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Connecting Literature and Drama to Develop Critical and Creative Thinking

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Abstract

This paper reports on two day-long activities developed as part of a school-wide project that simultaneously addressed improving academic achievement as well as moral character. The entire faculty and student body from grades five through twelve were involved in these two days. Detailed descriptions of events are provided in appendices and suggestions are made as to how the project might be improved.

### Connecting Literature and Drama to Develop Critical and Creative Thinking

For over three decades the American public has expressed their interest in having schools attend to both academic competency and moral character development (Gallup, 1975; 1980; Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1993). While there has been some renewed interest in addressing moral character development, the focus on this issue has not kept pace with the increased attention to developing academic competencies (Vessels, & Huitt, 2005). The Character through the Arts (CTTA) project was intended to simultaneously address these two important issues in a school-wide initiative.

The CTTA project was a four-year, \$1.7 million dollar grant partnership funded through the U. S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Education Partnerships in Character Education Program (see <http://www.characterthroughthearts.org/>). It was intended to: (1) integrate the arts into academic instruction using the Artful Learning ® instructional format (see [http://www.artfullearning.com/artful\\_learning/](http://www.artfullearning.com/artful_learning/)); (2) utilize practicing artists as partners in integrating arts into the curriculum; and (3) integrate character education into classroom and school activities using Artful Learning and arts partners. The eleven principles of effective character education developed by the Character Education Partnership (CEP; Lickona, Shaps, & Lewis, 2003) provided the foundation for the character education component of the project. The eight schools were required to:

- Address each of the eleven CEP principles.
- Receive and utilize teacher training in the Artful Learning™ model.
- Effectively address the State of Georgia's mandated list of character traits.
- Use strategies that involve parents and community members in the program.

- Make use of the arts and partnerships with arts organizations as a centerpiece strategy.
- Research, select, and implement other strategies that cover a variety of learning modes or research-based avenues to learning.

In 2002, Valwood Middle School in Valdosta, GA, was selected as one of eight pilot schools for the CTTA project. One of us (WH) served on the steering committee for the statewide project while the other (MH) served as the coordinator for the project at Valwood School.

The mission of Valwood School is to provide its students a challenging college preparatory experience and to develop in them strong character and a desire to contribute to society <[http://www.valwood.org/page/about\\_valwood/mission](http://www.valwood.org/page/about_valwood/mission)>. The school promotes personal growth outside the classroom and encourages participation in the arts, as well as athletic and extracurricular academic activities. Programs are designed to develop leadership, self-confidence, independence, physical and artistic abilities, and spiritual and moral growth. Experiential learning is one of the key components of the curriculum, and students at every grade level leave campus for at least one major field trip each year. They also attend numerous concerts and theater performances off-campus and are involved in service projects in the community. Valwood chose to write a proposal to become part of the CTTA project because it provided a more systematic direction to these objectives as well as funding to help meet these goals.

A primary activity of the project was the development of instructional units that could be used by teachers in classroom instruction. Over 50 units have been published on the project's website (see *Teacher's Corner* at <http://www.characterthroughthearts.org/>). While teachers at

Valwood School contributed to the development of these units, they also created a unique project that involved collaboration with the local university theatre department and was implemented in a day-long unit involving 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students.

In 2003, Valwood was approached by the Valdosta State University (VSU) Theatre Department to help sponsor their upcoming production of *Macbeth*. VSU is a regional state university that serves much of the metropolitan and rural areas of South Georgia in the United States. Its Theatre Arts Department is one of the best known and most respected programs in the southeastern United States and presents several major productions during the school year, as well as an extensive summer theater program. Valwood has always had a close relationship with VSU's theatre department; mini-workshops and children's productions are held yearly on the school's campus.

Valwood used CTTA project funds to collaborate with VSU to build on their ongoing relationship and provide a unique opportunity to connect character issues and appreciation for Shakespearean theatre. A plan was developed to use *Macbeth* to help students see how the choices human beings make always have consequences. The project began with the guiding question, "What are the responsibilities and consequences of moral choices?" All students either studied the play in its entirety or, for younger students, studied a synopsis of the play. Professors and students from the university devised a series of workshops focusing on the content of the play as well as the technical aspects of the production.

An entire school day involving students in grades 5 through 12 was devoted to the project. All faculty from the middle school, upper school, and grade 5 were paired, with at least one member of each pair having been trained in the use of the Artful Learning model and its four elements: experience, inquire, create, and reflect. Students were divided into groups of 10 – 12

with two adults and attended workshops as a group while reflecting on the guiding question. They were given a problem to work on throughout the day (See Appendix A) which culminated in a student created presentation having to do with making choices. Students were grouped according to age because of the differences in the nature of choices they faced. After the activities at Valwood, students attended the final dress rehearsal of *Macbeth* at the VSU Theatre. In the following days, students were asked to reflect on the day in writing and overwhelmingly expressed they had learned a great deal about the complexities of making choices.

