



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2005

## An Undergraduate Theatre History Course Design Utilizing Problem-Based Learning

Mary Alice Blackwell  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/1188>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

© Mary Alice Blackwell 2005

All Rights Reserved

AN UNDERGRADUATE THEATRE HISTORY COURSE DESIGN UTILIZING  
PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

MARY ALICE BLACKWELL  
Bachelor of Arts, Old Dominion University, 1993  
Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Director: DR. NOREEN C. BARNES  
HEAD OF GRADUATE STUDIES, THEATRE

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
December 2005

## Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the many people that aided and encouraged me through this process, including my friends, family, and my colleagues at The American Theatre for their support and understanding for the past three and a half years. I would especially like to thank my teachers and the members of my thesis committee, Dr. Noreen Barnes, Dr. Aaron Anderson, and Dr. Erlene Hendrix, who guided me through this process, taught me a great deal about the theatre, and about myself.

## Table of Contents

	Page
Acknowledgements	ii
Chapter	
Abstract.....	iv
1 Introduction .....	1
2 Theatre an Academic Discipline.....	7
3 The Role and Importance of Theatre History in the Theatre Curriculum.....	17
4 The Undergraduate Theatre History Class in the Modern Day Curriculum.....	22
5 The Problem-Based Learning Method and Its Introduction into Education.....	34
6 The Philosophy and Methodologies of PBL.....	37
7 The Course Design .....	50
8 Conclusion.....	65
Works Cited .....	69
Appendices	
A Syllabus.....	75

# Abstract

## AN UNDERGRADUATE THEATRE HISTORY COURSE DESIGN UTILIZING PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING

By Mary Alice Blackwell, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005

Major Director: Dr. Noreen C. Barnes  
Head of Graduate Studies, Theatre

This thesis was written to provide an alternative teaching model for an undergraduate theatre history class. The course design, utilizing the Problem-Based Learning educational model, aims to create a student-centered, experiential theatre history class.

The first section explores the history and evolution of the theatre discipline in academia. These chapters examine the expansion and transformation of the theatre curriculum within the discipline and higher education. The second part examines the history and the methodologies of Problem-Based Learning. Based on the philosophy of

educator John Dewey, PBL is considered to be a non-traditional method of teaching and learning that encourages the development of self-directed learning and the acquisition of knowledge through experiential education. The final section describes the actual course design. Included in this section are the educational objectives of the class, examples of problems, assessment methods, and an examination of potential challenges in the design.

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

The impetus for this thesis was a result of my participation in the Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFFP) at Virginia Commonwealth University and my two years working as a teaching assistant in Dr. Noreen Barnes' undergraduate theatre history class.

After being introduced to the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) educational model in a PFFP course, I became interested in exploring ways in which I could incorporate this method and style in both my current teaching and my future course designs. I was equally curious about how students enrolled in a traditional theatre history course might benefit from such an active and participatory method of learning.

I began to research Problem-Based Learning in more detail to determine if and what components of PBL current theatre history teachers might be utilizing in their courses. During my initial exploration, I found a great deal of material pertinent to the Problem-Based Learning teaching model; however, I was stunned by the lack of material that referenced specific pedagogical practices used in the instruction of theatre history. As theatre historian and educator Sam Abel states in his essay, Learning History by Doing History: Alternative Approaches to the Undergraduate Theatre History Course, "as soon as we attempt to depart from the traditional, positivist approaches to teaching theatre history, there are few alternative instructional models to follow" (146). As a theatre student and



future theatre instructor, I had practiced and observed components of the PBL approach in an instructional capacity, mainly in studio classes such as acting, directing, and various design courses and my knowledge and experiences as a theatre practitioner had made me aware of the correlation between the necessary skills needed, that PBL develops and enhances, to transform capable theatre students into proficient theatre professionals. Therefore I was troubled by the fact that the majority of theatre history teacher had failed to recognize the potential educational and professional advantages to this instructional method. This is not to say that this particular topic has never been addressed, discussed or presented in academic articles and symposia, but the limited information presented a dilemma.<sup>i</sup>

I began my second year as one of four graduate teaching assistants for the theatre history class and as in the previous year I was given the opportunity to observe and encounter first hand the accomplishments and the challenges that are inherent with teaching a large (50+ students) undergraduate theatre history survey course. Under the tutelage and mentorship of Dr. Noreen Barnes, the Head of the Theatre Graduate Program at VCU, theatre history instructor and theatre historian, I had become proficient in classroom management, discerning and organizing pertinent historical information for lectures, lecturing, and assessing students. In addition, I gained useful insight into the personal thoughts, reasons and pedagogical approaches that Dr. Barnes utilized in her course design. During my years as a graduate teacher, I had the benefit of witnessing the positive responses and results to the alternative learning methods, including PBL that Dr. Barnes actively employed in her theatre history course. This was especially the case when

Dr. Barnes reintroduced a *commedia dell' arte* group project in the fall semester of my second year. It was this assignment that confirmed to me the validity and the potential that PBL could have in a theatre history class.

The history and the style of the *commedia dell' arte* is rarely studied in any significant way in an undergraduate theatre history course and yet the conventions of this art form have had a lasting influence in the field of theatre, film, and television. Thought to have developed out of the mime troupes of the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the *commedia dell' arte* was a popular form of theatre in the 15th and 16th centuries. Although centered in Italy, professional *commedia* troupes traveled throughout Europe performing in market squares and various other makeshift viewing areas for the common people. The nature of the *commedia* performances and livelihood of the company made it necessary for the troupes to operate as a well-organized business sharing responsibilities and profits for each performance. The troupes, often created by entire families and working together for many years, relied on only the most essential and versatile set, wardrobe, and prop pieces. This made it easier to tour and assured swift set-ups and strikes however it also meant that the artists had to rely on their imaginations and intuitions in order to facilitate the performances and keep the audience's attention. In order to succeed a *commedia* troupe had to become adept at providing their audiences with inventive, improvised and often bawdy scenarios, comedic physical acting, and well performed stock characters (Wilson and Goldfarb 159-164).

Using these elements as a foundation for the project, students were divided into four groups with approximately thirteen students assigned to each "*commedia* troupe."

