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# Using Theater to Promote the Development of Literacy and Reading Comprehension

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Using Theater to Promote the Development of Literacy and Reading Comprehension

By

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Reading and Literacy For Clinical Practice

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores using theater to develop literacy and deepen the comprehension of literature for elementary aged students. Using Louise Rosenblatt's (1994) framework for aesthetic reading, it discusses the ways in which theater facilitates the reader's selection, interpretations, and analysis of plots, settings, and characters. This transactional relationship between the reader and text is explored with particular focus on the multi-sensory experiences in theater which support students' perspective taking. In particular, it explores the visual and kinesthetic opportunities that theater offers to differentiate instruction for diverse learners. In addition, when children engage with theater as participants, they practice expression, building fluency as readers, and benefit socially from engaging in collaborative activities with their peers in a developmentally appropriate manner. Finally, a sample scene from a theatrical adaptation of *Peter Pan* is analyzed to show educators the opportunities available for building these skills with their students in the classroom or on a stage.

*Keywords:* Literacy skills, theater, transactional theory of literacy, aesthetic reading, perspective taking, kinesthetic learning, Vygotsky

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## Introduction

For my Integrative Masters Project, I explored using theater as a means of strengthening literacy skills. This is a marriage of multiple passions of mine which includes working in the theater and teaching struggling readers.. Growing up, I was always a naturally voracious reader and loved the escape I found through books. I found that theater was equally engaging and has likewise been important throughout my life. I made my on stage debut at the age of three as an “oompa loompa” in a children’s production of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* at a community theater in upstate New York. From then on, I participated in the children’s program every summer, acting in various shows, my favorite being when I got to play Fern in a production of *Charlotte’s Web*. Eventually, I aged out of this theater program, but graduated to the adult shows put on during the month of August. This is something I continue to participate in every summer. Additionally, after I became a teacher, I was asked to direct the children’s program during the month of July. For five summers, I directed the children’s plays, writing original scripts, each adapted from a piece of classic children’s literature. I chose to do this, not only because I believed in the timeless quality of the works, but also because I wanted them to be stories that were already familiar to children or ones they might encounter in school. I wrote and directed adaptations of *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Pinocchio*, and ultimately *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for my last show, a fitting end and tribute to how I started. Though there are many versions of these stories, especially many that have been “Disney-fied,” I worked to adapt each of these scripts from their original source material. I felt it was important that children had a sense of the original language and story that has endured, not an overly sanitized version that might be abridged.

However, it was not just my personal love of theater and stories that perpetuated my belief in the power of theater. My younger brother, Robbie, and I are almost eight years apart. He was not diagnosed until later in high school with dyslexia, so growing up I watched him struggle with reading but did not know the cause of it. I would try to help him with what had come so effortlessly for me. He is, in fact, the reason I became a teacher. He was a shy, at times almost non-verbal child with some articulation issues. When he was eight years old, he was cast as the Artful Dodger in a full-scale production of the musical *Oliver!*; his best friend was cast alongside him as Oliver. It was a shock to us that our director, a longtime friend, would make this choice. He clearly saw something in my brother that many others had missed. That summer was a transformative one for Robbie. Through his experience in the theater, he gained in confidence and exuberance. His natural sense of humor emerged, and he blossomed. It certainly did not cure his then undiagnosed dyslexia, and he still struggled with reading, but he learned his lines and performed with aplomb. It was then that I first saw that theater can transform a child's life, especially one with learning difficulties.

Over the course of my career, I have tried to incorporate theater whenever possible. My first teaching job was at the Kildonan School in Amenia, NY, a day and boarding school for students with language-based learning differences. In addition to one-on-one language remediation, I also taught seventh and eleventh grade English. Because of the students' serious learning differences, we did not have our students read independently for homework. Instead, I read aloud all of our texts during our class time. The only exceptions were the times when I incorporated theater. For my seventh grade class, I dramatized portions of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and in eleventh grade, students read the play *Inherit the Wind*. They worked in small groups to look over their parts, read, and run lines.

