

SCOPE

NEWSLETTER
OF THE
NAGC
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STUDIES
NETWORK

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Gifted Children

From the Editor

Was there ever a lesson or assignment in school that helped you realize a sense of purpose? Maybe you felt connected to school or to your peers for the first time. For the Fall edition of SCOPE, we focused on the **MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS** that teachers and students make with each other through curriculum, classroom atmosphere and specific lessons. Christie shares an article about the power of the performing arts: how re-writing, collaborating, and performing a modified version of *Romeo and Juliet* connected a fifth grade class to their teachers and to each other. I asked students and teachers to share assignments that connected them not only to school, but also perhaps an assignment that made them feel part of the larger world. Sometimes curriculum can help us remember that there is a special and powerful place in the world for each of us. I hope this edition will help you find that place.

-Leighann Pennington, editor

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NAGC Curriculum Network
2009
Network Leadership

Network Chair: Carol Ann Williams
Convention Program Chairs: Christine Briggs and Carol Ann Williams
Newsletter Editor: Leighann Pennington
Layout Editor: Brianna Pennington

From the Curriculum Studies Network Chair

From the earliest I can remember, my life has been surrounded by the arts. Walking into my grandmother's apartment on East 7th Street in New York City hearing her singing her favorite arias from Verdi's *La traviata* or Puccini's *Tosca* while she was preparing dinner or straightening the house or to being awakened every Saturday and Sunday to my father's personal alarm clock: he always played recordings that ranged from classical music selections to South American Bossa Nova (Antonio Carlos Jobim) or American jazz (Erroll Garner, Thelonious Monk) and pop artists (Frank Sinatra, Robert Goulet). Visual and Performing Arts were revered in my family. I could name artists and their works at a very early age as my exposure to them was as often as my exposure to music. My father was in advertising in New York and he and my mother would often point out line and form and imagery as we were exposed to it. ***Creativity was encouraged: my sister wrote beautiful poetry and I painted with oils and acrylics.*** My own two daughters both write poetry, sing or act and are very involved with the arts. Every time a classroom teacher also linked what they were studying to something in the arts, ***it opened a new world to them.*** I, myself, can't think about history without thinking about the music or art of the era. It brings history to life! Our issue this season speaks to the ***importance of the arts for all children in helping them to understand their place in the world and in expressing their feelings and encouraging their creativity.*** Bravo!

~Carol Ann Williams, Network Chair

All the World's a Stage: The Transformative Power of the Performing Arts

by Christie Pearsall

"All the world's a stage/ and all the men and woman merely players;/They have their exits and their entrances;/ And one man in his time plays many parts" –Jaques from William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

I often ask my students to express what this metaphor means to them just as we are embarking on the study of a play or rehearsal process for a performance. They often point out that Shakespeare is comparing the human experience to a play where men and women enact various roles throughout the stages of life.

This quote often illuminates a connection I want my students to see between the artistic journey and life. It fuels students to be emotionally reflective about the creative process so that they begin to see that making theatre helps construct a safe venue to practice taking risks and working with others. As a student heavily involved in the performing arts, I did not always appreciate the emotional impact of the rehearsal and performance process, nor did I recognize the transformational aspects of collaborative art projects. As a teacher and performing artist, I am continually growing and rediscovering the deep impact that the performing arts can have in any classroom.

"This quote often illuminates a connection I want my students to see between the artistic journey and



My first experiences in classrooms were not as a traditional teacher, but as a teaching artist for Princeton University's McCarter Theatre Center's education department. During my yearlong internship, I spent time in classrooms across the states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania bringing theatre workshops and after school programs to students of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. The teaching experience that had the largest impact on me that year, and one that I have carried with me into my career, was a residency I helped lead at Littlebrook Elementary School where I assisted in the creating and performing of their fifth grade's *Romeo and Juliet*. Not only was this creative project transformative on a professional level for me, but it was also meaningful and emotionally transformative for each student who was involved.

Over the course of five weeks, a team of teaching artists spent several days a week in the fifth grade English classes teaching *Romeo and Juliet* through performance activities. The students were

hooked from day one when they learned the entire story by acting out an adapted version we had created that cleverly summarized the story, intertwined important verses from the play, and allowed students to spontaneously become immersed in the action of the tragedy.

