

Abandoning Teaching: The Value of Experience as Laboratory for Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study examines ways in which the creation of a sphere of relative student autonomy for the conception, development, and realization of work not only augments classroom education but leads to types of learning poorly supported by teacher-led environments. The practices and policies of the Experimental Theatre at James Madison University (USA) provide an example of a faculty-created environment in which instructors effectively abandon teaching. The study draws on the theories and findings of researchers in various types of experiential learning to examine the pedagogical effectiveness of the Experimental Theatre process, although the origin of the Experimental Theatre predates the broad emergence and articulation of such theories in the 1980s.

Using four components of experience-based learning that David Kolb and others identify as best promoting learning—incorporation of students’ previous concrete experiences, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and reflective observation—the essay examines the methods and effects of each stage of the student experience of self-producing work within the Experimental Theatre. It argues that their alignment with experience-based practices and the accomplishments by graduates who worked within them attest to the effectiveness of well- designed environments in which teachers effectively abandon teaching in helping students learn initiative, personal responsibility, disciplinary skills, multi-functionality, risk-taking, professional courage, innovation, and other qualities important to success in multiple disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre has always fit somewhat uncomfortably within the ivory tower. Lecture halls and libraries suggest a delivery of knowledge from source to target. The Greek root of drama, *dran*, however, does not indicate something written in dialogue form that could be readily studied but, instead, as the Oxford Dictionary indicates, a verb meaning to do, to act. Thespis, often credited with originating drama in Western world, did so by taking action. Rejecting and re-envisioning the status quo and the teaching of ages, he stepped out of the dithyrambic chorus and turned back to speak to its members, thus creating dialogue, actor, and drama, as Aristotle suggested years after the event.¹ Classical scholar Gerald Else proposes that Thespis’s experiment was, in fact, more radical. Thespis, he shows, was a rhapsode, like Homer, and his innovation was to synthesize his storytelling art with the chorus’s dance and song to create a new art, a new means of human expression, “instead of merely tinkering

¹ Aristotle does not, in fact, mention Thespis in the *Poetics*. The attribution is largely apocryphal, although the orator Themistius living in Constantinople circa 360 CE refers to Aristotle as asserting that Thespis originated tragedy’s prologue and rhesis (extended speech in trimeters spoken by contesting characters or a messenger), thus implying Thespis’s origination of the actor (Jevons 1904, 185). Thespis’s alleged act is dated at 534 BCE, about 200 years before Aristotle’s was writing and 800 years before Thespis’s time

with an old one” (Else 1965, 55). In either case, these origin stories place action and experiment at the heart of theatre. Conceptual as well as practical reasons underlay why the chair, that piece of furniture so common in classrooms and libraries, did not enter the stage as a significant and utilized set-piece until the nineteenth century, 2400 years after the origin of organized theatre in the west. How can these different and seemingly opposed ways of learning and discovery be reconciled or even complementary? Examining an innovative component of a theatre program in relation to influential educational theories formed after its inception offers provisional answers to that question that may be applicable beyond the arts.

The desire to reconcile the development of artists having the ability and inclination to break rules, offer unexpected perspectives, and initiate new work with an institutional structure that rewards rule-following, reinforces traditional methods, and cultivates a certain degree of passiveness through its methods was at the heart of a program of theatre education created by the young teachers and artists Tom Arthur and Tom King at James Madison University (USA) nearly forty years ago. Their solution was to create contexts that propagated learning through student experiences and the professors’ abandonment of the teacher’s traditional role. The student Experimental Theatre program they instituted recognized the critical importance of independent environments that stress the value of practice as a mode of learning.

The importance of experience would be championed by educational theorists in the coming years, but in the 1970s, Arthur and King were responding intuitively to the limitations they perceived in conventional educational practice. Students began their experience in the Experimental Theatre by proposing a production and, once it was accepted, working with their team independently of faculty to create and manage myriad aspects of its realization. Rather than its frequent connotation of avant-garde, “experimental” in this context points toward the reality of doing, of experience that enables the trial, the test known as experiment. Experience and experiment, in fact, share the same Latin root, *experīrī*: to test, to try. “Experience,” whose Latin origin, *experientia*, means “knowledge gained by repeated trials,” reveals their inextricable link to each other and to learning (*Online Etymology*). A student experiment to produce work without faculty assistance could be radical in its process and style or simply the attempt to mount a realistic play without external guidance. The Experimental Theatre became a place for doing that which is new, outside one’s previous experience, for gaining knowledge through trying. The composition and outcomes of the experiment, which became the Experimental Theatre challenge conventional classroom teaching in one sense; in

another, they function to complete it.