The difference it made for students to get up and rehearse was remarkable. They loved it! For many of my students, all of whom were dyslexic, reading had rarely been a pleasure. It was difficult for them to decode, and many of them had previously been in schooling experiences where their challenges in reading took an emotional toll, feeling inferior to their classmates. Getting up and reading from a script shook them out of this experience; they could move around and interact with one another, trying funny voices when appropriate. Reading could be fun, which was, unfortunately, a new experience for many of them. This is not to suggest, however, that they were able to magically stand up and read fluently from a script. They still had challenges reading, but they had increased motivation to continue. Their scripts, particularly for *Treasure Island* as *Inherit the Wind* is already a published play, I deliberately wrote with words that were easier to decode when possible. They were also not non-readers, though the lowest of the group was at an equivalent of a second grade reading level, making the literary texts seen in middle and upper school extremely challenging. I helped them with any difficult words through both previewing the vocabulary, but also often telling them the word so that they could focus more on the scene. They also relied on their peers for word solving, creating a natural sense of community. Through repeated practice, or rehearsals, their reading improved as they became more comfortable decoding the words in front of them, but also through some memorization. For both *Treasure Island* and *Inherit the Wind*, we used theater as a way to examine the perspectives of character and acting out these parts helped students immerse themselves in the text. It also provided the opportunity for students to practice their oral reading and fluency skills in a supportive environment, learning from one another while working together to put forth a final product in a presented scene.

Theater is a wonderful tool for teachers to use with any age group and ability level to target oral reading skills such as fluency, expression, and decoding, but also to help deepen comprehension. It requires active interpretation on the part of the actor while line reading and making physical choices so as to understand the perspective of a new character. It is particularly beneficial for students with learning disabilities. Working now as a learning specialist at the Dalton School, I often incorporate readers' theater with all of my reading groups, even my emergent readers. We use texts that are at their level and carefully controlled. I will often rewrite stories for them with these lines, previewing any challenging words as one might when reading a book. It gives children confidence to be able to say their lines out loud, trying out different voices and expressions. My students find great enjoyment in it as they try different intonations and voices, not realizing often that they are practicing their fluency and expression skills.

Many reading intervention programs talk about creating a multi-sensory experience for the whole child but in application that can be difficult. A multi-sensory approach advocates for using visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities in learning; having multiple pathways accessed helps students understand and retain information more effectively. Using theater allows for a truly multi-sensory learning opportunity. Children can move around a room, equating each line with the physical action they may take using kinesthetic and tactile senses. They also visualize what is happening literally in front of them. "Making a picture in their mind" becomes physically actualizing it. They read out loud but also learn by listening and watching their peers move and read around them. Theater and dramatizations create a sense of community for children as they share the experience. They interact in every way with the literature, reading it, saying it out loud, and physicalizing it.



Both through research and my own experience, it is clear that theater imparts literacy skills in a way that is enjoyable to students, but also developmentally appropriate and effective for struggling learners.

### **Literature Review**

In researching the benefits of theater as a means of developing literacy skills, I studied the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1994). In *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*, she questions the purpose of reading and the different approaches a reader can take depending on their goal. The teaching of reading is a broad arena that encompasses multiple skills. It can look differently depending on context, the students involved, and the purpose of the lesson; one day a lesson may focus on decoding skills while the next students are asked to visualize what they are reading. Teachers must ask themselves, what is the goal of the reader when examining a text? For comprehension, the ability to read a recipe and successfully bake a cake requires a different skill set from sitting cozily on the couch anticipating the enjoyment of a good novel. What should students be learning from the text? Is there a set of facts for them to come away with, or is there an experience for them to have when reading that is more about the process and less about what they attain at the end? Rosenblatt (1994) discusses these two styles of reading, which she labels non-aesthetic or “efferent” reading, and aesthetic reading.

Rosenblatt (1994) states that efferent reading is done when there is information to be remembered at the end of the text. For example, it is often coordination the skills needed when reading non-fiction. The objective of the reader during efferent reading is to hold on to specific pieces of information. She describes efferent reading as when:

the reader’s attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading- the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a

problem, the actions to be carried out... As the reader responds to the printed words or symbols, his attention is directed outward, so to speak, toward concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading. (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 23-24)

Rosenblatt (1994) describes aesthetic reading, in contrast, as when “the reader’s primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event” (p. 24). Aesthetic reading focuses on the experience of the reader and the processes occurring while reading. The objective and skills needed for aesthetic reading are actively applied for the sake of interpreting that work in the moment. The same text could be read efferently or aesthetically, depending on one’s goal when reading, but would produce different outcomes. This distinction Rosenblatt makes helps teachers understand the ways that people make meaning of text, the different styles of reading, and the relationship that readers have with a work based on their goal in reading. When reading a literary text efferently instead of aesthetically, a reader could miss the complexities of the text: the symbolism, the interwoven themes, the character dynamics, indeed, many of the portions that make a literary work distinct from others. Therefore, when looking at literary works, Rosenblatt (1994) argues that aesthetic reading and the skills it requires should be the focus of educators. When reading aesthetically, Rosenblatt says, there is a clear transaction happening between the text and the reader. She advocates for focusing on these transactions as a means of imparting literacy skills when reading what she refers to as the “poem.”

