

Teaching Through the Play

Theatre Topic: *Almost Maine* (John Cariani)

1. Opportunities to Choose: Technique 4: Allow Students to Create Their Own Projects (Armstrong 44)

Armstrong writes “that if the goal of education is to create self-motivated lifelong learners, then students ought to be working toward that objective while they are in school” (44). Giving secondary students the opportunity to create their own projects gives them the self agency that we would want to practice in our rehearsals for *Almost Maine*. These projects could be the technical processes needed for each scene to be completed, including the costumes, set pieces or props that may need to be built. This gives the students something that they can physically create and be able to be proud in their work. We would give students the voice they need to be successful and allow them to choose how they want to work.

2. Self-Awareness Activities: Technique 3: Students Keep Their Own Journals (Armstrong 57)

Armstrong argues that the adolescent brain is developed based on the people one surrounds themselves by. It not only develops an adolescent’s social skills, but influences their self-identity as a whole; this then affects their morals, ethics, beliefs, and experiences. A big thing that should be analyzed further is the background of each of the *Almost Maine* characters. That being said, we would have the adolescents/actors keep a journal and write in it as if it was their characters journal. “Journaling connects students with their own feelings, values, beliefs, and ideals, and this contributes to their explorations in identity formation” (Armstrong. 57). This way, these students can further connect with their character, and explore past relationships, events, family, and background.

3. Peer Learning Connections: Technique 4: Establish a Peer Mentoring Program (Armstrong 71)

Giving secondary students the opportunity to mentor and help their peers, or students younger than themselves can help all students be successful in the classroom. Within our production of *Almost Maine*, we hope to be able to include as many students as we can through a mentoring program. Younger students who may be understudying the difficult scenes within *Almost Maine* would be able to receive guidance from the older students. It also would be beneficial to pair a student who is normally prepared for class with a student who may have difficulty with this. This way students can work together to ensure they can be successful; they feel like “someone’s actually looking out for me” (Armstrong 72). We want all students to feel like they are being supported by others and given the opportunity to share their own wisdoms.

4. Affective Learning: Technique 1: Be Emotionally Supportive of Your Students (Armstrong 81)

One of the easiest things one could do to support their students is to connect with them emotionally. “Neurologist...Judy willis points out that under conditions of anxiety and stress,

metabolism in the amygdala surges which can reduce the flow of neural information coming in and out of this key component of the emotional brain” (Armstrong. 80). Of course, we want our actors to be able to delve into their characters and the story of *Almost Maine*, but within that we can create a positive environment by trying to avoid instigating a negative or stressful situation. Being encouraging, acknowledging negative and positive feelings, celebrating successes, greeting students, and even trying de-stress activities with the students can make the learning environment more positive.

5. Learning Through the Body: Technique 3: Use Physical Movement to Teach Specific Concepts (Armstrong 100)

For *Almost Maine* rehearsals we would want students to be able to explore the different types of physicality that they can bring into a character. A strategy that we would use when reading through the play for the first time would be to ask all of the students, whether acting or designing, to “remain at their desks and use gestures instead of full body movements” (Armstrong 101). Starting in gesture work would open the door for students to immediately make a connection to the text they are reading within their own bodies. We want students to engage kinesthetically with the text and feel how their bodies could respond to what is being said.

6. Metacognitive Strategies: Technique 3: Helping Students Learn Goal-Setting Behaviors (Armstrong 114)

For *Almost Maine* rehearsals, we would want for the students to do a pre-assessment where they can list at least 2 goals they have for themselves during our rehearsal time for the day, and apply the SMART system. Guiding the students so that they can set their own goals will not only practice critical thinking metacognitive skills, but also make them more successful in the long run. We would ask for the students to write their goals down in their acting journals, and have them think of short term goals for every rehearsal, and long-term goals before beginning the process. These long-term goals can shift and change, but are goals that are listed on the first page so that they can become agents in their own success for *Almost Maine*.

7. Expressive Arts Activities: Technique 4: Integrate Video, Photography, and Animation (Armstrong 128)

Technology has a huge impact on secondary students in today's society. It is how young people communicate with one another on a daily basis. Due to this, throughout our *Almost Maine* we would integrate many different types of technology into the story to give our students another medium to connect to the text. An exercise that we would have our students participate in would teach the lesson of how “digital productions tell stories of sorts and leave a digital trail, fingerprint or photograph” (Armstrong 128). We would have students engage in an activity that has them using technology to communicate their scene, whether this is through a text, phone or video conversation. This strategy would give students a different approach to the text and allow them to see how an interpretation may shift.

8. Real-World Experiences: Technique 2: Provide Internship Experiences (Armstrong 136)

For real world techniques, we want for our students to be as comfortable with their potential and skills. That being said, for *Almost Maine*, we would want to dedicate some rehearsals to building resumes, talking about professional theatre, and job opportunities whether that is an internship or anything else. Providing access to work experience can allow for the adolescents to become more comfortable in what they do (as their role in theatre) and also reflect confidence in their personality overall so that they are hire-able.