Arthur and King's practices post-date John Dewey's 1916 observation that "Thinking . . . is the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous" (quoted in Silberman 2007, 3). They preceded, however, the growth of experiential learning and related pedagogical approaches built on Dewey's theory and signaled by David Kolb's influential 1983 book *Experiential Learning*. In the context of virtual environments within which today's students are often immersed, such approaches may also assume unusual significance. Embodied Learning, Active Learning, Problem-Based Learning, Discovery-based learning, and Team-Based Learning share a belief in active engagement with an activity whose solutions students must discover as one of the most effective strategies for learning. They reject an instructor-centered approach, shifting the emphasis from teaching to learning, and cultivate higher-order thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis/creation within Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy.² They create a framework within which to appreciate the pedagogical effectiveness of the Experimental Theatre experience, one affirmed by the professional successes of JMU's theatre graduates.

To appreciate how these programs cultivate effective learning, the following examines, with emphasis on the Experimental Theatre, their activation of four components that David Kolb outlined and studies of experience-based methods often acknowledge to promote "the capacity to elicit changed behavior at a more complex level of functioning." These are incorporation of the students' previous concrete experiences, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and reflective observation (Lewis and Williams 1994, 9). Central to such approaches are "a) concrete activities that allow [students] to experience what they are learning about and b) the opportunity to reflect on those activities" (Silberman 2007, 8). Although Kolb presents these stages as a cycle, the steps may occur in nearly any order (Andersen et al. 1997, 226-27). In the Experimental Theatre process, steps recur

² Although in 1956, Bloom proposed the most advanced levels of intellectual behavior in the ascending order of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, in the 1990s his former student Lorin Anderson and a group revising the *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, updated the taxonomy in a way designed to reflect work in the 21st century and the development of educational psychology during the prior forty years. Coincidentally, they did so in a way that honors/reflects the kinds of processes artists undertake. The three highest behaviors in ascending order were revised as analyzing, evaluating, creating. See David R Krathwohl and Lorin W. Anderson, "Merlin C. Wittrock and the Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy," *Educational Psychologist* 45.1 (2010): 64-65

in new formations throughout the process.

These stages assume greater meaning in light of the Experimental Theatre's characteristics. They provide students an unusual degree of freedom to succeed and fail. Students are provided a rehearsal and performance space, a scheduled slot of time, and the resources of a budget, lighting and sound equipment, and limited access to prop and costume stock. They choose their source material (which may or may not be textual), student production team, and approach. They then direct, design, act, manage, and publicize their production. The space procured for such student creations during most of its history was, comically and poetically, a repurposed turkey hatchery. With a concrete floor and brick walls, the low-ceilinged black box conversion was virtually indestructible. Small and reconfigured for every production, it typically seated fewer than 100 audience members. Experimental Theatre projects, however, could also be and were performed elsewhere, in restaurants, courtyards, etc., reflecting that the Experimental Theatre was a policy as well as a space. It originally allowed students or other JMU community members to apply for a slot on a first-come, first-served basis. Initially, proposals needed only a title and an argument that they had a reasonable chance of covering expenses with ticket sales and were submitted to the student theatre organization each semester to secure a time slot. No imprimatur from faculty was required for a project to go forward. In subsequent years, a more rigorous proposal process was instituted that required students to articulate the project's purpose, vision, methods, and requested resources. Proposals were vetted and approved by faculty and student representatives.