Rosenblatt (1994) defines “poem” not solely in terms of what would be classified by the genre; rather, “‘poem’ stands here for the whole category, ‘literary work of art,’ and for genres such as ‘novel,’ ‘play,’ or ‘short story.’” (p. 12) She argues that reading a “poem” requires aesthetic reading, instead of efferent reading as literary works are not read solely to

obtain information such as when reading a recipe. Rather, “In aesthetic reading, the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through his relationship with that particular text.” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 25). This is the key difference in aesthetic reading from efferent reading. Readers immerse themselves in the world of the text, and to do so, they must build a relationship with the text.

Building literacy skills through aesthetic reading is done through this reinterpreting of a text which requires several steps. During reading, there is a unique set of tasks that readers do which include selection, synthesis, and interpretation (Rosenblatt, 1994.) During this active, transactional process, readers decide, consciously or subconsciously, what information is important, then select those pieces, process them, and interpret them in a way that is meaningful to them. It becomes a highly subjective experience that allows students to construct a personal connection through which they make meaning. Reading is of “an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of a particular reader.” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. xii) Readers cannot help but bring to it their own experiences and temperament. Because of this, the literacy experience can be thought of as both shared and unique (Rosenblatt, 1994); a class may all read the same book, sharing that experience, but students’ interpretations, though perhaps similar, will always be unique to them. Rereading a text will also always provide a new experience. Though the text may stay the same, individuals are always changing, even from moment to moment, bringing in new experiences and emotions every time they read. I have certain books that I often reread. Each time I read them, I find a new connection or a different plot event stands out, depending on how I am feeling at the time. My transaction with the text changes because I have changed from when I previously read. When people read, therefore, it is an “event in time, not an object or ideal

entity.” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 12). Once a work has been, in essence, recreated in the moment by readers, they are free to respond to it, evaluate it, and analyze it (Rosenblatt, 1994.)

This ability to interpret and make meaning *individually* from a literary text is the core skill that must be imparted when reading aesthetically, Rosenblatt (1994) argues. The interpretation may also differ from the author’s intent. When interpreting a work, readers draw on their own internalized culture which may differ from that of the author’s (Rosenblatt, 1994). Literary works do not exist in a vacuum, and our individual interpretations, as long as they are rooted in the text, are no less valid than the author’s. Yet, how does one guide students into this transactional, aesthetic reading, giving them the ability to put themselves in the world of the “poem,” and then select and interpret what is critical information? One of the best ways for educators to facilitate this is through theater. With its paired down text framework and the demands of active line reading, theater provides the necessary structure to allow students to interpret and embody individual characters, teaching comprehension skills such as character motivation and perspective. They access the multi-sensory learning pathways that are otherwise often neglected in more traditional formats for teaching reading, making it especially valuable for students with learning disabilities.

The aesthetic reading of the “poem” is obvious in the theater, even at a professional level. One could see the same Broadway play night after night and never truly see the same show. This is because actors are breathing life into stories. Every time they read a line, they have the ability to interpret it differently, react in a different way than previously, and make choices that explore new aspects of characters. They carry out new transactions with the source material at every performance. This dynamism is one of the most exciting aspects of theater, and also one of the things that makes it such a valuable tool for educators to teach

literacy skills. The function of a play is not to answer comprehension questions or take away facts, but to provide an experience, whether for the audience or actor. It is one where hopefully participants will relate to or learn something about their own lives while being immersed in the moment. Plays need not just textual comprehension, but also the individual's interpretation. Reading a script requires one to take on an active role as "no one can read it for you, you must bring yourself into it" (1994, p. 105.) This active reading is a key skill in the transactional framework and in theater; the text imparts the language, but readers use their own background and experience to imbue it with meaning and making personal connection.