In the sessions to come, we discussed the play's themes of tragedy, family, love, and loyalty.

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Students also improvised scenes in relation to the story, created new characters, and wrote monologues, which we then molded into a script. Our version remained loyal to Shakespeare's plot but also became the students' very own rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*.

With the collectively written script in hand, students began a transformational rehearsal process and eventual performance, complete with costumes, scenery, music and lighting. Their tragicomedy redefined the famous Montague/Capulet feud as stemming from a longstanding disagreement about dietary practices; one family was strictly vegetarian while the other was comprised of brutish meat lovers. New characters included a sleepy undertaker, a hot dog vender, and two gossiping tabloid newscasters who reported on the love scandals and murders of Verona. The outspoken Mercutio was a flamboyant seventies rock star whose death was capped off with a disco inferno style dance-off. Even the ending was altered to provide a partial happily ever after. The final scene of the play still included Romeo and Juliet's death, but it added a hopeful twist when the star-crossed lovers' younger siblings unite and the families come together in celebration.

On performance day the entire school was abuzz. The artist's residency had been going on for several years now and it had become a joyously anticipated tradition. Bright-eyed students in the lower grades couldn't wait to see their older brother or sister in the fifth grade play and even more, couldn't wait for it be their turn to perform in the coming years. The annual fifth grade Shakespeare adaptation and performance involved the entire school in an exciting Shakespearean endeavor!

"I always seek to cultivate an environment that encourages students to work out of their comfort zones while finding safety and support in an ensemble of their peers."



Our residency was emotionally transformational in countless ways for the fifth grade students and the entire school community. Students immersed themselves in a classic piece of literature and took ownership of the text by contributing to their own adaptation. They grew individually in the classroom and on-stage learning to take risks and be supportive of their peers. Students practiced skills that are not only integral to the theatre process, but more importantly, skills they can apply to many life endeavors. They gained confidence when speaking in front of an audience and other communication skills. Students collaborated, practiced leadership, and built a sense of community.

Experiencing the transformation that occurred at Littlebrook Elementary through reading, writing and performing Shakespeare is forever imprinted in my heart. I have continued my journey as a teaching artist by leading similar projects in nearly every one of my teaching venues. Over the years, I have engaged in a variety of experiences as an artist-teacher. These have included leading gifted fifth and sixth graders through their first analysis and creative response to Shakespeare, directing imaginative play exercises with first and second graders in an after school program, and using drama as a venue for healing, empowerment, and community building with learning disabled and at risk seventh and eighth graders.

I always seek to cultivate an environment that encourages students to work out of their comfort zones while finding safety and support in an ensemble of their peers. While my methods, practices, and overall goals differ for each individual group of students, the emotional "transformation" that only the performing arts can bring to a classroom almost always occurs and never ceases to amaze me.

Student Spotlight

Focus on how this meaningful project affected two particular students, those chosen to play Romeo and Mercutio:

The project had a particularly strong impact on the boy we selected to play Romeo. Although our young Romeo was shy and hesitant in the classroom, we immediately recognized his understanding of the characters and natural stage intuitions. With each rehearsal, he grew more and more confident. He began to truly realize his potential on stage. His confidence was strengthened when his peers noticed for the first time their timid classmate taking on a challenge that was new to all of them.

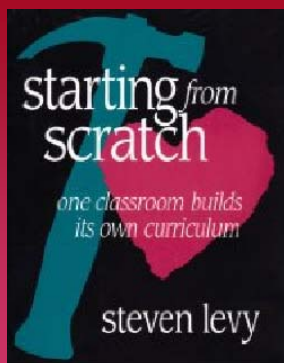
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Student Spotlight... Continued from page 3

We chose to cast another bold and vocal student who had begged us to play Romeo as Mercutio. While disappointed at first, the experience not only humbled this student, but it allowed him to see that playing the more minor, yet perhaps more interesting character in the play showcased his talents just as much as a lead role would have and was ultimately more challenging for him. Most importantly, during the rehearsal process he began to focus less on showcasing his own talents and more on contributing his gifts to the ensemble of his peers.