Before being assigned to their prospective troupes, students were given the opportunity to sign up for which position(s) or character(s) they wished to portray for the project. The options included the stock characters such as Pantalone, Il Capitano, young lovers, Zanni, etc. as well as a Director, Stage Manager, Scribe, Costume and Mask Designer, and Props Designer. These positions allowed every member of the class, whether an acting or a technical student, to participate fully in the assignment. Once the groups were solidified, Dr. Barnes provided the troupes with fictional backgrounds in that two of the troupes had just returned from a tour of France while the other two had just returned from a tour of Spain. They were instructed that their hypothetical experiences during their visits to their perspective countries would be an important component of the assignment. This component of the project required the students to include in their research how other European countries of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reacted to the Italian Commedia troupes. Equipped with the project requirements, a lecture about the art form, and a commedia demonstration by Jonathan Becker (a graduate student who was a LeCoq trained clown and professionally trained in commedia) the students were given the task of writing, developing, and rehearsing a two “act” (five-minutes per act) commedia performance. Students were also given the article “Commedia and the Actor” by Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, a copy of the commedia scenario The Betrothed, and were required to purchase the book Lazzi by Mel Gordon to use as additional resources for their projects. The final performances would be presented to their fellow classmates and other members of the theatre department as a fictional competition for the monetary sponsorship of a wealthy Italian citizen. In addition to their work within the troupe and on the performance, each student was required to write

a five to seven page creative paper (that could be in the form of “letters” home or a “personal” diary) that included an account of their individual participation in the project, researched information on the commedia, and the history of how either their character or position (i.e. scribe, director) was traditionally performed.

It was the responsibility of each teaching assistant to oversee the work of our troupes, assist with any problems or questions, and to help guide the students through the project. Although the project required students to work outside of class, the bulk of the group rehearsals were held during approximately five class periods that Dr. Barnes had designated on the course syllabus. I was confident in the students’ creativity and tenacity towards the project, as well as their ability to work collaboratively to form cohesive groups and performances. Furthermore, I was surprised to discover the amount of responsibility the students were willing to take on themselves and as a group to ensure the success of the project. As evidenced by their performances, the students became willing, active, and interested participants in their education, and more importantly were able to successfully connect and convey the historical elements of the commedia dell’ arte into contemporary contexts.

In the ensuing pages of this document I will explore the development and progression of the theatre as an academic discipline as well as examine the role and importance of theatre history in the theatre curriculum. I will consider the traditional methods used in the teaching of this course, including the advantages and the disadvantages, and the necessary revisions that should be instituted in the teaching models to bring a theatre history class into the 21st century. The second section of my thesis will

be comprised of the essential elements of the Problem-Based Learning educational model including the history, the basic principles and methodologies, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of this instructional model. The final section will encompass my basic layout and course design for a theatre history course utilizing the PBL method, including course material, potential projects, means of student assessment, potential problems in the course design and my conclusion. The appendices include a sample course description, syllabus, and class schedule for a theoretical two-semester theatre history course.

---

<sup>i</sup> I found Seminar Abstracts from the annual 2003 ASTR/TLA (American Society for Theatre Research/Theatre Library Association) Conference in which participants of this seminar, titled Teaching Theatre History: New Ideas/New Methods, delivered papers regarding the incorporation of new pedagogical practices and topics into theatre history classes. Although I was able to get the abstracts for the papers, the full length papers have yet to be published.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theatre: An Academic Discipline

Compared to subjects such as philosophy, mathematics, literature, and the sciences, theatre studies is still considered to be a fairly new discipline in higher education. Over the last sixty or seventy years, the study and practice of the theatre in the university, has established itself as a valuable resource for students wishing to supplement a liberal arts education or obtain a specialized education in the field. Unlike the theatrical training that takes place in other countries, often in conservatory programs operated by working theatre companies or through state subsidized schools, much of the theatre education in America is relegated to the university and college campuses throughout the country (Hobgood 1).

In the opening essay of Teaching Theatre Today, “Changing Views of Knowledge and the Struggle for Undergraduate Theatre Curriculum, 1900-1980,” author Anne Berkeley explains that by following the strategies of German educator Wilhelm von Humboldt, higher education in the United States altered its ideology in the late 19th and early 20th century, making it possible to include components of theatre study in the academy (7). Berkeley follows the transformation of theatre studies from its inception into higher education to its role in the modern educational curriculum. She points out that these changes not only mirrored the prevailing philosophies and modifications of the university, but also were and continue to be centered on the way in which society regards the role and

function of higher education and the art of theatre. Berkeley argues that although universities had authorized drama clubs and productions as extracurricular activities beginning in the late 1800s, it was not until 1903, in an English class at Radcliffe University, when George Pierce Baker had his students perform plays as a method of teaching them how to write plays that theatre studies became a conceivable area of study in higher education (12). The expansion and transformation of the theatre curriculum was a result of three additional movements occurring between its establishment and the late 20th century.

The first development took place in 1925, when George Pierce Baker began the Drama Department at Yale University.<sup>ii</sup> Considered by many theatre scholars and academics as the beginning of theatre as an independent field of study, this institutionalization was the result of the prevailing academic ideology in which both humanism and utilitarianism were regarded as important components of higher education. Citing Louis Menand, Berkeley writes, "...humanism was charged with the safeguarding and dissemination of national cultural heritage. ... utilitarianism fostered the development of research based, technological knowledge with social and economic payoffs" (qtd. in Berkeley 10). Determined teachers, such as Baker, felt that instruction in drama was useful in the teaching of traditional literature and new languages, and asserted that the performance of a play enabled students to fully comprehend its scholarly value (11). In addition to this growing enthusiasm for teaching the literary side of theatre, instructors felt that the presentation of plays to the student body and the community would enhance the

surrounding culture, fostering a practical connection between the university and the rapidly changing society (12).