PREVIOUS CONCRETE EXPERIENCES

The experience and success of drafting the proposal, conceptualizing the production, and working in rehearsals, however, depended on the students' prior experiences in five significant areas, which the process prompted them to reflect on and utilize. First was pre-college theatrical productions with which they were involved. Students often reflected on these in light of the second experience, that of productions they saw before and after starting college, with the conceptual complexity of the latter often challenging their earlier assumptions. Their third experience was that of working on university productions, and thus developing skills, understandings, and confidence. Their fourth experience that of encounters with visiting artists throughout the year and during an annual arts festival introduced entirely new perspectives, often from areas outside the discipline of theatre. Workshops with these artists opened students to new methods and theories. Lastly, their experiences in the department's classrooms provided practices, historical events, performance theories, and literatures of various

kinds that became approaches to test, and ideas to embody, and foundations on which to build within the Experimental Theatre context. Playwriting classes, for example, not only exposed them to a wide range of dramatic literature but demanded that, in writing their ownplays, they manifest their ideas and intuitions as artistic works, a kind of rehearsal for their later work. The influence of study in other disciplines should also be considered.

ABSTRACT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Such experiences, as well as students' own life encounters, constitute the well of reflection that enables their effective drafting of proposals for Experimental Theatre projects. Requiring them to amalgamate their understandings of dramatic structure, action analysis, metaphor, design concept, staging method, and acting approach within the concrete physical limitations of the turkey hatchery, the drafting of the proposal provides students their initial challenge of the project in abstract conceptualization. The educational experience of a project begins with the student's choice of "material" to explore, with each new work forming part of an unpremeditated Experimental Theatre repertory. The openness of the program's production options prompts significant variation in types of sources, from original plays written by students to devised works to published dramas. Avant-garde, classic, and, postmodern plays, novels, stories, and nonfiction have graced the repertory. Sources arise as a response to the students' interests in a particular play, a dramatic genre, a theory or period or playwright encountered in a class, an idea, a challenge posed by a professor, a situation in the world, or any of a hundred inspirations.

The Experimental Theatre, thus, exercises what might be called an organic repertory, one responsive to the areas students have felt compelled to explore, and, due in part to the short time between proposal and production, responsive to what is current to them and in the world. Grown from multiple inspirations within numerous individuals, this collective organicity provides students an alternative approach to repertory that contrasts with the deliberate and centralized methods of choosing the Mainstage, faculty-directed season. It also teaches them, however, that even in more institutionally defined contexts where factors such as cast size and composition, public interest, role in the entirety of the season, etc., must also be considered, that at the heart of choosing material resides a question, an artistic exploration, a connection between the artist and the source.

Contexts like the Experimental Theatre necessitate an expansion of the idea of repertory, however, beyond that of source texts. Lacking givens like a proscenium arch, set seating

configuration, costume and scene shops, and large budget, students are forced to explore new and untried ways to produce plays, no matter how well-established the scripts might be. If students want to produce a play like Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* with a proscenium arch, they have to build the arch themselves, paying for materials out of their budget. If they choose to do so, the cost of that decision encourages them to think through *why* the arch is beneficial and how it relates to the play, its style, and their interpretation, understandings less likely developed when the arch is a default. Abstract conceptualization is asked in the proposal process; therefore, to return repeatedly to the physical world, creating dialectic between the two characteristics not only of theatre but of many endeavors they will attempt. For developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, in fact, as David Kolb notes, "the twin processes of accommodation of ideas to the external world and assimilation of experience into existing conceptual structures are the moving forces of cognitive development" (Kolb 1984, 29). Experiential approaches are grounded in the insight that "learning involves transactions between the person and the environment" (ibid. 34). The rethinking of (a repertory of) sources constitutes an abstract conceptualization of the "what," the material, while a reconsideration of (a repertory of) methods requires a more complex conceptualization, one that constructs productive relationships between the goals, processes, and aesthetics of the concept with a different kind of material, that of the environment and physical resources available.

