

**Investigative Drama:  
A Service Learning Capstone Theatre Course at Gonzaga University**  
John Hofland, Associate Professor of Theater, Gonzaga University

**Abstract**

This paper describes a process of using investigative drama with four students in a service learning capstone course in theatre at Gonzaga University. Beginning with a history of previous efforts at incorporating service learning into a capstone course, the paper describes the goals of the revised course; the resources and process that students used in doing their work; and the responses of clients at the institution that was served by the project, students, and academic and community audience members.

**Introduction**

In spite of the fact that the Gonzaga University theatre program's mission statement places a strong emphasis on using theater to serve one's community and to promote the search for social justice, undergraduate theatre students lacked connection with that part of the mission. Few seemed to relate their training in theater to serving their communities. Few felt compelled to use theater as a voice for social justice, even though several courses had included service learning components. Service learning projects had included such varied things as setting up a drama program at a local Boys and Girls Club, contributing scenic units to a United Airlines holiday party for homeless children, and performing at a retirement community. Nevertheless, service learning activities were not helping students make civic engagement a priority.

In addition, the senior capstone course seemed instead to be promoting a disassociation from civic responsibility. Students in the capstone course were required to write a paper describing some area of theatre, its role in society, and the best approach to become involved in that area of the entertainment industry. In the papers they wrote, they tended to see theater as a tool for self-promotion. Post-graduation goals were to find employment at a large regional theater, to find a job where they could use their theater skills in the business world, or, as one student put it, "to go to Hollywood and become famous." None wrote about a connection between theatre and civic engagement.

It was time to restructure the senior capstone course. The process of restructuring the course became a process of moving from the old insular model, where learning was intended merely for the students themselves (i.e. to help them find a job), to a transactional model of civic engagement, and finally to the beginnings of a transformational model of civic engagement.

The transactional model for civic engagement is designed to complete a single task that satisfies a certain need of each group. In this exchange, no long-range change is expected; when the transaction is complete, each party hopes to be satisfied with the

outcome of the exchange, but real change is not expected (Enos and Morton, 2003). Our first effort to make the senior capstone course a service learning course followed a transactional model.

Students in the early course were assigned to form themselves into a small company that would create a piece of theater that reached out to some underserved population. They studied descriptions of the community's needs in a local United Way report in order to select a focus group. In the end, three focus groups were chosen—impoverished children, mentally handicapped adults, and senior citizens. They produced a light-hearted story theater piece called “Frumpled Fairy Tales” and performed it at a Boys and Girls Club, at a center for handicapped adults, and at a retirement home. Although the play was well-received at all three sites, the work required only superficial interaction between the student artists and their audiences. When they left, the students had not had an engagement that would deepen their understanding of their audiences or indicate the impact their service had had on their audience—if indeed it had.

Interestingly, while students in this initial version of the course were clearly enthusiastic about the work they had done, they sensed that there must be a better model for civic engagement. One student returned in the fall and asked if she could be part of a similar, but expanded project in the following year. Another sent me a list of ways the theatre program could broaden its involvement with senior citizens. Still another said he thought the course could be improved and deepened if the next year's class would repeat the activity with the same audiences. It would be unfortunate, he said, if the minor relationships that had been established were terminated as the seniors graduated. Urged on by this interest in broadening the scope of the course, I began to look for some way to improve the transactional model we had used in the first revision of the course.

Enthusiasm for the first revision of the capstone course had by this time spilled over to juniors, but they too sensed that there was room for improvement. They asked if they could do something similar, yet they wanted to do something more serious than a “cutesy” fairy tale written by someone else. They suggested it would be more meaningful to write a play of their own for an underserved population.

With this as background I again revised the class. This time I made a first step toward moving from a transactional model to a transformational model of civic engagement. For full implementation, the transformational model would require sustained commitment (Enos and Morton, 2003). We were not ready for this, since we were still unsettled on community partners. However, we were able to incorporate other elements of the transformational model. For example, we proceeded this time with somewhat less definition and were open to unanticipated developments as we interacted with our community partner. Furthermore, by the end of the course, we began to recognize that the interaction could transform the people in both partnering institutions.

At the beginning of the course I required that the student production would fulfill the following objectives. It would:

- 1) Provide an application and integration of all that students had learned about theatre
- 2) Involve interaction with an underserved population in the community
- 3) Give the students the opportunity to form a theater “company” that would produce their own script. They would team up to do everything from the writing to the casting, advertising, and designing.

As before, the course began with a series of readings. Readings included a recent local United Way report, Peter Brooke’s *The Empty Space*, a few articles from *American Theater* that described dynamic artist-audience interactions, Chris Lowney’s *Heroic Leadership*, and video clips detailing the work of Curt Tofteland in his *Shakespeare Behind Bars* program in Kentucky prisons.