One of the ways that theater lends itself to the aesthetic reading is through the structure of the plays themselves. In a play, where the text structure consists of lines clearly assigned to a character with minimal direction or narration, students become familiar with plot structure without a lot of extra language involved. Rosenblatt (1994) calls the text, "...the stimulus that focuses the reader's attention." (p. 11) For students with learning disabilities, the format of the script helps them discern the most important information. Too often, my students have focused on decoding the language of the narrator, and have missed main plot points, struggling to discern the key events from the ancillary details. While these prose are an essential part to literature, they can make it difficult for learning disabled students to synthesize the main idea and plot events. This then hinders their ability to form the transactional relationship. The structure of a script, therefore, can aid their comprehension of plot structure and the events of a text.

The script format can also augment students' comprehension skills, particularly their understanding of characters and ability to take on those characters' perspectives. Readers

have only the text to guide them and must recreate from it a speaker or persona (Rosenblatt, 1994). As the structure of a play consists almost solely of dialogue, it forces an aesthetic stance, demanding it be experienced as lines are read. Readers fill in the gaps between distinct lines for characters and any stage directions given. Though there may be some suggested stage direction, plays take students out of a strictly narrative mindset (Murray, Salas, Thoghda, 2015.) Line by line must be read differently as they are unconnected by description on the page, and readers must use this to recreate characters. It is up to actors to select, then interpret and infer what the emotion and message of the character is. The play structure provides the framework for this interpretation and aesthetic reading. While rebuilding these characters, it forces students to think about characters' motivations and past experiences; students do not rely just on the author to tell them a character's history or how they think and feel, they fill in the blanks themselves, making inferences from the information they have. They can create their own ideas about a character's motivation because of this text structure, leading to augmenting their comprehension of a character.

When reading a novel, authors often present us with one character's point of view. They may guide readers into an understanding of what one character is going through, engendering empathy for that character as readers see the world through the eyes of that experience. Yet even with an author's guidance, it can still be a challenge for students to put themselves in a character's shoes and understand the perspective of that character, especially if it is not easily relatable to an experience they have had. Further, it can be even more challenging to try and understand how a secondary character feels, one who is not the main character or from whose point of the view the story is told. To comprehend a work, there must be empathy and or at least understanding for its characters. Theater helps us do this as it

teaches point of view and perspective (Rosenblatt, 1994) through the taking on of different characters. In order to “become” a character, there must be an active, transactional relationship with the text.

Playing a role creates ownership that in turn creates an intrinsic motivation for students to understand their character. When embodying a character, as in a play, an understanding begins to happen naturally. Being charged with representing a specific character in a play facilitates caring about that character’s point of view, further developing empathy. The text-to-self connections we try to teach our students to make when reading can transform into the self becoming a character from the text. In reading a novel, readers may automatically select and emphasize the main character’s perspective because that is what the author is guiding them to do by virtue of telling that person’s story. However, when they are given a part in a play, they look at the world from that character’s point of view, while still having access to the rest of the story. Characters assigned to actors then becomes the main character to them. Their relationship to the world of the play may be different from the protagonist, their lens is different. They are solely reading the lines from their character and only in certain scenes, seeing certain situations. They develop a stronger affinity with that character as they see these situations solely through their eyes, yet also by realizing what scenes they are *not* a part of. This restriction helps students to take on the perspective and point of view of certain characters, helping them to aesthetically select and interpret what is valuable for them. Stepping into a character also taps into students’ natural curiosity; “perhaps,” they may wonder, “Captain Hook had a miserable childhood, which is why he is so combative with Peter and the rest of the lost boys.” A teacher or director can use this curiosity as an opportunity to guide students into examining these questions and actively

using comprehension skills such as perspective taking, inferencing, finding the main idea, and making text-to-self connections. Often during class discussions I have had students vehemently defend their character's actions and try to justify objectively bad behavior. The ownership they feel over their character, but also their ability to fully take on their character's perspective becomes clear. At times, they have even talked about their character using the first person, saying things like, "I didn't mean it like that! You just don't understand me!" This was especially true with my seventh grade students, and often the language they used to defend their character echoed what one might imagine them saying at home to their parents, further proving how they had merged to become one with their character. Having this practice with comprehension skills in a concrete, stripped down textual structure can then help students with learning disabilities transfer these skills later on to more complex literary works.