Although the faculty in this context has abandoned teaching, they have not abandoned the students. Perhaps sensing that, as some later research would conclude, that providing in the early stages only "minimal guidance during instruction does not work" (Kirshner et al., 2006, 75), faculty began to require each student submitting a proposal to enlist a faculty advisor. The advisor responds to proposal drafts with questions, eliciting the search for answers from students, and helping to craft a project challenging both artistically and educationally. The students' previous classroom and other concrete experiences create the context for the faculty member's unobtrusive, mentor-like position since "the advantages of guidance begin to recede only when learners have sufficiently high prior knowledge to provide 'internal' guidance" (ibid.). Once a proposal is accepted, advisors also respond to select rehearsals, again avoiding the kind of teaching that supplies answers but instead socratically encourages the student to search for solutions. Abstract Conceptualization, as well as the next stage, active experimentation within the production process, contributes to the wealth of knowledge and ability that constitutes the "internal guidance" that enables artistic autonomy and

marks a successful education.

ACTIVE EXPERIMENTATION

Despite the role of the faculty advisor, the relative removal of the professor from the process is paramount to the effectiveness of projects as learning environments. A tempting internal monologue for educators who lead educational productions protests that “I do things differently. I avoid replicating corporate hierarchical models and consciously create process-oriented experiences when directing productions. I give students responsibility and stress the importance of discovery. I create a laboratory. I facilitate learning.” While these are noble goals, they disregard a decisive circumstance. As Werner Heisenberg proposed in science and the “automaticity of social behavior” reveals in human relations, “the mere presence” of the professor affects the experiment (Bargh, Chen, and Burrows 1996, 230). We can no more shed our institutional positions and the perceptions that students hold of us as educators, as the ones ultimately responsible, as the font of answers or guide through the process than we can remove our skins. Authority and antiquation cling to us by virtue of a number of factors over which we have no control related to institutions, experience, age, our students’ upbringings and socialization, etc. As Bargh, Chen, and Burrows show, “behavior is often triggered automatically on the mere presence of relevant situational factors” (231). Our attendance ultimately constrains young artists’ risk-taking, creativity, development of autonomy, and discovery of artistic voice. While we facilitate learning in important contexts, we open channels for greater learning when we recognize that we also impede it in significant ways.

Why is a context in which students can create independently of teachers important in today’s world? The answer lies in the unique position that such a space occupies between the classroom lesson and professional stage. Often students don’t get the chance to initiate or participate in a production process not guided by a teacher or established professional until after graduation. Those who get such post-graduation experience do so with existential pressures related to funding, rehearsal and performance locations, living expenses, press critique, publicity, the schedule-juggling of busy professional participants, etc. Such factors often impede focus and may lead to compromises on artistic problems and vision, experimentation with possibilities, risk-taking, and exploratory processes. Such distracting pressures occur, moreover, at the moment when students are crossing a transformative threshold as they seek to synthesize their university lessons and influences with their own ways of understanding and experiencing the world so that a heretofore unknown creation takes form. Resilience, self-knowledge, confidence, a sense of direction, and feeling of artistic identity are

still often so embryonic at this stage that external pressures threaten to distort them, shift them into safer channels, well-trodden paths, to make what might have been more fully creative instead re-creative, an application of what others have done. Experimentation with styles, the development of artistic voice, and the growth of internal guides developed through creative decision-making may be impeded, slowed, or stunted. Practical experiences such as determining a budget, working within a schedule, and publicizing a show are also invaluable, but Experimental Theatre projects provide these without some of the monetary and existential pressures that threaten to undermine a concentration on artistic process and the delicate development of one's own intuition of possibilities and creative relationship to the material.

Students who never experience an autonomous production during university may also enter the profession moving from position to position within organizations in which they serve what is essentially an employee function, fulfilling to greater or lesser degrees the directives or visions of others. Not having been part of a production team producing its own work or perhaps devising new pieces, they may never discover a mode of creation that would best suit them, that develops their creative potentials or the particular competencies autonomous work cultivates. The Experimental Theatre provides an environment in which overriding commercial, authoritarian, and popular pressures can be held in abeyance so that students may develop capacities that will serve them as theatre artists, professionals in various occupations, and mature, contributing members of society.