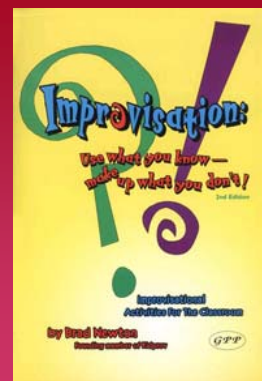
Books that are All Play!

If "all the world's a stage and we are merely players," then you can bring the "Play," the fun and the passion, of the performing arts and other forms of interactive curriculum into your classroom. Learn how by reading these books:



Starting from Scratch: One Classroom Builds Its Own Curriculum by Stephen Levy

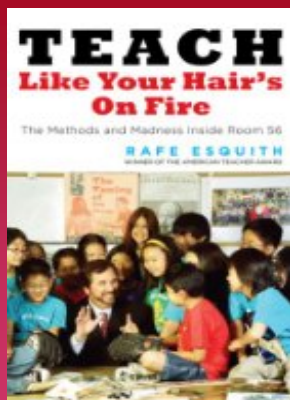
With his approachable style and interesting anecdotes, Stephen Levy shares how he creates a phenomenal classroom atmosphere and allows students to participate in building their classroom environment and curriculum in a deeply meaningful way. This one's a classic!



Improvisation: Use What You Know - Make Up What You Don't! by Brad Newton

A favorite from Great Potential Press: "An aerobic workout for the brain, recommended by Destination Imagination! This innovative book describes 50 creative activities designed to get children's minds going. Each activity works well for children in grades 2-12, and is explained in both words and pictures." Get your kids moving with creative and improvisational acting activities.

Teach Like Your Hair's on Fire: The Methods and Madness Inside Room 56 by Rafe Esquith

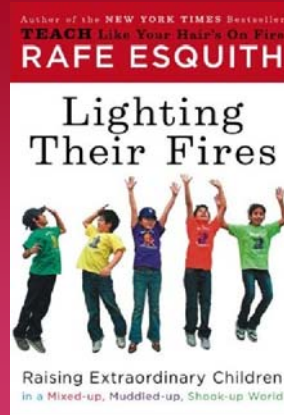


He transformed his classroom in inner-city LA. His students wowed one of the greatest Shakespearean actors with their performances.

**Did you see Rafe Esquith at last year's NAGC?
Check out his latest book:**

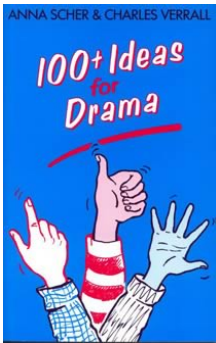
Lighting Their Fires: Raising Extraordinary Children in a Mixed-up, Muddled-up, Shook-up World

This book is geared more toward a parent audience. In an engaging style, Esquith frames the book using a class trip to a baseball game to impart advice based on experience.



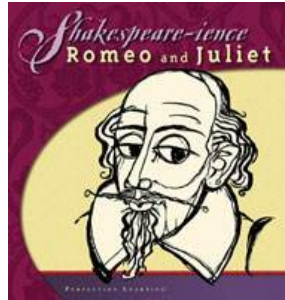
Resources for Teaching Drama

Recommended by Our Article Author Christie Pearsall



100+ Ideas for Drama by Anna Scher and Charles Verral. Christie says: "This is a book I use for simple warm up games and activities to break the ice or to "get going" in the classroom."

The **Folger Shakespeare Library website** is an excellent resource. They publish teacher materials and run workshops. Here is the web address for their "K-12 teachers" section, which includes "Teacher's Lounge" for exchanging lesson plans and ideas, primary sources about Shakespeare's time, and even study guides: http://www.folger.edu/index_sa.cfm?specaudid=2



SHAKESPEARE_IENCE:

This series of books can help "Make your Shakespeare unit a true Shakespeare-ience!" This series includes materials to help teachers approach the plays from a literary based study or a performance-based experience.

An image of the Globe Theatre



NAGC ANNUAL CONVENTION NEWS

We hope to see many of you at our Annual Convention. Our network starts out with a collaborative effort with the Middle Grades by offering a Wednesday Academy geared to Middle Grades entitled: Taking Middle School Gifted Students to Higher Ground. This session will focus on those practices that engage gifted students in rigorous learning, creative activities, and critical thinking.