Teaching Through the Play

Theatre Topic: *Newsies* by Alan Menken, Jack Feldman, and Harvey Fierstein

1. Opportunities to Choose: Technique 6. Permit Students to Learn at Their Own Rate

This class will use flipped instruction, allowing students to do their work at their own pace outside of class. Students will be assigned readings for class surrounding “hot topics” in the musical *Newsies*, which will be done over several days at home and “at [the student’s] own rate” (Armstrong 47-48). They will then be challenged to go the extra mile and find their own piece of research that will help support the articles they have already read. The article must be centered around a central theme or historical event in the musical, but it is up to the students to decide what they research. Students will come to class prepared to share the articles they chose with the rest of the class by holding a 2-minute presentation about their research.

2. Self-Awareness Activities: Technique 1: Use Self Awareness Assessments

Have students fill out a core values assessment sheet from their point of view/as themselves. Next, have students fill out a core values assessment sheet from the perspective of a character of their choosing. Explain that when filling out the sheet as a character, students should choose the values that they think their chosen character holds. After both sheets have been completed, students will analyze how their core values are similar/different from the character they chose. It is the goal for students to “learn more about their strengths, interests, and values” (Armstrong 55) in addition to analyzing a character.

3. Peer Learning Connections: Technique 5. Let Peers Critique One Another’s Work

Have students pick a word out of a hat (steampunk, fantasy, punk-rock, minimalist, post-apocalyptic, nautical, intergalactic, etc.). This word will inform the scenic design of a scene of the student’s choosing. The students will create a rough sketch of an assigned scene for homework and will come to class ready to present their work. Students will partake in a sketch critique where they will discuss the work and give affirmations/constructive criticism for their peer’s work. By hearing critiques on their own work, students will “think through... their projects or

assignments more effectively and gain a greater appreciation for the work of their classmates” (Armstrong 72).

4. Affective Learning: Technique 6. Be More Aware of Adolescent Culture

Students will create a character “Instagram” using online templates from the perspective of a chosen character (must be a different character than the core values sheet). The students will be sharing “the culture and interests of [their] generation” (Armstrong 91) by translating the 1800’s characters into the present day. The templates must include staged pictures that the characters might post if they were living in the present day. There must be an Instagram “bio” including 1) A quote/song lyric from a modern song, 2) at least 3 emojis, and 3) a unique username. Three to five pictures must be “posted,” suggestions include but are not limited to: an outfit of the day, a meal picture, a picture of a landscape the character might enjoy, a current instagram trend the character might participate in, etc.

5. Learning Through the Body: Technique 1. Provide Exercise Breaks During and Between Classes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3ANKqrlg-k>

Integrating exercise into class can achieve “improvements in academic achievement, attention, and classroom behavior and reductions in anxiety and depression” (Armstrong 96). During a class break, students will have the opportunity to follow along a short youtube video to learn a section of a dance from a Newsies production. At the end, the students will perform the dance as a group. After the dance, the students will engage in discussion about what dance moves communicate the message of the song and why. Students will then be asked to find a dance move that they would like to replace with their own movement/gesture that communicates a similar message. As a class, the group will perform the dance again while including their own edited dance move.

6. Metacognitive Strategies: Technique 1. Engage Students in Critical Thinking

Armstrong regards critical thinking as “something to inquire into or evaluate, sifting fact from fiction, weighing sources and statements, challenging conventional beliefs, being curious, asking interesting questions, and being comfortable with complexity and ambiguity” (Armstrong 110). Students will be able to engage in these through a debate. Split the class into two groups. One team will portray the newsies, one team will portray the Pulitzer Press. The two teams will engage in a spirited debate over whether or not the newsies will get a pay raise. Each team will have one day to research and must come up with 1) a statement that clearly explains their argument, 2) at least three points to support their argument, 3) as well as one piece of evidence to refute a potential counterargument. The students will engage in a 15-20 minute debate while they role-play the two sides of the paper strike.

7. Expressive Arts Activities: Technique 2. Encourage Students To Express Ideas Visually

Armstrong argues that artistic expression is “a way of thinking that is crucial to students’ development as thoughtful, innovative members of society” (Armstrong 123). In order to foster this thoughtfulness and innovation, have students create a mood board that displays a chosen “design concept” as if they were to design the show *Newsies*. Students may pick any design discipline of their choosing (costume, set, sound, lighting, etc). The board must include 10-15 images, 5-7 quotes/words, as well as 2-3 small textured objects. Students must be able to justify their choices in regards to what the images represent for their design concept.

8. Real-World Experiences: Technique 3. Incorporate Community-Based Learning and Service-Based Learning

Armstrong shares that students who participated in community-based and service-learning “showed significant gains in academic performance, civic engagement, social learning, and positive attitudes toward self, school, and learning” (Armstrong 140). In order to engage in service-learning, students will have the opportunity to volunteer at a local homeless shelter after a discussion from a social works employee to learn more about what poverty can look like today. The show *Newsies* is centered around the Newsboy Strike of 1899, in which many young boys were striking against unfair wages. The boys often did not have enough money or resources to survive, which is still a problem today. After the experience, students will write a short 1-2 page reflection on their experience and how they can continue to help and advocate for those in need.