

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY – Michael Osinski

I love escape rooms. I admire the intricate creative work that goes into building one. But more than anything, I love the communal experience of playing a game or solving a puzzle. If I could incorporate an escape room into all my syllabi, I would. I believe we only truly learn when we work together and become physically engaged participants in our learning.

But I can't always convince students to see the world from my perspective. I have to justify the need for problem solving skills when students believe ChatGPT could do everything for them. And I am constantly trying to prove the legitimacy of the arts and humanities in an increasingly "STEM-ified" world. So for the past ten years, I've tried to conceptualize and employ hands-on experiences in every class I've taught – from directing to theatre history to dramatic literature – to get students to experience the joy of collaboration and to find the practical applications of the creative and performing arts.

Giving student actors and directors a hands-on problem-solving approach has a bonus effect. It helps them silence the true enemies of creativity – their inner critics. When they have a riddle to solve, and they have structured problem-solving tools at their fingertips, they don't have time to tell themselves they can't do it. They have a clear objective and the confidence to achieve it.

For actors these experiences take the form of games. When I teach student actors at Northwestern University's Cherubs program about changing tactics, I break out the "verb gauntlet." I write a bunch of verbs on index cards and scatter them on the floor. Then I ask scene partners to perform their scene while traveling through the room, changing the actions they play every time they step on a new verb. The students make choices without worrying about whether they've made the "right" choice. Sometimes the verbs don't work, but at least they've tried out different options without censoring themselves.

For directors this problem-solving approach gives them structure. I introduce plenty of analysis methods and rehearsal strategies, so they won't run out of ways to understand or "fix" a scene. Asking them to use Katie Mitchell's "facts and questions" analysis method helps them separate the unchangeable given circumstances of the play from the unique directorial choices they can make. Showing them how to use Viewpoints and Composition to stage a scene gives them a less cerebral approach when they get stuck on a difficult moment. They can bypass their frontal lobes and simply improvise, play, and create.

In more academic classes, this approach takes other forms. I supplement the usual writing, research, and discussion in my dramatic literature courses with participatory activities. To reinforce the idea of given circumstances, I ask students to cast Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* with celebrities and defend their choices with evidence from the play. To remind them plays exist in three dimensions, I task students with sketching out an important scene from Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*. To introduce the idea of a central image, I have them design marketing posters for Manjula Padmanabhan's sci-fi play *Harvest*. Hopefully they remember the experience as more of an "event" than a lesson, and they see how the ideas introduced in these plays have relevance outside of theatre.

I want students to see the value of an "analog" arts education in the digital world we live in. I want them to understand why we play zip-zap-zop and try to run to the center of a circle at the exact same time. I want *all* my students – even the ones who have no intention of pursuing theatre as a career – to experience the same joy and fulfillment I experience when I'm making a piece of theatre with my collaborators. Until I have the budget to purchase escape room tickets for my students every semester, I will use my physically engaging problem-solving approach to achieve this. Because if my students can play games and solve puzzles together in the classroom, then hopefully they will use the same skills to solve much bigger problems in the outside world.