

Theatre in Diversion and Service Learning

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Theatre in Diversion

Theatre in Diversion is an initiative that was offered four times to date in the greater Cincinnati area, in Northern Kentucky. This formal partnership between Northern Kentucky University (NKU), which established and coordinated the pilot along with providing ongoing technical assistance and support, and Kentucky's Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) was designed to work with at-risk youth in the juvenile justice "diversion" program, a unique program for juveniles in the justice system. The goal was to divert them from inappropriate and illegal behavior by boosting the youth's self-esteem and teaching creative solutions to problem-solving so that they can make more appropriate decisions. This session will provide participants with philosophical foundations for such a program, practical ways to implement and maintain such a program, and participatory exercises that may be included in a program's class sessions.

Theatre specifically, and the arts generally, serve as wonderful tools for this important work because people are inspired to think and act creatively together in order to solve problems. Juveniles who have committed minor offenses (and who are referred by Court Designated Workers with the AOC) participated in the program. Theatre in Diversion connected college students and university resources with the community. Youth in the court's diversion program learned teamwork and developed effective problem-solving strategies in an imaginative 12-week program taught by Dr. Daryl Harris, a dynamic theatre instructor who believes that theatre can positively effect social justice. Along with other faculty and theatre professionals from the

community who acted as guest lecturers, Dr. Harris taught these young people for 1 ½ hours after school once a week on NKU's campus. The choice of place was very intentional: participants were exposed to college life and culture in the hope that they would begin to envision themselves as future college students. Two college students served in lead roles, assisting throughout the program. Other Theatre & Dance students participated in various ways in front of and behind the scenes. Barbara Wallace, now employed at UC Clermont College, coordinated the program. The culmination of each 12-week session was a final public performance on campus. Although the long-term benefits remain to be seen many years down the road, Theater in Diversion has been considered to be highly successful by all participants, including the various stakeholders and the parents of the juveniles.

Ideally, Theatre in Diversion (or any type of Arts in Diversion) would involve one or more service learning classes. In this case, The Arts for Social Justice would be perfect. In a semester, students would spend the first 5-6 weeks studying various forms of theatre including Theatre of the Oppressed. In addition, they could research social issues (e.g., poverty, abuse, depression, etc.) in order to better comprehend the youth's complicated lives. Service would entail working with the 12-week Diversion session. College students (some of whom might have similar backgrounds) would be seen as positive role models as well as acting coaches, multimedia experts and more.

Students would not necessarily have to be theatre majors. Further, it would be possible for students from various other disciplines to do the same service. For example, students in criminal justice, social work, multimedia (who could help with photography, filming and final performances) and art classes (who could help make masks) could be involved with the diversion session. Whether teaching the youth how to do improvisation, helping them write a script, or

offering various types of coaching, college students would serve as ambassadors for the college, inspiring the youth not only to dream about college but also to see it as a realistic goal. The roles college students play matter less than the fact that they are seriously involved and committed to the program.

While the number of weeks can be modified (it has been done in as few as 7 weeks and as many as 14), twelve weeks work well in a semester. This allows for all of the various types of instruction as well as the building of trust and teamwork along with the creation and rehearsal of the final public performance/presentation. Because there is a reflection session following every session with the youth, college students from one or more service learning classes would benefit by discussing myriad issues including how the service connects to their curricula.

While this program has worked effectively in the greater Cincinnati region, its impact could have far-reaching potential elsewhere. The practicality of NKU's program is currently under reconsideration and restructuring. However, to date, NKU's model has spawned similar ongoing programs at the University of Kentucky and at Kentucky's Morehead State University. It is a very replicable model, one that is adaptable to various regional community needs and particular university resources, wherever there is an identified, ongoing need to work with at-risk youth in the schools and in the justice system.

Essential Elements of a Theatre (or Arts) in Diversion Model

- College students work with at-risk youth. Students in various disciplines (e.g., visual and performing arts, English, social work, criminal justice, etc.) learn about social issues in the classroom and connect this learning to the service of working with at-risk youth in the 12-week program (in a semester)
- College students help with exercises and activities
- College students act as positive role models
- College students play various roles (e.g., leaders, mentors, acting/dance/writing coaches, etc.)
- College students from various classes/disciplines may do this service together (e.g., social work, improvisation acting class, dance, multimedia, etc.)

- Weekly post-discussions serve as great reflection opportunities
- Confidentiality is extremely important
- Service is provided in numerous locations on college campuses in order to expose youth to the college culture and give them hope for brighter futures, including college education
- Instruction must be dynamic and flexible
- Various forms of art (e.g., writing, music, dance, visual arts) should be infused in the program
- Guest lecturers (other faculty, experts from the community) offer additional instructional benefits
- A Memo of Understanding should be formalized in order to establish a clear division of roles and responsibilities
- Risk management issues must be deliberated, agreed upon, communicated clearly and revisited as necessary
- Policy and procedures should be established, distributed and discussed, and revisited as needed
- Formal reflection (possibly taking many forms) should be included by college students and youth in the program
- A team comprised of all stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, student leaders and community partners) should be actively involved in the design, implementation and assessment of the program
- A public performance or presentation should be given. This should be organic in order to accommodate the unique interests and various talents of each group.
- Instruction should include lessons and exercises to encourage:
 - Teamwork
 - Enhanced self-esteem
 - Creative problem-solving
 - Self-expression
 - Tolerance and appreciation for diversity
 - Reflection

Coordination:

Ideally, a coordinator would work closely with the college instructor. This person would take care of a wide variety of duties and would, in effect, be the "glue" that holds the program together, facilitating the program in many ways. Coordination would include setting meetings, making arrangements for space, facilitating ongoing communication, helping with some of the program design, risk management, photography/videography, written records (for historical purposes), evaluation, various logistical arrangements, budget and more.

Budget:

Programs which rely too heavily on volunteers or grant funds will eventually suffer as enthusiasm wanes, funds diminish or as volunteers move on. Funds will be needed for:

- Course release/adjunct pay for course design
- Specific art/other supplies
- Weekly refreshments for youth
- Final public performance or presentation (e.g., supplies, food, video, printing programs, etc.)

Sustainability:

In order to create a sustainable program, the following factors must be considered:

- The partnership must have a firm foundation and partners must adapt as necessary as the program evolves
- Ongoing, candid communication is vital for success
- There must be strong institutional support. Whether this is supported by a department, a center, or a specific program or programs, there must be a commitment from college administration. Upper administration must embrace the program in order for it to be funded, promoted and more. The best programs will live up to college/university missions.
- Typically this type of program is fueled by the passion of the individuals who initiate the program's partnership. Care must be taken to structure it in such a way as to minimize potential "burnout." Among the Kentucky models, three years seems to be the point where exhaustion kicks in. A careful distribution and rotation of duties and responsibilities, along with the recruiting of co-leaders can help to avoid this inevitability.