Consider that places deliberately created to be distanced from the centers of money, popularity, power, authority, and various material pressures have provided the space for many of theatre's most significant developments in the modern period. Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, dada, Futurism, all emerged outside the large, highly organized, conventionally professionalized and administratively directed contexts in which realism and melodrama were performed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The independent theatre movement was often their cradle. Jerzy Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavsky's Studios, George Pierce Baker's 47 Workshop at Harvard, the Living Theatre, Caffe Cino, Eugenio Barba's Odin Teatret, Yuri Lyubimov's Taganka, England's fringe, New York's early Wooster Group, Sheffield's Forced Entertainment, Poland's Gardzienice, Prague's Farm in the Cave, . . . ; the list continues to grow today as innovations emerge from laboratory contexts. This is the sphere of Eugenio Barba's Third Theatre, outside the ideological and material pressures of both the commercial theatre and the avant-garde (Watson 2003, 18-22). In all of these spaces, learning comes

through doing, discovery emerges from experimentation, and artistic voices develop through challenging established principles and asserting a vision of the world of possibility. Their proliferation and historical significance attest to the importance of the impulse they share, one grounded in the suspicion that innovation thrives best outside the corridors and stages of power.

The discipline-transformative experiments in the 1960s of Jerzy Grotowski at his Polish Laboratory Theatre were, to a significant degree, his attempts to wrestle with and explore the implications of his formal education. He located the “technical and ideological basis of his own practice in the work of Stanislavsky, by whose direct successors [in Russia] he was trained” notes Lisa Wolford (1997, 10). His laboratory work was, thus, a synthesis of Stanislavsky’s principles with his own inclinations. Konstantin Stanislavsky, the west’s most influential acting theorist and founding artistic director of the historically significant Moscow Art Theatre (MAT), also inspired Grotowski through his creation of studios independent of the institution of the MAT. It was in the studios, in fact, that Stanislavsky’s groundbreaking work and a new generation of innovative directors developed (Gauss 1999, 3). Similarly, the JMU Experimental Theatre provides a forum for students to amalgamate classroom lessons and reading with their own impulses and interests. In it, the abstract is reified into action, the possible synthesized into practice. Conversely, it is also a sphere in which lessons can be abandoned. In a memorial to his 47 Workshop teacher George Pierce Baker, for example, the inveterate experimenter Eugene O’Neill does not credit Baker’s teaching of “technical points [and] play-making” as the most “vital thing for us, as possible future artists and creators, to learn at that time.” Instead, the “vital thing” was that he taught them “to believe in our work and to keep on believing. And to hope” (quoted in Bogard 1988, 49). Likewise, an autonomous sphere is vital for the freedom it enables and the belief it reflects that creativity and personal vision are not simply an outgrowth of education but ineffable, indefinable forces that need space for their emergence, discovery, and development.

Significantly, the kinds of approaches that the Experimental Theatre experience exemplifies require kinds of trust that many educators may be reluctant to give: Trust that students’ own desires to learn will prevail over those to be simply entertained. Trust that students will, through the nature of the process, grapple with and cover the “content” that the educator traditionally transmits as information. Trust that students will teach and learn from each other. An Experimental Theatre project of *Rossum’s Universal Robots* provides an example of the outcomes of trusting students even when the aspirations of a project seem unsupported by the depth of the students’ backgrounds. The

director's choice to explore Josef Svoboda's use of projections and Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanics and constructivism applied to Karel Čapek's Expressionistic text created the circumstances for more than twenty students to become familiar with and experience these approaches as it also presented numerous complex technical and conceptual questions and problems requiring solutions. The project was so ambitious and challenging that its final production only partially realized its potential, but the impression it created was unambiguous. It remained an experience that both participants and student audience members referenced repeatedly in following semesters for what it taught them about the theories and forms it incorporated as much as the practicalities of negotiating the physical and conceptual complexities of the project. It inspired students who experienced it on both sides of the footlights to be more artistically courageous. Such ventures demand from educators a particular "ethical stance" towards learners that involves such features as openness, validation, respect, and trust, which value and support the "self-directive potential of the learner." Andersen, Boud, and Cohen identify this quality, in fact, as one of the six essential criteria for effective experience-based learning (227, 228).