After doing the readings, students decided they would like to write a play that focused on the plight of single women living in homeless shelters. They wanted their play to be about the families of these women, and they wanted their play to include a contrasting voice about family life from someone who had managed to escape poverty. This drama would be based on real people in the community, and students would have to be working as investigative journalists before they could begin their work as artists.

However, even though one student had written and produced a number of movies that played on a popular website, none of them had had any formal education in playwriting, so they needed some guidance. Braden Abraham, a casting director from the Seattle Repertory Theater who had worked with Ping Chong to create an investigative drama about immigrants in Seattle, came in to conduct a two-day weekend workshop. He provided several models for investigative drama, including the work of Eve Ensler, Anna Deavere Smith, and Ping Chong. Next he explained how to deal with legal issues involved in doing investigative drama. And finally, he provided students with practice in conducting interviews and in writing short scripts based on the interviews they had conducted.

Thus equipped, students wrote individual contracts to plan their contribution to the project. The contract insured that they would utilize each student’s strengths and equitably divide the work of producing their play.

Before the end of the first semester each student would conduct 10-20 interviews, and then each would write initial scripts based on stories they had collected. During the second semester, one student would be in charge of writing the final script, one in charge of technical areas, one in charge of casting and directing, and one in charge of public relations while taking on a lead role in the play. (Other roles would be cast from outside the group.)

It seemed we should now be ready to begin the work, but the beginning was not without problems. Two students disliked conducting interviews. One student excused himself by saying he was not really interested in issues of social justice and felt that theater should be for entertainment. “Why do we have to add all that heavy stuff?” he

asked. Another found it difficult to find time to conduct the interviews, and found interviewing strangers, especially people outside her social class, unnerving.

The other half of the team, however, pursued the task with enthusiasm, and came back to seminar meetings eager to share what they were learning. One had a funny story about how a woman had formed hamburger into a turkey shape so the family could have “turkey” for Thanksgiving. Another came with photos of art that was being done by women at the shelter. “Do you realize the important role art plays in helping these people?” she exclaimed. Gradually the enthusiasm spread.

Near the end of the semester, the students had completed an average of five interviews—less than we had planned, but enough to get the work of writing initial vignettes started.

As students began writing their individual vignettes, the project began to coalesce. They began to discuss what the tone of the play might be, what kinds of stories they wanted to include, how they wanted to shape the play, and therefore, what information they still needed. In addition, they began to ask questions. Since the play was to be performed for homeless people, how could they find a way to portray the grim reality of the women’s lives without creating a sense of hopelessness? And since the play was to be performed for the wider community, how could they use the piece to win the community’s empathy? Suddenly, the questions generated by script writing began to drive the project.

Theorists suggest that in the transformational model of civic engagement the interaction between groups transforms the people in both of the partnering institutions. For us, however, the initial impetus for transformation was not the interaction between the two groups. Instead it was the interaction between the students and their artistic project that drove the initial change. Their wanting to have a good piece of art was what opened students to better interact with people in the partnering institutions.

More interviews were conducted, more short vignettes were written, and by the end of the first semester, the group was ready to hand the task of writing the first draft of the script to the student who had been designated as the scriptwriter.

They had decided that the skeleton of the plot would involve a group of siblings who had gathered for their mother’s funeral. One of the siblings would try to collect stories about their mother by recording each sibling’s memories as a video. This would provide the playwright with a gimmick for compiling the range of stories that had been collected. Furthermore, conflict would be generated as the siblings offered differing views of their mother, and as they responded positively or negatively to the idea of creating a video.

By February, the first draft of the script was completed. Students were ready to present a staged reading. Student peers, faculty members from a wide range of

disciplines, and representatives from the shelters attended the performance and provided both written and oral feedback.

Some of the most important feedback came from representatives from the shelters. One woman commented that the play sounded like a middle class version of a lower class story and offered specific advice for changes. Another noted that the students failed to understand the dynamics of smoking as part of lower class life.

At the seminar meeting the next day, students admitted that for the first time they understood how different their lives and their way of thinking was from that of the people they had interviewed. At last, they were beginning to allow their understanding to be transformed by people in the partnering institution. But again the vehicle for this change was the art they were creating. Since they wanted to create a worthwhile production, they were willing to listen to people at the partnering institutions.

At this point, however, the transformation was quite one-sided. Although the students' understandings were changing, the work was having little effect on the partnering institutions.

As the scriptwriter began his second draft, other members of the team returned to the shelters to answer the questions the scriptwriter continued to face about differences between social classes. The script was sent to Mr. Abraham, who had conducted the initial workshop, so that he could evaluate the script for dramatic structure. Soon the script was in suitable form for the designer to begin her work, for casting to be completed, and for rehearsals to begin.

The rehearsal process began to raise new questions. Once they saw the script enacted on stage, the students visiting the shelters found that an important element in their research – a father figure – was missing. So it was that the scriptwriter included a long-absent father's return to the family at the end of the play to trigger the climax.