The advent of amateur college public performances soon gave way to the belief that universities and colleges could and should offer students practical training in other aspects of the theatre. This notion, starting as early as the late 1920s, continued to gain momentum and increased significantly between the mid-1940s and the late 1970s, an era in which higher education proliferated and which Berkeley identifies as the next major development of theatre studies. This vast growth of theatre studies coincided with the expansion of the entire university system. Due to several federal programs such as The G.I. Bill following World War II, the 1958 National Defense Education Act, and the 1963 Higher Education Facilities Act, large amounts of financial support were granted to colleges and universities for program and curriculum development (15).

In the beginning stages of this movement, a small number of educators felt it necessary to incorporate into the curriculum more training and instruction in acting and directing in order to improve the quality of productions and theatre education. On the other hand, many other scholars argued that theatre studies should continue to support the existing methodology that had launched collegiate theatre at the turn of the century. This debate, which Berkeley refers to as the “culture vs. craft,” has continually been a source of dissension among theatre scholars and even today, remains an unresolved issue in theatre education.<sup>iii</sup> This shift to providing practical theatre training gave rise to an educational design that promoted research and proficiency in theatre studies. It also provided the impetus to include as part of the curriculum other aspects such as set, lighting, and costume



design (13). A 1936 quote from James Fiderlick, a proponent of expanding the theatre curriculum, illustrates this view:

Approaching the work from a scientific standpoint, the student is taught to assimilate and master the technique and principles that govern all right expression, arriving thereby at a discovery of his true self and the power of his own thought. The work then is not only practical but educative. (qtd. in Berkeley 13-14)

The transformation of theatre education and the theatre curriculum into its modern application was well underway by the 1950s with sweeping changes occurring swiftly throughout the discipline. Universities and colleges had increasingly become producing organizations of theatrical productions and now rightfully considered theatre to be an independent field of study. This shift in ideology had an impact on theatre education in several ways. It required the addition of technical and design classes to ensure that professional theatrical standards could be met on college stages; it motivated theatre departments to align themselves with professional theatre companies in order to offer the best training to students; it altered the curriculum making it more specialized and vocational; and it prompted schools to offer the Bachelor of Arts degree (15-17). Berkeley writes, “it took 200 years to secure the right to perform plays at American colleges, it took only 80 for theatre curriculum to grow from a few isolated courses at the turn of the century to well over 14,000 in the 1970s” (15).

Across the country theatre departments, now equipped to offer a variety of specialized theatre courses, increased in both student enrollment and faculty membership. Universities actively hired professional theatre performers and designers to train students

in all disciplines of the theatre. This new and profound interest in the performing arts meant that students were now performing in the growing number of newly constructed performing arts buildings, on campuses throughout the United States, for paying audiences. This formation of what Berkeley refers to as, “a professionalized curriculum,” resulted in a large increase of Bachelor of Arts Theatre programs offered by higher educational institutions as well as the number of students receiving such degrees. Furthermore, the specialization of the theatre programs lead to the development and proliferation of the Bachelor of Fine Arts and the Master of Fine Arts programs (17). The B.F.A. and M.F.A. programs were developed so that students could receive extensive training and experience in their chosen theatre track. These curricula were specifically designed and geared toward students planning to pursue a career in the professional theatre. Regardless of the practicality of this movement in theatre education, some opponents disapproved of this shift towards professionalism and specialization. They argued that it was incompatible with higher education’s current goals of providing a comprehensive liberal arts education and in fact would diminish the quality of theatre education and professional theatre. Perhaps to appease the critics or in a move to strengthen what many felt to be a struggling discipline, educators and administrators reaffirmed that the major aim of theatre programs was to satisfy the academy’s objectives for an inclusive liberal arts education (18). Burnet Hobgood explains that while the move towards a specialized curriculum continued, theatre programs implemented more extensive curricula and activities to reinforce the liberal arts and academic portions of the discipline.

This decision strengthened B.A., B.F.A., and M.F.A. programs and degrees, while M.A. and PhD programs and degrees began to decrease in student numbers and interest (5).

Although higher education and theatre studies continued to grow and prosper in the 1960s and 1970s, both institutions were affected by ideological shifts within academia and society. The social turbulence of The Vietnam War, The Civil Rights Movement, and The Equal Rights Amendment was experienced both on and off college campuses and the resulting action was the transformation of the existing social construct. Higher education, especially the humanities' disciplines, adopted this progressive humanistic approach and began to actively incorporate it into the educational curriculum. Berkeley explains that many educators eagerly intertwined this humanist ideal with a number of innovative pedagogical methods to support the emerging educational philosophies of "the whole man," "the education of feeling," and "artistic intelligence." In conjunction with this new ideology, many scholars were influenced by the philosophy of educator John Dewey, whose ideas formed the principal aspects of Problem-Based Learning. A pragmatic, Dewey advocated an educational system that emphasized, "learning by doing," "teaching students rather than subject-matter," and "education not as preparation for life, but as life." These changes not only created an interest in the subjectivity in education, but also initiated the notion of a theatre education that could successfully promote both craft and culture within the curriculum (18). Joseph Roach describes his experiences as a student during this era:

We were a blessed generation of theatre students, changing the world. Part of that boundless revolution, of course, which we confidently aspired both

to bring about and to build our careers on, would be the total decentralization of the American theatre from New York into the vast network of regional repertory theatres, many of them located on university campuses. [. . .] the new kind of professional but non-commercial company for which we were training. Such a company would need artists who could read plays and scholars who could help produce them. [. . .] the repertory—fresh interpretations of the classics and new plays by our contemporaries—would entertain the culture-hungry masses while making the stage look like America: Margo Jones meets Robert Edmond Jones meets Ernest Jones meets LeRoi Jones (as Amiri Baraka was then known).

(6)

Berkeley notes that other examples of this development consisted in the theatre disciplines study and adoption of the work and practices of theatre artists such as Joseph Chaikin, Julian Beck, Antonin Artaud, and Jerzy Grotowski; the willingness of educators to support the practical pedagogies; the increase in student-run “black-box” or studio theatres; and the establishment of practices such as role-playing, sociodrama, and psychodrama in other fields of education. Thus, while theatre studies continued to support the practical aspects of the field it also returned to exemplifying the humanistic ideal in society, which it had done in the years following World War II (18-19).