This comprehension is aided not just through the text structure of a play, but also by the multi-sensory demands of theater. Students are physically becoming the character, further forcing them to relate as they become one and the same with the role they are assigned to. It also allows students to find connections with characters through movement. Through movement, students are able to "climb into history- to understand historical situations and current events in a dynamic and personal way- which inevitably stirs deeper interest and thoughtful questions" (Griss, 1998, p. 16). This is directly applicable to theater and learning about characters. Students climb into the history of a character. For every physical choice they make, they must ask themselves why they make it. What is it about that character that makes that choice make sense? For example, when one embodies a character, they need to think about the way they walk and why. The aesthetic reading skills of selection, evaluation,



and analysis are translated from the comprehension of a character as actors fully take on their physicality. If one stoops their back, they may come closer to feeling how an elderly character must feel and the encumbrances upon them. As they take on this physicality, they will begin to develop an understanding of who that character is. They bring a part of themselves into the character, but the character will also become a part of them, getting under their skin. Through this transaction, there is a natural inclination to embrace the character and motivation to then understand the character more fully.

Some students may not even realize that they are asking themselves these questions when making physical choices. This then provides the educator with the opportunity to tap into students' metacognitive skills. They can help them realize where these choices are coming from, connecting the dots between their implicit understanding and the deliberate choices they have made. Theater lets students tap into the perspectives of another character and their own thinking as they physically become one with their character.

Movement helps children become invested in their own learning. In theater, they are moving together as part of a cast. They are held accountable not only to themselves but also to their castmates. They can feel the energy and support of their group in a natural camaraderie. It provides students with the chance to physically see what is happening around them, and it also allows students to share these moments with each other. Kinesthetic movement can be motivating for students, especially those who have attentional or sensory needs. For those who find the constant need to sit still challenging, theater is a wonderful vehicle for all students. Often these students will need non-traditional pathways activated more often than other students, making the kinesthetic learning opportunities invaluable for them. This muscle memory can help them recall plot points later on, as can the visual

recollection of seeing where they were physically placed on stage or on a classroom in relation to other students. I recently did a scripted version of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* with my first graders. They loved practicing how the different bears might walk, lumbering about, but also how Goldie would walk and skip. When discussing the experience, one of my students said he liked getting up and staging the play because “he didn’t really have to read to remember what was happening.” This student, who struggles in reading, felt the value in the kinesthetic and visual connections made to the plot, though he expressed it as one might expect a six-year old to do. However, this approach is valuable for all students, not just struggling readers; it gives them the chance for movement, and the benefits that come with it, that is often lacking in other parts of their day.

Just as actors must make physical choices based on their understanding of a character, they also must make vocal choices. Voice is important in aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1994). The voice given to a character, whether being read out loud or in the reader’s head, provides the experience that the reader is living through (Rosenblatt, 1994). Through this, even if not on stage, they are a performer. Reader respond to textual or verbal stimuli, but draw selectively from their own experience to create the voice of a character (Rosenblatt, 1994.) This selective attention in aesthetic reading, where responses are weighed and multiple possibilities are offered (Rosenblatt, 1994) is seen, for example, in line reading. The emphasis put on different lines, and the expression with which they are read, can dramatically alter the way a character is seen and their intent or sincerity. Students have to extend and elaborate on the meaning in their own mind as they think of how to read a line. The selection of important information is seen clearly during these line readings; the students decide for themselves what to emphasize, and they have the opportunity to try it in multiple

ways, without guidance from the author. Part of understanding a character includes speaking with that character's voice. When teaching reading skills, we may just call it reading with expression, but in theater it is an essential part of becoming that character. Theater provides the opportunity for students to attempt different voices and expression in their character, often modulating their voices until they feel that they have selected and expressed a voice that fits their interpretation of who that character is. It is also one of the most enjoyable parts for students. One of my lowest readers in first grade came up to me unexpectedly in the hallway and told me she "couldn't wait to do our play!" She was playing Baby Bear, and she was excited to show off the voice she was using. She had fun trying different options, and she was proud to reveal it to her classmates. This opportunity to feel successful and have fun while reading is sadly rare for many of struggling readers.

Theater provides the opportunity to improve other oral reading skills such as fluency. Repeated reading has been proven to help students' fluency. As students become more fluent readers, their comprehension also improves as they add the appropriate intonation and expression to their lines. Yet, having students repeatedly read the same text can become tedious and laborious. There is little joy in rereading the same paragraph. In theater, however, repeated reading is a requirement but not a chore. As students try to learn their lines or figure out what the best way to deliver a line is, they must try it out multiple ways. In rehearsals alone, whether for a production or just as part of a classroom activity, they are given the opportunity to say a line multiple times. There is a purpose in the repetition and practicing of their lines; as with the student mentioned above, they have an investment in delivering a strong line reading as they want to deliver it for their cast mates. Many students may not be

even fully aware that they are practicing their fluency as this is not the goal; it is part of a larger purpose where fluency is a foundational skill.