The following year, based on the success of the “Macbeth Day”, Valwood and VSU collaborated on the production of the Greek tragedy, *Antigone*. An entire day was again devoted to the project exploring questions surrounding the burdens and responsibilities of leadership, whether the rights and/or needs of the individual ever outweigh the rights/needs of the group or society, and the moral and legal issues surrounding these questions. The culminating activity was a “mock trial” deciding on the guilt or innocence of the main character, Antigone. (See Appendix B). As in the previous year, everyone attended the university’s production of *Antigone* on the VSU campus and reflected on the experience.

#### Evaluation Findings

Evaluation of this process yielded a number of positive observations as well as areas in which the planning could improve. The students were extremely engaged, even during mini-lectures, and the clarity of a focus on moral choices was always evident. The Valwood teachers demonstrated exemplary attention to the plan while making insightful individual variations. The academic side of *Macbeth* was addressed at a very high level. Teachers have good relationships with students and modeled great character for them. The students, themselves, showed a high level of decency and respect for teachers and for each other. The choice and use of an arts

partner was exemplary and became sustainable, as the partnership has continued for three years. The Valdosta State faculty and students brought energy and a very high level of talent. The connectedness to the past CTTA activities and to the future was very evident and provided a model for teachers working on projects for their own classrooms.

In future activities there will be more structured “reflection” times, perhaps giving examples or categories of age-appropriate moral choices in order to make the lessons more meaningful. In addition, inviting students to apply more academic areas – math, science, social studies – to explicitly “teach” rigorous academic standards to the audience for their skit will be tied in more closely to the curriculum. Students could possibly be coached in the Artful Learning components (experience, inquire, create, reflect) and build lessons from their initial skits, which would still focus on moral choices.

#### Summary and Conclusions

Even though parents and educators recognize that moral character is as important as academic achievement, the pressures of standardized testing leave little room in the curriculum to address anything other than basic skills. The CTTA project, a school-wide effort to utilize strategies from Artful Learning® and the Character Education Partnership as well as making use of teaching artists to imbed the arts into everyday classroom activities, provided the foundation for an ambitious day-long project that made a significant impact on both faculty and students. While not the only contributing factor, the increased emphasis on the arts led to an eighth-grade team winning an international *Odyssey of the Mind* competition after having participated in both years of this project. Based on our experience, we highly recommend both the daily implementation of arts-embedded lessons and daylong activities as one strategy to improve student literacy.

References

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Appendix A  
Macbeth/Arts/Choices Day

Introduction

Every day life presents us with decisions, choices, and problems that have to be solved. Some are as basic and mundane as which shoes to wear, but others may be as complicated as whether to remove life support from a loved one. Sometimes there are no right or wrong answers, just choices that may have very different consequences or outcomes. As we move further from childhood and the comfort of our parents' guidance, we become more responsible for the decisions we make.

Much of what we read in literature explores the choices characters make and the consequences of their decisions. In Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*, the main characters, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, driven by ambition and greed, make a series of choices which eventually lead to their downfalls.

The Problem

The team's problem is to create and present two 3-5 minute performances that include characters who must make moral choices and the outcomes of those choices. The team may choose to present two different moral choices or dilemmas and show the consequences of the decisions; or the team may present one moral dilemma with two different decisions and how these affect the outcome.

The team will use the initial group gathering to brainstorm ideas for their problems and performances and to explore the question "What are the responsibilities and consequences of moral choices?" Teams will attend sessions hosted by the VSU Theater Department on the technical aspects of the play, *Macbeth*. During an extended break, teams will have an opportunity to reflect on the first two sessions, either through discussion or journaling. Work in individual groups will begin with a working lunch and continue over a one and a half hour period. Performances will be held in the afternoon, and audiences will be able to ask questions of the team about the choices they made for their performances.

The team must:

- a) decide on the moral choice (s) they wish to explore.
- b) script, stage, and present two 3-5 minute skits to two other teams.
- c) include all members in some way in each of the performances.
- d) use skills learned during the morning sessions.
- e) be able to discuss and reflect on their process.

The team may:

- a) create sets or props to be used to enhance performances (resource materials will be available in the middle school conference room).
- b) present in an indoor or outdoor space (weather permitting)
- c) explore any relevant, age appropriate topic.