This change provoked intense criticism by some academics within the discipline, as had curricular revisions in previous eras. They argued that rather than being educated in the historical knowledge and academic attributes of the discipline and how these aspects

might have an impact on the students in an educational and professional manner, they were instead being taught how to make consequential choices that only took into consideration the transforming and transient society that surrounded them (19). The perspectives of Francis Hodge in 1954 and Jon Roush in 1978 indicate the extensiveness and perpetual nature of this argument:

[O]ne of the principal reasons why the educational theatre has not yet realized its potential contribution is that many of those who now teach...design curriculum so inadequate and so superficial that students find it impossible to acquire a comprehensive knowledge of the art and craft of theatre. (1954) (qtd. in Berkeley 19-20)

[. . .]In a world committed to change, what kind of sense does it make to talk about enduring values? If we take seriously the problem of preparing students for the future, then we must take seriously the responsibility to help him become artful as well as knowledgeable. (1978) (qtd. in Berkeley 19-20)

Despite the inability of educators to agree on a clear and definite answer to the ongoing craft vs. culture debate, theatre education progressed until entering into what Berkeley considers to be the final development of theatre education in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (11).

The 1980s marked the beginning of several key transitions within society and higher education that would continue to have a significant impact on higher learning, as well as theatre education, throughout the end of the century. These changes included the

sweeping decline of society's interest in the arts, a shift back towards social conservatism, and the continuation of the nation's fiscal troubles. Although all these occurrences played a major role in defining the arts and education both inside and outside of the academy, the most obvious and deeply felt event of the era was the drastic reduction in the funding and monetary support that had helped to stimulate and sustain the educational boom of earlier decades. Across the country, universities and colleges began downsizing both administratively and academically, which resulted in the closure or realignment of many departments. Disciplines related to the arts and humanities were especially targeted since a restructuring of educational priorities in academia had reemphasized educational basics and diminished the importance of the arts. Suddenly theatre departments were thrown into disarray as they attempted to provide students with the needed educational resources despite substantial budget cuts. As it had done at the beginning of the century, theatre education was forced to prove its academic legitimacy and its educational worthiness in order to sustain and justify its position in higher education. This task was made difficult by a decrease in student enrollment, a reduction of budgetary money, a shrinking and aging audience, and the continuing internal strife between faculty and administrators within the discipline (22). Despite these circumstances which surrounded the field at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continue to at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, theatre education has not only successfully endured the changing ideologies of higher education and society but continues to grow, change and persevere within the academic setting.

---

<sup>ii</sup> Previous to this development, Pierce had been teaching classes in drama at Harvard University as part of the English Department.

<sup>iii</sup> Currently this argument exists between some scholars in the disciplines of Theatre and Performance Studies.

## CHAPTER 3

### **The Role and Importance of Theatre History in the Theatre Curriculum**

The initiation of the PhD theatre program in 1929, at The University of Iowa, established study into the literary and historical aspects of the theatre as an important component to theatre studies (Roach 3). This practice was initially reserved for doctoral and graduate students with the purpose of expanding academic inquiry and scholarly research. These upper-division students were historians and academics diligently working to provide groundbreaking theories, establish answers to unproven hypotheses, and advance the scholarly literature on the history of the theatre. In essence, they were working on advancing the position and stature of theatre education in the university in the hopes of catapulting theatre studies and education into an independent academic discipline (Postlewait 181). The efforts of these theatre historians and academics culminated not only in a wide array of published material, but also in the implementation of courses dedicated to theatre history into the theatre curriculum.

As theatre education continued to grow and expand between 1950 and the late 1970s, so did the research and scholarship into theatre arts. Drawing on the endeavors and works of the preceding generations, theatre historians, academics, and practitioners continued to publish academic essays, scholastic journal articles, manifestos, and books on a wide variety of theatre subjects. Perhaps one of the biggest developments to occur at this



time in theatre education and theatre history classes was the 1968 publication of the first edition of theatre historian and educator Oscar Brockett's textbook, History of the Theatre (Roach 4). Although not the first of its kind, this book, like the undergraduate comprehensive theatre history course, became a standard part of the theatre education curriculum. Currently in its ninth edition and co-written by Franklin Hildy, it remains the preferred textbook for theatre history courses.<sup>iv</sup>

The implementation of history-based courses corresponded with the expansion of theatre studies in higher education that took place in the decades following World War II. As previously stated, the addition of these classes also coincided with the restructuring of the curriculum, in which theatre programs added more comprehensive courses to strengthen the academic, practical, and liberal arts segments of the discipline. Brockett points out that once established; the role of theatre history has typically been viewed in two different ways. One is the more academic and general view in which theatre history is seen as "a body of information" beginning with the ancient Greeks and spanning to present day, in which students are expected to become acquainted with the types of theatre of each era. The second views history as a necessary component of a specific production. While the first view can only hope to offer students a broad familiarity of theatre practices, due to the overwhelming amount of material and time constraints, the second view generally only emphasizes the information that the production team deems pertinent to the production. Therefore there is the risk that certain information will not be studied and that the only context the student will have is how the history pertains to that one production (Brockett 37-38). The reasoning and results behind this action not only had a profound impact on the

theatre curriculum and education of the time, but also continue to be an important influence in contemporary theatre education.

The emphasis and utilization of theatre history-based courses have varied since their inception into the curriculum. At the height of their growth, theatre departments offered a number of history based courses and seminars covering specific movements or time periods as well as the standard comprehensive theatre history course. The decline in programs and the shift towards a more practical curriculum, however, resulted in the reduction of the number of required and elective theatre history courses offered in the curriculum (Brockett 37). While most theatre departments continued to offer focused history classes as upper-division electives these select courses have become desirable only to those students with the schedule availability, a serious interest in the subject matter, and in some cases the financial means to participate in additional credit hours. This situation effectively made the one or two semester general theatre history course the primary and in some cases the only source for introducing and teaching theatre history to undergraduate students.