Another question concerned the ending. Attempts at finding a suitable ending seemed to end with one of two problems. Early drafts of the play either ended sentimentally (in an effort to provide some sense of hope), or they would end in gritty despair (in an effort to provide a sense of realism). As rehearsals continued, the script underwent a total of four major drafts and several smaller changes in order to incorporate what they had been learning from people in the partnering institutions.

At last the play was ready for performance. The first performance was at a women's shelter, a performance that would test whether the story connected with those who had provided the source material. Women in the audience buzzed with recognition of their stories, nodding in agreement, pointing to others in the audience at times to identify a familiar story, and finally, at the end, weeping. The ending of the script seemed to have landed in the right spot—not sentimental, not despairing, but with a sense of truth and a thread of hope. The effect of the play on the women was evidence that the project had achieved another goal of the transformational model: the interaction had

provided some measure of transformation for the people in both of the partnering institutions.

A week later the show performed on campus. Audience members commented that they were left uncomfortable knowing about community members whose problems they had managed to avoid. They commented about the technical successes of the video. They commented about the script and the acting. But most notably, some remarked that the piece showed that the student artists cared about their subject matter.

The student artists seemed to have learned many things. A student who had worried that interviewing the women might be invasive, concluded, “I was able to see that these people actually enjoyed sharing their stories. I found that it could be therapeutic and relieving, in a way, to be able to open up and share a story.” She went on to comment, “The most incredible thing about the whole experience was seeing how it affected people of the community. To be able to see that people are touched with something I had a hand in was quite moving. It was the factor that made the hours we all put into the production worth it.”

The scriptwriter found he had grown in his understanding about script writing. He had learned to be sensitive when dealing with issues of sexual assault. Working with a live cast as he finished his final draft had helped him “to hear and see my words performed by the cast before solidifying my final draft. Thanks to the understanding cast, I was able to hear which lines sounded awkward and which lines fit the actors delivering them.”

The student who at the outset said he preferred a theater of entertainment over theatre dealing with matters of justice – the same one who resisted conducting interviews until he got caught up in the creative process – wrote, “I learned a lot about the real demographics of poverty and about the demographics of Spokane itself. How many opportunities do you get in life to actually talk to someone outside of your own socio-economic class, let alone hear their life story? The stories I heard during the interviews were surprising because they were so shocking and different and yet so similar to my own stories. The characters and the love that bonded their families together were the same characters and love I knew, only I had experienced it in a far less interesting situation growing up. By the end of the process I started seeing their stories more sympathetically. These were normal people – intelligent, educated, funny – who had been dealt some tough hands in life.”

Another student commented on how much she had learned about working as a team, and how the course had forced the group to integrate learning and input from outside disciplines.

The team member playing the lead had learned about differences through her role. She commented, “[The role] challenged me unlike most of the roles I had been given in my four years here. Angela (her character’s name) was a much darker character than

anything I had done, and I really had to think about motivation and the “magic if” because she and I are so different.”

As instructor of the course, the project helped me take a big step toward working with a transformational model of civic engagement. The work became more than a simple outreach to an underserved population, as it had been in the class that used the transactional model. Students had learned to appreciate the humanity of those they had chosen to portray. They had applied and integrated of all that had learned about theatre. Furthermore, they had broadened their vision for the role of theatre in society and in the academic community.

Besides all that, the women in the shelters had found the value of their own lives affirmed, and the project had made social links within the wider community.

Will the senior capstone course follow the same format each year? No. Its three goals will be the same, but a new set of students will find a new project to satisfy the goals. Students will need to take ownership of their work. The project will need to help them realize their own goals and interests while at the same time learning to use their art in the service of their audience.

In addition, I found myself learning better ways to implement the transformational model. With that in mind, one of my next goals will be to establish a sustained commitment between our theatre program and a partnering institution.

## **References**

Enos, E. and Morton, K. “Developing a Theory and Practice of Campus-Community Partnerships.” In B. Jacoby, and associates, *Building Partnerships for Service Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.

## **About the Author:**

**John Hofland** has served as director of the theater program at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, for the past seven years. His fields of expertise are in technical theater and creative dramatics. As a scenic designer he has worked for theaters in Spokane, British Columbia, South Dakota, Kentucky, and in Ukraine. After pursuing a teaching career as a middle school English and science instructor in Wisconsin and Iowa, he earned his MFA in theater from Trinity University in San Antonio, TX. Over the past ten years he has worked as a designer and teacher in Kharkiv and Odessa, Ukraine. You can reach Mr. Hofland at Gonzaga University, Box AD 24, 502 East Boone Avenue, Spokane, Washington 99258-0080; Email: [hofland@gonzaga.edu](mailto:hofland@gonzaga.edu); Phone: 509-323-6657 (w); 509-443-6277 (h).