From Friday to Sunday, we have attempted to reach out to all curriculum areas and offer presentations that are engaging, cutting-edge and invigorating. Hopefully there will be something for everyone in, Mathematics, Literacy (including using RTI for Gifted Readers), Science, Social Studies and the Arts.

Friday, we invite you to join us for dessert at Curriculum Awards Night. Here we will showcase our award-winning curriculums and give you a chance to meet and greet our winners and sample their curriculums.

On Saturday afternoon, we will host our annual Curriculum Business Meeting and would enjoy meeting you and seeing how you might like to get involved in your network.

We are always looking for both readers for Curriculum Awards and convention proposals and writers who might like to contribute to our newsletter. Hope to see you there!

In the Words of a Student: The Process of Writing an Inspirational Speech Leads to... Inspiration!

One 8th grade student, Alexia, wrote a response to the following question: “**What assignment did you CONNECT with on an emotional level?** Now this may be an assignment that showed you a special talent you have, connected you to a discipline or other students, or even gave you confidence in yourself. Describe the assignment or project and why it meant something to you.”

Alexia writes: An assignment I really connected to in my school years was having to write a speech. I love talking in front of people, so this assignment sounded easy. We were given the assignment and all of a sudden I had no idea what to write and speak about. I thought about this for a long time and I had to really think, “What topic will be easy to talk about and write about?” I honestly had no idea.

About a week later, I had an amazing idea! Earlier that year my class and I had a book drive; not a small little book drive, it was huge! I really got into it, I helped in every way I could. During the process of this book drive, my class and I learned about the school we were donating the books to. The school had no library! I was so surprised. Most of the children at the school were underprivileged and never really got to sit down and just dive into a book. So I wanted to write a speech on how important it is for children to read and create imaginative worlds in their minds from the story books. I started writing and I just couldn't stop. I felt great that I was going to be able to share my experience in a speech to my fellow students and their parents.

After writing a rough draft, I showed it to my 6th grade Language Arts teacher. What I remember is that she liked it, especially because she was the head of our book drive. The day of our speech performance grew closer and closer, I felt that my speech was getting better and better. Finally, I could share my feelings and inspiration to other people. I said my speech and I felt so happy. Now whenever I am given an assignment, I always wish it is to write and perform an inspirational speech.



Connecting to the Curriculum Through Hands-On Experience

Many teachers know intuitively that we must connect with students emotionally, get to know a little something about who they are, in order for students to learn and retain the subject matter we teach. Perhaps you started the school year in this way, by asking your new students to complete interest and learning surveys or “getting to know you” icebreakers.

In order to find out about meaningful assignments from the perspective of a teacher, I asked one teacher the same question I asked my student, Alexia: What assignment or project did you CONNECT with on an emotional level? Now this may be an assignment that showed you a special talent you have, connected you to a discipline or other students, even gave you confidence in yourself. Describe the assignment or project and why it meant something to you.

One teacher wrote the following about an experience he had in college:

“When I dissected a rat, then finally I realized all of those Anatomy and Physiology diagrams in the book that showed layer upon layer of organs in a mammal's body were true. The lesson was cleverly tied into the debate of whether experiments on animals are necessary to learn how to perform surgery on humans. The rat's liver was in exactly the same place as a human. You would never have believed what an important tool an animal's body is unless you had opened one. I realized it was an essential practice—the question is, should we experiment on animals in order to gain mastery in the practice of medicine on humans?”

This anecdote reiterates the point that, especially in science class, there is no substitute for hands-on experience; certainly it is an “essential practice” as the teacher above noted.

Article Contributor

Christie Pearsall currently teaches English and Theatre to bright and talented middle school students with learning differences at Delaware Valley Friends School in Paoli, PA. She is also an Artist in Residence/Creative Director for Radnor Elementary School's (Radnor, PA) after-school creative drama class. She graduated from Muhlenberg College with a B.A. in Theatre and English. Christie has also worked as a Teaching Artist for Princeton University's McCarter Theatre Center. During the summers, Christie teaches the courses “Heroes and Villains” and “Elements of Drama” at Johns Hopkins' University's Center for Talented Youth (JHU-CTY).