Students within the active experimentation phase of their work undertake a vast array of physical and intellectual tasks in the attempt to manifest the vision articulated in the proposal. They must analyze not only written texts but those "texts" constituted by space, behavior, sound, and physical expression. Directors, technicians, stage managers, publicists, crew members, and lighting, set, costume, and sound designers must assess needs at every turn and discover how to meet them. Some are conceptual, such as, for a 2012 production, what means might express the magic in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* in a way that reflects the Elizabethan period, avoids reliance on modern technologies, and yet still seems credibly magical to a modern audience? Others are more practical, such as what color light gels can be combined to create three different color combinations, one of them being white, so as to enable the use for each area of the stage of only two lighting instruments rather than three, since there may not simply be enough equipment?

Research into the texts, philosophy, history, technology, literary theory, and other areas informs the students' assessment of needs as well as their discovery of solutions. Time itself becomes the most unforgiving teacher, since strict deadlines, the ultimate of which is opening night, mark the work and teach the public consequences of poor planning. Without a professorial mediator, students must also discover and develop ways to work together, communicate effectively, and either arrive at solutions as a group or cultivate group investment in a decision made by the leader(s). As much as

collaboration, therefore, the experience develops leadership. The relative autonomy of their work in the Experimental Theatre ultimately leads students to “assume responsibility for their own learning,” and thus become lifelong learners, which Lewis and Williams argue the rapid pace of change today necessitates (15). Responses to a survey conducted with our graduates confirmed that the experience not only taught students “hard” skills like electrics, set construction, and craft but, most often mentioned, the “soft” skills of teamwork, ethics, discipline, accountability, leadership, empathy, organization, risk-taking, learning from failure, and entrepreneurship (Arthur 2014).

Those who have changed professions credit their success in new areas to such abilities. It is through acquiring such “a repertoire of attitudes, skills, and understandings,” Lewis and Williams contend, that people “become more effective, flexible, and self-organized learners in a variety of contexts” (15). As Arthur and King originally intended, the learning that students experience in the Experimental Theatre extends into areas well beyond the specific purposes articulated in their proposals.

REFLECTIVE OBSERVATION

Reflection and debriefing enable experience, which learning theorists recognize does not by itself necessarily lead to learning, to be “arrested, examined, analyzed, considered, and negated in order to shift it to knowledge” (Aitchison and Graham 1989, 161). Sensing the importance of that shift as early as the 1970s, faculty members initiated a practice that following each production a postmortem attended by students and faculty provide feedback on its effectiveness and realization of its apparent intentions. Those unaware of the creative difficulties encountered in the process responded simply to the outcome. To facilitate learning and honor the students’ work, each faculty member wrote a one-page evaluation of the production, shared orally with the gathered group and then filed in the department’s archives.

Students were invited to offer their feedback as well, having observed the faculty model of constructive critique. In later years, the postmortem process becomes increasingly dialogic, with the student artists asking questions and openly reflecting on their experience. This activity, and the requirement that each faculty member sees every Experimental Theatre production, has not only kept the extra-curricular Experimental Theatre integrated with the theatre program but demonstrated to students the respect that faculty accord their work. The postmortem process manifests the Experimental Theatre’s ultimate purpose of aiding the educational development of the students as

artists and lifelong learners.

Research indicates that one of the key conditions of learning, in fact, is “helping students to analyze their strengths and limitations” (Kwan 2012, 103). A survey of contemporary issues in Active and Experience-based learning research finds that “one consistent feature of this literature is the central place of reflection” (Andersen, Boud, and Cohen 1997, 232). The postmortem process and advisor’s prior questioning also help to cultivate what Donald Schön calls the “reflective practitioner” in which experiential learning is paired with professional feedback so each student “can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he [*sic*] may allow himself to experience” (61). Such contexts of active reflection, therefore, encourage reconsideration of not only the student’s own practices, approach, and doubts but the traditions, assumptions, and habits (“tacit understandings”) that adhere to a disciplinary practice. The experience of doing enables a quality of reflection that uniquely positions the student to subject the practice he or she is learning to critical evaluation. The quality of reflective thought may, in fact, be more significant to some types of learning than the nature of the original experience.