Theater accesses multiple modalities for learning, but one of the best benefits is that it is purposeful; it gives students a goal to work for where they are part of a collective. They can, therefore, become invested in their own learning and performance. It is a meaningful, collaborative, and transactional process through which one builds literacy skills but also creates a performance with peers. When students are creating something, they are taking an active role in their learning, one of the key aspects of aesthetic reading. It also builds social-emotional skills, allowing students to try on a variety of roles and temperaments, but at a safe distance so as not to feel judged by their peers, understanding they are playing a character.

This is also developmentally a sound approach to impart literacy skills. In his book *Mind in Society*, L.S. Vygotsky (1978) discusses the importance of social interaction in oral language development. Vygotsky (1978) tells us that “the most significant moment in the course of intellectual development... occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of development, converge.” (p.24) As children are able to tie speech to action, there is significant growth in their language acquisition as it becomes purposeful. The relationship between the two is dynamic, with speech becoming a way to plan and interact socially. It serves as the child’s social contact with people, furthering the cognitive and communication functions of their language development (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 28.) Connecting speech to action through social interaction is exactly what theater demands of a person. Children acquire speech from adults, but they can also learn from interaction with their peers. Vygotsky (1978) tells us of the distinction between a child’s actual developmental level, the tasks they can complete independently, versus what

they can do in collaboration with others who are at a higher level. When given tasks in collaboration, the child can demonstrate capabilities beyond their independent development. This gap is what Vygotsky (1978) calls the “zone of proximal development.” (p. 85) It is crucial for children to have learning experiences in this space as it exposes them to higher level skills that they would not have accessed independently, but also shows them how these skills can be applied. This information is scaffolded through work with others. It uses humans’ innate social nature to help them “grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88) Vygotsky (1978) also tells us that:

[Learning] awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement. (p. 89)

This is at the foundation of how theater can help students with their language development. Instead of reading and practicing skills independently, theater is, at its core, collaborative. It gives students not only the motivation to work as part of the whole, but also the opportunity to see skills modelled, differentiated, and scaffolded by their peers. Through working together to put on a play, students are able to hear fluency and expression modelled from their peers and see the character choices they are making. The more they see this and try it in collaboration with others, the more it will become internalized for them until ultimately their independent level rises to match the skills they have been practicing. When as a group, they have repeated line readings in rehearsals, a child’s own fluency will improve. They can see the character choices their peers make, but also collaborate with them on their own character choices, asking them why they decided on certain things, inspiring one another. As they become accustomed to questioning these choices with their peers, they will begin to do so

more naturally for themselves. Through theater, they are able to do this in different, multi-sensory modalities, further ensuring that they can retain the information presented to them. By collaborating with their peers in theater, they are working to build something purposeful together while continuing to learn from one another and developing their own skills with increasing independence.

Finally, theater provides a distinct benefit for educators; it gives a quick way to assess their students as teachers watch what is happening in front of them. Through students' character choices, line readings, and bodily movements, teachers can assess students' comprehension of their characters, the world of the play, and also their oral reading skills. It can be used in many different educational settings, from small literacy groups, or in the classroom, to full scale productions. Though it may at first seem a daunting undertaking to teachers, it is highly adaptable to fit the needs of any educator.

### **Sample Scene and Application in the Classroom**

This section includes a short scene taken from my own theatrical adaptation of *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate to educators ways in which various literacy skills can be taught with a short theatrical text as an example. It is meant to give examples of assignments, how they can be differentiated for different learners and age groups, and how multi-sensory learning can be employed to help develop comprehension skills. In the below scene, Captain Hook and his band of pirates discover the secret hideout of the lost boys, and they plot ways to lure them into the open. Ultimately, they run away at the end when they hear Tiger Lily and her band coming toward them.

*Enter the PIRATES while the LOST BOYS scatter and hide in the trees*

**STARKEY:** Captain, I could have just sworn I saw one of those boys you hate. Should I go after him?

**HOOK:** No, the sound of the fight would bring Tiger Lily's Indians down on us, and then we will be outnumbered.

**SMEE:** That is true, Shall I after him, Captain? I can be silent. I'll tickle him with Johnny Corkscrew (*motioning to his sword*). Johnny is a quiet fellow.

