tedious and uninteresting, now enthusiastically brought their knowledge of the text to an experience that challenged them, delighted them, and taught them.

This strategy also included arriving at the theatre in time to watch preshow preparation by technicians. Because I was the artistic director of the company that produced the play, the students were treated to an experience that is not usually shown to audiences. As production teams, however, it was important for the students to share in this side of the process with those who created the adaptation. Depending upon the complexity of the show, some companies would be pleased to have learners watch them work.

Watching a stage adaptation of literature also involved teaching students how to respond quickly after a performance. This strategy can be used when reading literature even when it is not possible to incorporate a performance of the work. Instead of asking how they liked the performance, the teacher should continue to follow the model of wow moments, moments of confusion, and questions that follow up on their expectations.

Nitro: The Man with the Red Eyes. Amazing! How did you do it?

SpongeBob: My favorite characters were Charles, Meg, Mrs Whatsit, Who, Which. The Mrs W’s were great.

CWallace: Charles Wallace was very funny. I like who you picked.

Muffin-Man: The Man with the Red Eyes was exactly what I was thinking he would be. When Mr. M. was in the collum and the Zap!

The following comments were about any confusing moments that students had while reading the text:

Jazz: The dimensions and the tessering. At first I didn’t understand the tessering. Now I know what that meant.

Supra: I would like to reread the part when Meg meets Aunt Beast.

Outline of the strategies and action plans

With any program, success is measured by results and the ability to replicate activities. This list outlines the strategies and action plans:

1. Select a book that will be produced by a local theatre company. If you are in a metropolitan area, usually one company produces litera-
ture or a company tours to your region. If this is a problem, remember scripts are literature. Plays are effective tools to connect students with reading. You could also propose to the theatre that if they produce the work, you will bring your class and help promote it to other teachers. As an artistic director, I would definitely consider that proposal. If you live in a smaller city or town that does not have a theatre, perhaps your school will produce a play or musical. Many musicals are based on literature. This could be a wonderful opportunity for any school study of the literature. I hope the book is on your school’s reading list. If not, this could be an opportunity to consider including the book in the canon of literature.

2. Plan the curriculum as a collaborative, extended experience that will culminate in students’ seeing and responding to a production of the literature.

3. Initiate partnerships with a colleague who has theatre experience or with a local company. If you have limited experience with the performing arts, this action will provide you with continual support throughout the program. Theatre is the most collaborative art form. It always takes more than one person to create any performance—even a one-person performance. There are always directors, designers, stage managers, and crew. Even writers work in collaboration with editors, illustrators, or publishers. They will enthusiastically work with you and your students.

4. Introduce the literature, theatre, and the experience to the students.

5. Organize your students into small-group production teams.

6. Initiate discussion prompts of wow moments or moments that confused you.

7. Invite guest artists to share in discussions about the book and the students’ creations.

8. Prepare students for experiencing the literature in a theatrical format by reflecting on their discussions, comments, questions, models or sketches, and their expectations. Be sure to contact the performing arts company in time to observe the show’s preparations.

9. Encourage immediate feedback using the earlier discussion prompts. Be sure to actively, intently, and sincerely listen. Offer your own ideas and engage the students in discussions that challenge them to think critically about the experiences.

10. Provide an encouraging environment in which students actively create and share their projects, express and discuss wow moments or moments of confusion with the text, and freely state their responses to the literature and the theatrical adaptation of the book.

Comments from teachers and former reluctant readers

Did all the students transform into engaged, enthusiastic readers? While it would be wonderful to report a resounding yes, the reality is that not all students were transformed. Mrs. Bresso commented, “Although students did not [all] become proficient readers, I did observe improvements in their willingness to read, participation, and grades.” Of the 16 students, 14 passed a unit test with excellent scores and found enjoyment with reading the assigned literature. Twelve students continued to read additional books, and 10 students significantly improved their reading grades.

Ms. Roy noted, “The experience has enriched their lives as well as mine. I will look at books with ‘drama eyes’ and will use some of the methods that Mr. Brinda used.” Mrs. Bresso found the production team groups particularly effective: “I feel many of them have gained a trust in me due to the small-group setting. There is something ‘special’ about the group...like it’s a secret we share.” Before the study, all of the reluctant readers typically kept their heads down and were very quiet. Now, the students had something important to share.
Kay-Kay: It has helped because you take me back to where I read before and I visualize it again.

A-Stara: The study has helped me a lot. P.S. I have a lot of books that I am going to read when [this] is over. P.S.S. I now like to read when I don’t have to read

Bre: I would pick this book again if I had the chance.

JR: I think I read a little bit more than I used to. I use to never read (unless I had to in school). Now a few weeks ago I found my Harry Potter Order of the Phonix year 5 book. My Grandmother got it for me a year ago. I never wanted to read it. It’s 875 pages long. Since this program, I’ve read up to page 342. This program got me into reading again. I’ll probably lose interest again over the summer, but not until I’m done with Harry Potter and the Order of the Phonix.

Muffin-Man: Was it a good thing for me? I’d say yes because, it’s just like you got to talk about things that you thought about to yourself and it helped me visualize a lot.... What I would do if I were a teacher is when we’re stuck, ask what part confused you or what was a wow moment which I loved. I’m not ever going to be a director when I grow up; but I’ll be my own director when I read a book.

Two students summarized the effectiveness of the experience. CWallace wrote,

I thought it was, like, good because we got to actually see it. Like, understand it a lot more. So, instead of just thinking about it in your head, you could actually see it, visualize it, so you don’t have to keep it in your head.

A-Stara shared a comment that all educators hope to hear from their students: “Thank you for letting us know that it’s OK to read!”

Help students find value in reading

Through the implementation of theatre experiences, teachers and students discovered how reading literature can be meaningful, attainable, and enjoyable. They also discovered how reading for reluctant readers works best as a group activity. Success happens when they have opportunities to share delights, confusions, frustrations, and discoveries with peers, teachers, and adults. These students found value in reading. As a result, their motivation to read was reignited, revitalized, and celebrated.

REFERENCES