In keeping with its liberal arts heritage, currently most undergraduate theatre programs are designed to provide students both an academic and a practical education. The courses needed to successfully fulfill the requirements for undergraduate degree programs, the BA and BFA, can generally be divided into either studio classes or academic classes. Studio courses, such as Acting, Directing, Voice, Movement, and Design classes, are designed to provide students with the necessary skills and experiences needed to prepare them for practical careers in the theatre. Academic classes, such as Dramatic Literature,

Theatre History, and theory related courses, serve two purposes within the curriculum. These classes help fulfill the scholarly aspect of the discipline and the university, but more importantly, they introduce the students to the essential literary and ideological views of past and present societies and theatre practitioners that have shaped and continue to define the theatre as an art form. Oscar Brockett explains that theatre history is seen as an enhancement to a theatre education in that it provides students with a perception of the present and information that will be useful in their future careers as actors, directors, and designers. In addition, theatre history adds an academic dimension to a curriculum that is often scrutinized for its appropriate place in academia (39). Consequently, courses that emphasize the historical components of the theatre are an important and vital part to an undergraduate's success as a student and as a professional.

A primary importance of such an exploration should be the student's ability to comprehend the significant historical developments and movements in the theatre, and to recognize how these events have affected the contemporary and future theatre. As Oscar Brockett states, "studying the past ought to help us to understand the present more fully" (49). Consequently, the synthesis of this information, along with the practical skills and knowledge acquired in studio classes, gives students the capability to understand abstract ideas as concrete practices, offers them a substantial comprehension of the history of the theatre, and provides them with an effective and feasible foundation so that they may make educated decisions as to how they personally relate to the theatre. Although students may consider the value of theatre history classes inferior to studio courses, the examination into theatre history serves to familiarize the student to the theatre as a vocation and an art form,

and expose them to the function and stature of the theatre in a specific society, culture, and time.

---

<sup>iv</sup> In their article Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy: A reassessment of the Undergraduate Survey Course, Jerry Dickey and Judy Lee Oliva note that as part of a syllabus exchange project, they found that twenty-three out of thirty-seven syllabi either required or recommended Brockett's textbook (49). As for my own experiences, Dr. Barnes had been using the Brockett text until switching to Edwin Wilson's and Alvin Goldfarb's Living Theatre A History in my second semester as a teaching assistant. As an undergraduate student, our theatre history instructor used a course pack that she had compiled for the first semester; however, for the second semester she recommended the Brockett text. It should also be noted that Franklin Hildy is now the sole author of this text.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Undergraduate Theatre History Class in the Modern Day Curriculum**

A major challenge for instructors and students in any history course, especially one as rich as the theatre, is how to approach the breadth of material within the time limitations of the semester and the constraints of knowledge retention. A theatre history textbook will document the developments of the theatre from its origins through present-day with each new edition, including the latest findings and events as well as any requisite revisions. An indication of the continual necessity to revise and scrutinize the dissemination of information is evidenced in the fact that the ninth edition of History of the Theatre contains 648 textual pages while, as indicated by Roach, the first edition was 690 textual pages (4).<sup>y</sup> Although these modifications are needed to keep the book up-to-date and manageable in both size and content, the fact remains that the study of history not only can be a highly subjective discipline, but also involves the awareness and comprehension of a substantial amount of material. Therefore, because of the impracticality of trying to recount thousands of years of history to their students, theatre history teachers often find themselves in the position of having to select what they deem to be the most pivotal and relevant events, people, and advancements taking place throughout history. This task is further compounded by taking into account the interests and previous experiences of the teacher and the students. While most students enrolled in theatre history will likely have

encountered some historical elements applicable to their specific fields, few will have a comprehensive understanding of how these individual components combined with other factors to shape the history of the theatre. As a consequence, most standard undergraduate theatre history courses are designed to provide students with a general view of the major developments, shifts, and practitioners in theatre history.

Perhaps in an effort to inform students, and in some instances even faculty, of the course objectives, theatre history classes are usually described as “survey” courses. The fourth definition for “survey”, in the Oxford English Dictionary, reads:

- a.) To look at from, or as from a height or commanding position; to take a broad, general, or comprehensive view of; to view or examine in its whole extent
- b.) To take a comprehensive mental view of; to consider or contemplate as a whole.

While this definition serves to describe the typical theatre history course and perhaps even suggests a means in which to structure such a class, it does not offer the instructor or the student insight into how to best achieve this goal. In fact, although there are the occasional exceptions, most teachers and programs, in order to satisfy the status quo, limit the possibility and potential of making a theatre history class truly dynamic and participatory.

As Jerry Dickey and Judy Lee Oliva point out:

The most frequent design of these of these survey courses contains a chronological discussion of major theatrical developments through a combined study of production innovations and dramatic literature,

frequently augmented by a required research paper and two or three exams.

(46)<sup>vi</sup>

Currently, the majority of theatre programs require undergraduates to complete at least two semesters of a theatre history course in order to fulfill the requirements for either a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree. These courses are often structured to follow the chronological developments of the theatre from the Greeks through the present day (Dickey and Oliva 46). My experiences as an undergraduate student and a graduate teacher suggests that the two-section theatre history course is usually divided so that the first semester covers the Greek theatre to the Renaissance theatre and the second semester covers the Restoration theatre to the Contemporary theatre. Although the majority of students take the two-semester course in sequential order, by either schedule design or program guidelines, in some cases there is the possibility that students may have the option to either begin with the second semester followed by the first semester or take each semester independently of one another in different academic years. Depending on the program, class enrollment may range from 12-50+ students representing not only the various tracks and aspects of the theatre, but also, in some instances may include non-theatre majors. While most programs advise or require students to have reached junior or senior ranking before taking theatre history there may be instances in which second year students must take the course.<sup>vii</sup> Therefore in most theatre history courses, the student population varies widely in class ranking, experience, knowledge, and individual specialties.

In order to accommodate the size and the demographics, theatre history courses are typically structured so that the majority of information is presented to the students in a lecture format. Under the tutelage of faculty members, many of whom are theatre historians in their own right, students spend the majority of class time listening, taking notes, and perhaps participating in class discussions surrounding a topic (Dickey and Oliva 53). This approach to teaching and learning is often referred to by educators as the banking method. Students are given the needed information, 'bank' it in their brains, and then when necessary recall the information usually in the form of test questions. Although this style of teaching has become the most predominant and widely accepted mode of education, instructors often incorporate other teaching methodologies such as group projects, student demonstrations of parts of plays, and the showing of video/films to enhance and supplement the lectures and reading assignments. The goal of these activities is to add a participatory component to the course structure, provide a framework and timeline of historical events, and give students the opportunity to synthesize the information on an individual level.