**HOOK:** Not now, Smee. He is just one boy, and I want to get all of them. Most of all, I want their captain, Peter Pan. 'Twas he cut off my hand. I have waited long to shake his hand with THIS! (*holds up his hook*)

**SMEE:** Yes, I have often heard you say your hook was worth a dozen hands. You can use it to comb your hair, pick your teeth, and you never need to use a fork!

**HOOK:** Very true, Smee, very true. If I was a mother, I would pray that my children were born with hooks instead of hands, but Pan flung my hand to that crocodile that was passing by, and I want my revenge!

**MULLINS:** I have often noticed your strange fear of crocodiles.

**HOOK:** Not *crocodiles*, just that one crocodile. He liked the taste of my hand so much that he has followed me around ever since, trying to get a taste of the other.

**JUKES:** In a way, that could be sort of a compliment. You must be delicious, captain!

**HOOK:** I don't want that compliment. I want Peter Pan. That crocodile would have gotten to me by now, but luckily when he swallowed a clock, and it goes tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock, inside of him so I can always hear him coming.

**SMEE:** Some day the clock may run out and then he'll get you.

**HOOK:** Aye, that is the fear that haunts me, Smee. (*jumps up*) Odds, bobs, hammers, and tongs, Smee, this seat is hot! I'm burning!

**SMEE:** (*examining the seat*) A chimney!

**HOOK:** Listen, Smee! They must be living underground!

**CECCO:** Tell us your plan, Captain!

**HOOK:** Let's return to the boat and make a great big cake. Then, we will leave it outside here. These boys have no mother to look after them and hold them back from eating the whole cake. Then we will get them!

*Noises are heard off-stage*

**NOODLER:** That's Tiger Lily and her Indians coming!

**HOOK:** They don't frighten me, but let's get out of here since it wouldn't be fair to the other crew if we fought them without them!

This short scene alone provides multiple opportunities for students to practice literacy skills. Each pirate can create their own personality and motivation for joining Captain Hook. The renowned American actress, theater practitioner and teacher, Uta Hagen (1973), always asked her actors to complete a series of questions about their character and the world of the play to help them think more fully about their character's life and motivations, but also to help them develop the metacognition in understanding the character choices they were beginning to make already. These nine questions are:

1. Who Am I?

(All the details about your character including name, age, address, relatives, likes, dislikes, hobbies, career, description of physical traits, opinions, beliefs, religion, education, origins, enemies, loved ones, etc.)

2. What Time Is It?

(Century, season, year, day, minute, importance of that time)

3. Where Am I?

(Country, state, city, neighborhood, outside or inside, home, room, area of room)



4. What Surrounds Me?

(Objects- inanimate or animate, other people, all details of surrounding area)

5. What Are The Given Circumstances?

(Past, present, future of all the connected events to lead to this)

6. What Is My Relationship?

(Relation to what is going on/events, any characters, and any things)

7. What Do I Want?

(Character's need or want/main goal or objective)

8. What Is In My Way?

(The obstacles which prevent character from getting his/her need)

9. What Do I Do To Get What I Want?

(The actions taken, both physically and verbally)

These questions, though extensive, directly correlate to comprehension reading strategies, and students begin answering these questions implicitly when becoming a character. Using Uta Hagen's (1973) Nine Questions as a framework, for example, allows students the creativity to come up with their own backstory and ensure that they are exploring and comprehending the world of the play. These questions can be easily scaffolded and differentiated for all levels and ages of students. Questions such as identifying the setting of a story are basic for even emergent readers, but could be made more complex for older students by incorporating what else surrounds them, the time period, and events that have happened prior leading up to a scene. Additionally, they could be an assignment to help students think more concretely about their character and the play, or serve as questions asked more informally; teachers can use these questions to advance the learning goals for students and as a way to assess their comprehension. Depending on the age of the students, they could

fill out a worksheet answering some basic questions about who, where, and why they are in the context of the play. For older students, they could write an essay or a shorter creative writing piece about their character at a particular moment in time, perhaps incorporating a backstory that may not be part of the original text given by the author. Answering comprehension questions can become laborious for students. However, within the context of a play, there is an intrinsic motivation given to students when they represent a character. Even if they have a smaller part, students can enjoy building their character; it helps them feel increasingly significant in the world of the play. Students who do not have large characters can create a rich life for themselves. They allow for them to use their imaginations and create their character within the frame of minimal text. Students can take the information given to them, and make inferences and predictions about what may have happened to cause their character to act in a particular manner. They can use text-to-self connections to think about times they may have acted in a similar manner and what the motivations were. When the text demands are not high, students with learning difficulties have greater opportunity to practice their comprehension skills without the added concern of decoding a lot of text.