Schedule for the Day:

8:00 – 8:45	Meet with team and facilitators/brainstorm
8:45 – 9:30	Session I
9:40 – 10:25	Session II
10:25- 11:00	Break and reflection with team
11:05 – 12:50	Session III
12:55 – 12:40	Session IV
12:45 – 1:15	Working lunch—grab your lunch and drink and meet with group to begin planning process.
1:15 – 2:30	Work on productions
2:30 – 3:15	Presentations and reflection

Sessions presented by the VSU Theater Department

- A The Play as Literature and in Rehearsal (Student Center carpeted area)
- B The Development of the Characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Main Dining Hall)
- C The Design Element in Scenery, Costumes, Lights, Make-up and Sound (Gym Lobby/Porch)
- D Stage Combat (Gym)

Instructions for facilitators

In the initial group meeting at 8:00:

- Go over the problem and parameters for the afternoon session.
- The group meeting should be used to help students clarify moral choices and begin brainstorming the kinds of choices that may be relevant. These should not be easy, good or bad, black or white choices—the more difficult the better. They should look at choices that are relevant to their lives. They may or may not make a decision at this point about what they plan to do in the afternoon, but they can begin thinking about it. Some quotes are attached to help with the discussion if necessary.
- They will attend all the morning sessions in the order given them.
- After the second session, we will have snacks and drinks on the porch of the dining hall and then meet with the groups to reflect on the previous sessions. How you reflect will be up to the facilitators. You may discuss or you may choose to have students journal about their experiences. If you choose to have them journal, you will want to have paper and writing utensils available to maximize the time you have with them.
- After the fourth session, students will pick up a sack lunch and drink on the porch of the dining hall and meet with their groups for a working lunch.
- Presentations will begin at 2:30, so help students gauge their time in order to be finished on time.
- All students will be staying until 3:15—football players will not be leaving until after that time, so no one should be asking to leave early.
- We will have some guests here for Friend Day, so just incorporate them into the group.
- These productions are not intended to be polished and elaborate. The process is the most important part.

Appendix B  
Antigone/Arts Day

Introduction

“Antigone”, the Greek tragedy by Sophocles, is the story of leadership, loyalty, and the struggle of the rights and needs of the individual in conflict with those of society. In our study of this play, we will explore the questions surrounding the burdens and responsibilities of leadership, and whether the rights and/or needs of the individual ever outweigh the rights/needs of the group or society. We will also be looking at the moral and legal issues surrounding these questions.

The Problem

The team’s problem will be to decide the guilt or innocence of Antigone, who is charged with crimes against the state, and to research and plan a trial. You will be provided with witness statements for the major characters, for and against, and will need to divide your team into prosecution and defense teams. The following are the minimum roles you will need for your team. There may be others you decide are relevant to your side, and you are free to use these. Copies of the entire script will be provided to each group.

- 2 lawyers for the defense
- 2 lawyers for the prosecution
- 2-3 witnesses for each side
- Researchers

You will have two advisors and a resource person from VSU for your team. The team must:

1. Review the case and discuss the legal and moral issues in the context of Greek society at the time of Antigone.
2. Choose sides and roles (prosecution or defense)
3. Prepare the case. This will involve reading witness statements, reviewing the facts, developing a strategy, preparing witnesses, preparing cross examination.
4. Present case (for and against) to another group

Schedule for the Day

- 8:10 – 8:30 Students report to designated advising area. Check attendance and orient students to the day
- 8:30—9:30 VSU director and cast of *Antigone* will go over a scene from the play and discuss (everyone will be together in dining hall)
- 9:30—10:15 presentation about Greek Theater by VSU Theater Dept. This will provide background information about Greek society and the role of the theater.
- 10:15—10:45 Break and possible initial meeting with team. (Advisors, meet with Chuck and Patty or Marsha in your respective advising building for briefing and to receive any additional materials.

- 10:45—1:30 Case preparation and working lunch. Students will eat lunch with their group in designated area.
- 1:30 Trials (presentation to another group)
- 2:30 Dismissal

#### Instructions for Advisors and Facilitators

- Students will be coming to you first thing in the morning; two advising groups will be paired. Please take attendance and let the office know who is absent.
- You will not have time to go over much, but at least talk with students about the day and the introductory material. If you have not read the synopsis of the play, please do so and summarize during this time. (Please be positive and supportive about the day with the students.)
- All students will meet in the dining hall at 8:30. Jacqui Wheeler and her cast from VSU will be presenting a scene from the play that will start the ball rolling concerning the issues.
- After the second session, we will have a regular break. If students in your group want to begin talking about the activities, they can get together at this time.
- We will meet briefly with advisors during break to answer questions, etc. Upper School advisors will meet with Chuck and Patty and Middle School advisors will meet with Marsha.
- At least one facilitator from VSU will be assigned to each group. These individuals may be students from VSU, but they are very knowledgeable about the play. They will need your help managing the process.
- Around 12:00, we will have Katie and Monique come and get your group for lunch. It will be a box lunch that students can take back to your area for a working lunch. Please wait until someone comes to you. This way we can avoid the long lines at the dining hall.
- Students will present their cases to another paired advising group, beginning at about 1:30. A small group of students will leave for soccer at 2:15, so make sure your group knows who that is so they can do their part early before they leave.
- The performance of “Antigone” will be on Wednesday evening at 7:30 in Sawyer Auditorium. We encourage all faculty to support this endeavor and attend the performance. This play is much shorter than “Macbeth”, and should only last about one hour.