In addition to the text book, many theatre history professors also utilize and assign readings from play anthologies, journal articles, manifestos, and other pertinent handouts in order to furnish students with a general insight into specific movements in the theatre. Besides the intense reading load, traditional theatre history courses are also usually designated as writing intensive<sup>viii</sup>. These assignments serve as a method of student assessment, fulfill the academic component of theatre education, and in many instances



provide the only means in which students can explore, communicate, and offer their personal interests and analysis of the studied material.

Although these classes can be considered to be passive in student participation, an enigma in a field that mandates physical, intellectual, and creative activity from its students, there are many advantages to this style of class. Perhaps the greatest benefit is that it gives the instructor the opportunity to control conduct, time, and content in the classroom. A traditional academic design assists the professor in classroom management and provides a good structure for the organization of the semester as well as the basic everyday operations of the class. To begin with, the lecture format allows the teacher to know and express to the students what will be occurring every class period. This includes what information will be covered, what topics will be discussed, the turning in of or presenting of assigned projects, and of course the ever important test dates. While many teachers find that adjustments may have to be made to accommodate unexpected occurrences, this flexible yet firm foundation gives the students a sense of where the class is going and what is expected of them. In addition most teachers find that this structure works well with time management issues. Teachers learn very quickly that there is never enough class time to cover all the information they would like; however, the lecture format does allow for vast amounts of information to be disseminated to the students in a timely fashion. Furthermore although a lecture may prompt a discussion, either by teacher design or by student impetus, the instructor has the ability to control the direction and duration of the conversation. Finally because theatre history courses typically have large class rosters, this structure allows for an organized, disciplined classroom conducive to learning. The

advantages for such a designed class include syllabus structure, classroom management, and the utilization of a teaching method that is not only familiar to students but also meets the academic expectations of teachers and administrators.

Along with its advantages, the lecture structure and banking method of teaching, like all methods of education, also has its disadvantages. While these shortcomings may appear to be the accepted results of the methodology or mere hindrances in the course structure, a class as unique as theatre history requires a diverse teaching and learning method. To begin with, the structured syllabus, although offering some adaptability, usually is not flexible enough to withstand interruptions within the semester. Though when planning the syllabus, a teacher may do his or her best to account for the time needed to cover a section, it is impossible to anticipate disruptions caused by illness, weather, or departmental activities that may either shorten or cancel class periods. This could influence a teacher to limit the time they spend on topics in order to present as much information as possible to the students. This approach places content over context in what Abel describes as, “ a marathon, with the only goal being is to get to the end” (148), which not only overwhelms the students with information, but also does not allow for an adequate examination of how the theatre functioned in a specific time and culture. As a consequence, students either study theatre history outside an historical context or isolated from the history of the society, culture, or time being examined (Brockett 40-41). Furthermore, a student’s intellect may become thwarted by making the academic information “something to be gotten through rather than something to enjoy or confront” (Abel 149). This methodology makes the students simple repositories by enslaving them to

a rigorous process of reading and note taking with little or no opportunity to intellectualize the material.

Another obstacle and potential disadvantage, for both students and teachers, in the lecture format is the task of considering what subject information should be presented. Many teachers face this predicament, no matter what instructional model they incorporate into their class design, however, it can be especially inhibiting in a theatre history course for several reasons. The first and foremost being the instructor's ability to objectively decipher the historian's referenced material. As with any course that contains an historical component, this is paramount in order to present the most reliable and perhaps most recognized information. This decision process could and does lead to the exclusion of certain people, events, and cultural influences within the historical realm of the theatre. While most authors and historians take great strides to remain as objective as possible in their research, conclusions, and writings, Abel states:

The new historiography questions the possibility of the historian's objective stance, arguing that all historical narratives are constructed, and necessarily reflect the viewpoint and cultural biases of the historian. Historical narrative depends on whose story is being told, and who gets to tell the story. (147)

An example of a theatre history text's predisposition to cultural biases can be found in the Preface of the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of History of the Theatre, where it is stated, "Its primary emphasis continues to be the European tradition, with a secondary emphasis on the traditions of Africa and Asia." Despite the fact that African and Asian theatre pre-dates

Western theatre and continues to influence the global contemporary theatre, the authors choose to devote only a total of sixty-seven pages, in the last two chapters of the book, to explore both the historical and contemporary theatre of each continent.<sup>ix</sup> While it might be argued that the history of the “western” theatre should take prominence in theatre history courses, the theatre discipline, compared to the other visual and performance art disciplines, falls short in the recognition of international developments (Dickey and Oliva 49).

Besides taking into account their own interests and specialties, theatre history teacher must also actively integrate into the course the areas and topics that interest the students. This can be an arduous undertaking because of the demographic make-up of the class. As stated previously, the roster in most theatre history classes is made up of students representing and perhaps specializing in the varying aspects of the theatre thus it is important to address and convey the historical material that is significant to acting, designing, directing, and other such majors. Granted, students may have previously encountered the important historical components pertaining to their individual fields in other theatre classes; however, this information was more than likely presented to them as a distinct area of study separated from the workings of the theatre as a whole. Therefore in order to provide students with a full academic understanding of how the theatre operated in a certain era, all parts must be presented in a comprehensive manner. The fact that most theatre history courses are structured to approach theatre history from a limited view point diminishes rather than expands the academic proficiency of the students (Abel 147).