There are nuances and choices required in line reading. In this scene, when Smee tells Captain Hook, “Some day the clock may run out and then he’ll get you,” does he say so sadly? Or could he be secretly gleeful at the thought because then he could become Captain? There are many different choices a student could make in that one line, all of which would be valid and speak to a new way of interpreting and understanding the character. Similarly, when Captain Hook says that “the Indians do not frighten (him)”, a student might ask themselves, “Is that true?” Then, “If he is not frightened, why is he running away?” This develops students’ inferential thinking, and in their line reading, they can make the choice of

believing exactly what Captain Hook's excuse is, or they can dive deeper into the character, who does not want to admit his cowardice and fear. These examples show Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetic reading enacted through theater. Students are actively selecting what to emphasize, then interpreting and analyzing the choice within the world of the play and context of the character. This becomes a natural and fundamental part of the rehearsal process. It is a transaction that occurs, with the actors making the decisions as they become the embodiment of their characters.

Students will also think beyond their own characters and think about the relationships among the pirates, the Indians, and the Lost Boys. What have been their previous interactions with one another, and what have the outcomes been? This references previous events that are outside the world of the play. It gives some description of what happened leading up to Captain Hook's hand being eaten by the crocodile, but the exact details are left vague. It offers students the opportunity to think about it for themselves within those boundaries, imagine what may have happened, and think about it in relationship to them. Where was their character when all of this was going on? How would they have felt at the time?

In this one short scene, there is ample opportunity for character building and interpretation, even for students who may only have a line or two. This means that students who are also uncomfortable with many lines or taking on a bigger role can still have a rich literary experience, even if they are just part of the group of pirates without a speaking role. Teachers can differentiate and scaffold the experience for their students by assigning certain roles that fit their reading level, while still allowing all students to partake in the overall comprehension building goals. This also accesses students' multi-sensory abilities and connects it to their comprehension. For example, visually, even without an elaborate set,

students can still think about what the space around them looks like as they move through it. If this chimney they discovered was hidden, what is around them hiding it? What connects to the chimney that may not be seen? Additionally, by entering and exiting the “stage,” whether an actual stage or using a space in the classroom, students must think about where they are coming from and where they are going. This provides them with the chance to visualize the geography of the whole world of the play, and not just what is happening in their scene. What direction is their ship in and what does it take for them to get there? Where are they coming from? Though if being produced, a set may help to actualize these ideas, this can be easily done in a classroom without a set. A simple classroom chair could be used for the chimney seat, and that alone would be enough to ground the scene.

Finally, the kinesthetic act of walking around helps actors solidify the scene in their memory. It accesses new pathways to aid their comprehension and help them visualize where they are. When trying to remember lines for example, it provides a visual trigger of where they are on stage that can help cue them. It connects the kinesthetic memory to the literacy demands, helping students to retain the information. They can now hold on to and understand the scene as they have moved through it, accessing this other pathway of memory and intelligence.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most rewarding experiences for me as an educator has been watching students who are otherwise quiet and shy come alive using theater. Like my brother a couple decades prior, I have watched many other students find their voice on stage. Students feel empowered through the process of becoming someone else; there is a bravery that many acquire when they feel they can finally explore different emotions and personalities, often

behind what they view as the safety of an external character. The sense of camaraderie when working with a collective to create something allows many students to come out of their shell. They may find that in theater, they can express themselves in a way that they may not feel equipped to in their real lives.

The beauty of using theater to develop literacy skills is that it can reach every type of learner, tapping into a truly multi-sensory approach to learning. Because it is so student-driven, as they work together to create, much of the skill acquisition seems practical to the students as the learning is embedded in an authentic context. This is a welcome alternative to many from the explicit teaching that is often teacher-driven or led on a daily basis in most intervention programs for struggling readers.

Storytelling through theater brings many children joy. I always say at parent-teacher conferences that my number one goal is to get your child to love reading. Yet, for many, the struggles they face when reading inhibits their enjoyment. Using theater as a gateway to help children fall in love with stories should be used increasingly by educators. The transactional, experience is magical for students, transporting them to worlds where they have limitless potential to become whoever they want to play.

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