Writing on the critical role of reflection, David Kolb notes that “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984, 38). That transformation of experience into knowledge begins with the advisor’s questioning while the production is in process. The glimmerings of self-reflection prompted in such sessions prepare the student for the more challenging and multi-faceted experience of the postmortem, in which observations from multiple perspectives provide rich material for deepening the artists’ personal reflections on their intentions, choices, and practices.

The accomplishments of graduates who were most active in the Experimental Theatre suggests the pedagogical effectiveness of the process of concrete experience, conceptualization, experimentation, and reflection they experienced there as students. Some are actors on stage and screen, a number of the most recent are graduate students at prestigious programs like those of New York University, Columbia, and Northwestern; others are playwrights, directors, company managers, professional designers, teachers. Many are successful independent, freelance artists. Results of an informal questionnaire distributed to graduates showed, in fact, that they felt the Experimental Theatre to be an invaluable environment for learning new skills and offering the practical experience

to develop them. Perhaps most notable, however, is how many have founded their own theatres, some of which have become significant U.S. institutions. A partial list includes the Cincinnati Shakespeare Festival, the African American Repertory Theatre, Courier theatre (Baltimore), the Annex Theatre (Baltimore), the Forum Theatre (Washington, DC), Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, and in New York, the Drama Department, the Neofuturists Company, the Examined Man Theatre, and the Ensemble Studio Theatre.

This marked tendency demonstrates how the Experimental Theatre inspires the desire and ability to create new environments to make work as well as an inclination to support original theatrical creations. The questionnaire revealed that one of the lessons nearly every student took from the Experimental Theatre experience was a taste for creative freedom, the confidence to do their own work, and the belief that “anything is possible” (Arthur 2014, 1). Considering the number of new theatres JMU grads have created, this sentiment might be summed up as the confidence to follow their own vision and to lead rather than follow. The same students, however, nearly always also noted that it was in the Experimental Theatre that they truly learned how to cooperate and collaborate. The necessity to assemble creative teams and work productively with them has served them in their later careers, as demonstrated at one of the most respected theatres in the country, the La Jolla Playhouse in San Diego, California. A new program, modeled on the JMU Experimental Theatre by JMU alumnus and La Jolla Managing Director Michael Rosenburg, funds anyone in the company who presents a proposal for a project that has merit. As did Moscow Art Theatre artistic director Konstantin Stanislavsky, more than a hundred years ago, Rosenburg recognizes that creating autonomous spheres for the development of creative work relatively independent of the external pressures, even of his own organization, means to honor the impulse to experiment into the discipline’s future.

Although the alignment between the Experimental Theatre process and the four key components of experiential learning—previous concrete experiences, abstract conceptualization, active experimentation, and reflective observation—occurred at JMU by coincidence and pedagogical intuition rather than research of an educational literature not yet written, that subsequent literature corroborates the educational soundness of the approach. The accomplishments, abilities, and understandings of graduates most active as students in its carefully designed but loosely monitored environment suggest the formative impact of a space apart in which students can experiment, succeed, fail, discover, and experience free of instructive oversight that may in some

ways short-circuit the process of learning or, through a professorial presence, affect the ownership, mindfulness, and independence with which a young artist approaches a challenge.

Part of the indelible impact of such experiences on students stems from their character as something more than educational undertakings or assignments. The stakes are raised and the student's relationship to the work elevated by the fact of doing the work of their chosen profession, creating something not for a grade or the purposes of a classroom but for the very reason they chose to enter the discipline. As young artists, as apprentices to their future selves, they discover and create themselves as practitioners in the Experimental Theatre. What they learn there seems to sink deeply into them to become part of how they practice their discipline and how they think of themselves within it. The lessons of seizing initiative, personal responsibility, technical skill, multi-functionality, risk-taking, professional courage, innovation, and others become their internal guides. The usefulness of such abilities and understandings extends beyond the professions within the theatrical arts since they constitute qualities important to success in multiple disciplines. Perhaps the key lessons learned within a carefully constructed environment that allows for wide-ranging experiment are those unarticulated by the proposal's purposes or a discipline's specific area of study. They are the foundational lessons, however, that enable the proposal and the discipline to be pursued passionately, responsibly, and innovatively.

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