Though the lecture format may provide the flexibility for a teacher to implement solutions to the challenges of neutrality and relativity it cannot completely overcome other fundamental qualities such as monotony, disinterest, impersonality, and the inability to offer alternative learning methods to some students. Instead of being able to listen to and internalize the information being communicated, students generally find themselves too busy taking notes to ensure that they have the information for the test. Consequently, the material becomes nothing more than words and sentences for a student to regurgitate on an exam. Furthermore, while lecturing is commonplace throughout the educational system and in all disciplines, it has been proven not to be the most effective form of learning. In fact, citing information from J.G. Penner's book, Why Many College Teachers Cannot Lecture, author, Barbara Gross Davis, emphasizes that because studies show the average attention span for most students to be only between ten or twenty minutes long, lecturers should plan on changing pace every fifteen minutes in order to keep the students' interest. She suggests that teachers should break from the lecture by either telling an anecdote or story or by having the students perform an activity either by themselves or in groups (qtd. in Davis 99).

To a theatre history class that relies on the lecture format, as a means of classroom management and as the main source of communicating information, any disruption can create more obstacles than benefits. At first the telling of a story, an anecdote, or the sharing of obscure historical information might seem to be an excellent way in which to keep the students' interest; however, for this to be successful the teacher must keep the students and any ensuing discussion focused on the topic. In addition, the interruption of a

lecture with a group activity may actually hinder some students' ability to remain or regain focus on the subject matter. My experience in the classroom, both as a teacher and a student, has proven that when there is a recognizable shift in the instructional mode there is an equal shift in the dynamics of the class because the students are being asked to be receptive and responsive in a different way. This is especially evident in a theatre history class when normally active students are required to sit passively and then are invited to participate in the educational process. These responses and outcomes can be attributed to the impersonal nature of the lecture format in what many consider to be personal discipline. The structures of this instructional method provides very few occasions for students to share, show, or vocalize their reactions to the material and inhibits the creative process.

Finally, lecturing does not take into account the different ways in which students learn and process information. Fundamentally it assumes that all students are capable of receiving information, disseminating the information intellectually, and communicating this information back in the form of answers to test questions. However, recent studies have shown that all students do not have this ability and rely on alternative visual or physical learning methods for comprehension.<sup>x</sup> In a discipline that promotes and even encourages creative and artful thinking, students are forced to limit their imagination, creativity, and ingenuity in lecture formatted classes all in the name academia. As a result, the growth of the discipline, the students, and the instructor is hindered in that there are missed opportunities to make personal and professional connections to the material.

In order for theatre history to continue to be an integral and important part of the theatre student's education, revisions must be made to the course design as well as to the curriculum. Administrators and educators must identify and define the role that theatre history courses play in a 21<sup>st</sup> century theatre education. In recent years, the concepts behind historiography have changed, expanded, and to some extent embraced the multi-cultural society that surrounds it. History is no longer viewed as an objective science where it is the job of the historian to collect data, sort out the important material from the unimportant material in order to effectively communicate an accurate, chronological account of historical events. Instead contemporary theatre historians consider chronology to be only one component of the vast and intricate historical structure, and include the social, political, and economic factors of a society when attempting to reconstruct the purpose that theatre had in a specific time and place (Abel 147-148).

Theatre as an art form and a means of expression has grown past the academic model of the 1900s and though still used as a valuable tool in education, has also become a useful instrument in social activism, reform and other such situations. In the modern global society, theatre practitioners as well as audience members have learned to include and accept the diverse theatrical offerings from all countries and cultures around the world. This means that current theatre classes must initiate progressive educational models that reflect the function, the art, and the professionalism of the modern day theatre.

As educators, we must be willing to utilize methodologies that allow our students to become active and willing participants in their education. We must challenge them seek out and understand the information so that they may discover the importance that history

plays in their professional and personal lives. We must provide our students with new ways of looking at and interpreting the past, so that they have a clearer vision of the future.

---

<sup>v</sup> Another popular theatre history text book is Living Theatre A History, by Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb. It is currently in its fourth edition and is 595 textual pages with 16 chapters.

<sup>vi</sup> According to their paper, Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy: A reassessment of the Undergraduate Survey Course, this is evidenced in their syllabus exchange project.

<sup>vii</sup> This may be due to the individual student's schedule or the availability of the class within the department's course schedule. As an undergraduate, my theatre program only offered Theatre History every other year.

<sup>viii</sup> Usually this designation is as a result of a University or College policy aimed to ensure that students become proficient writers.

<sup>ix</sup> By comparison, Wilson and Goldfarb, in their text Living Theatre a History, devote approximately forty-eight pages to the African and Asian Theatre. It is arranged; however, so that thirty-two pages in the first part are dedicated to the early Asian Theatre (along with the Greek and Roman Theatre) and the remaining pages in the last chapter cover the contemporary theatre.

<sup>x</sup> I experienced an example of this during my second year as a teaching assistant in Dr. Barnes' theatre history class. After failing the first test, a student who was assigned to my group asked if it would be possible to answer the short identification test questions using a series of cartoon drawings instead of a series of sentences. The student explained that they had always had a hard time articulating factual information with words and felt that pictures would be a better option for fully answering the question. Knowing that Dr. Barnes was more than willing to work with students in such cases, I told the student that it would be fine but to make sure that all the information that was being asked for was included in the drawing. I later explained the situation to Dr. Barnes, who commented on the fact that she had noticed that the student's class notes were a series of pictures and cartoons. When the student turned in her second test, I could not believe the difference in the comprehension and articulation of the information. In addition, because the essay portion asked the students to be creative in their responses, this student was able to successfully answer the questions using the traditional written response. I should add that this was not a case of the student failing to study for a test because both of the exams were take home tests.



## CHAPTER 5

### **The Problem-Based Learning Method and Its Introduction into Education**

As mentioned in the introduction, Problem-Based Learning or PBL is an alternative instructional model that shifts the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the student. It is a constructive learning and teaching method that makes the assumption that a student, by working through a series of steps, taking the appropriate actions, and applying them to a hypothetical problem, will learn the concepts surrounding a specific topic or subject. As a result of this problem solving foundation, the educational emphasis in PBL no longer hinges on the students finding the correct answer, as with more traditional methodologies, but rather on the students' attainment and retention of the knowledge they encounter while working towards a solution. The introduction to the book, Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice, defines PBL as:

a method of learning in which the learners first encounter a problem, followed by a systematic, student-centered enquiry process. Although the purpose of using problems in PBL is to stimulate learning of information and concepts brought out by the problems (rather than to 'solve' the problems), PBL does teach both a method of approaching and an attitude towards problem solving. (1-2)

Educators, employing this method, believe this approach impresses upon students the need for life long learning, and works to develop and hone research, organizational,

interpretive, intuitive and interpersonal skills. Along with improving these skills, students are encouraged to expand their creativity, imagination, inquisitiveness, and responsibility in the learning process. In PBL structured courses students utilize these skills, deemed important in the educational, professional and personal arenas, by working with a group of their peers to identify and acquire the information needed to form a reasonable hypothesis, and to test and assess the validity of the resolution as it relates to the subject matter and the exercise. Students are expected to take an active role in their groups and education as well as practice self reflection and self assessment. Supporters feel this approach to instruction empowers and motivates students and allows them to experience education first-hand making it exciting and enjoyable.

Problem-based learning first appeared in academia in the late 1950s and 1960s when several medical schools in North America, Australia and New Zealand revamped their curriculums in an effort to provide their students with an alternative atmosphere of learning other than the customary pedantic style (Abrahamson 59). Later in the 1980s, as the promising results and studies of PBL began to appear in scholarly journals, several other schools adopted the methodology including Harvard Medical School. It was used as an alternative way of teaching first and second year medical students in the hope that by giving the students the opportunity to enhance their critical thinking skills and provide them with necessary skills for self-directed learning they would retain more information, and find classes more interesting and enjoyable (Moore 80).

In the past decades, PBL has continued to grow and gain acceptance in select disciplines, in higher education as well as extending into select elementary, middle school

and high school curriculums. Examples of PBL can currently be found in schools all over the world including North and South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, the Middle East, Asia, and the South Pacific. It has been used in almost all the health sciences, social work, engineering, architecture, business, law, economics, management, mathematics, and education (Schwartz 2). Although total problem-based learning curriculums continue to be the exception to the conventional didactic educational models, currently many educators include some form of problem-based learning instruction in their teaching. Thus by examining the history, fundamental principles and methodologies of PBL and by evaluating the advantages and disadvantages, the value and validity of utilizing this instructional method in an undergraduate theatre history course will be recognized.

## CHAPTER 6

### **The Philosophy and Methodologies of PBL**

The basic tenets and objectives of PBL can perhaps be traced to the personal views that American philosopher and educator John Dewey (1859-1952) expressed about education. Dewey explored and wrote about such topics as the importance of life long education and its significance in society, the need for instructional models to mirror how human-beings learn, the function of the school, as an institution, in education, and the individual students responsibilities towards their quest for knowledge. Dewey's views and opinions on education were not widely instituted during his years as a teacher, due to their progressive nature; however, his theories did and continue to influence many educators and scholars.

Influenced by the pragmatic philosophy that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Dewey became a proponent of the idea that in order to make education as effective as possible, it needed to be grounded in the experiential rather than in the didactic. Dewey advocated that this utilitarian approach to instruction would not only promote a students' success in the professional world, but would also benefit society as a whole. Dewey surmised, in his Theory of Experiential Education, that because human-beings learn and retain more knowledge from actual experiences, whether good or bad, that it was only appropriate to formulate and utilize an instructional method that would allow

students to actively experience education. The basis for this theory was the two central points of continuity and interaction. The notion of continuity and interaction, as defined by Dewey, suggests that the total learning experiences of an individual have a direct effect on the quality of all future experiences. Previous experiences interact with an individual's current situation to create the individual's present experience (Neill). Thus the accumulated previous experiences that a student may encounter with a subject, whether positive or negative, will greatly impact how that student perceives and responds to any present or future interactions with said subject. Dewey suggested, therefore, that students be entrusted with the responsibility of constructing their own educational experiences, albeit under the guidance of a teacher, to encourage a personal understanding and familiarity of the subject. Although Dewey's approach to education was viewed as somewhat radical during his lifetime, a number of innovative educators embraced and expanded his philosophy to form the foundation for PBL.

In his Pedagogic Creed, published in 1897, Dewey wrote about many of his beliefs concerning the educational process and the role of the school in society.<sup>xi</sup> Some of these tenets are:

- True education comes through the stimulation of the student's knowledge by the demands of the social situations in which they find themselves.
- The educational process is made up of both sociological and psychological factors. Although both of these aspects need equal attention, psychological is the basis in that the student's own instincts and knowledge furnish the material and give the starting point for all education.

- School is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated.
- The teacher's place and work in the school is to be interpreted from the basis that school is a community. The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.
- To prepare for future life students must be given command of themselves. They must be trained so that they are able to work to their full capacities and so they are capable of grasping the conditions under which they must work.
- Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience, that the process and the goal of education are not the same thing.
- To make the child conscious of his social heritage is to enable him to perform those fundamental types of activity which make civilization what it is.

Many of the basic philosophies of PBL reiterate these same notions.

- PBL is based on the theory that learning is a process in which the learner actively builds knowledge and that new knowledge adds to the individuals' current knowledge (Gijsselaers 13-14).

- Learning begins when students are presented with a problem, a question, or a challenge that they wish to solve (Boud and Feletti 13).
- PBL values the belief that students and teachers possess knowledge, feelings, understanding, and interests that should come together in a joint educational process (Boud and Feletti 45).
- PBL considers that “knowledge is complex and changes as a result of responses by communities to problems they perceive in their worlds” (Boud and Feletti 45).
- PBL stresses the importance of the aptitude to gain propositional knowledge as required, and the ability to use it most effectively in a given circumstance. This leads to a student’s ability to make good decisions concerning challenges in a situation: meaning the ability to recognize the most important problems and having the skills to know how to resolve or at the very least improve the problems. ‘Know how’ becomes a greater commodity than the ‘know what’ especially in a professional setting. While PBL does not refute the significance of content in knowledge, it does challenge the way in which content is best learned and utilized. PBL argues that content is not best learned in the theoretical, in large amounts, and committed to memory only to resurface at a later time when a problem arises (Margetson 44).

The methodologies in PBL are structured to fulfill these core beliefs and to provide an interesting and optimal educational experience for students. In order to be an effective

learning method in various disciplines, PBL must be a dynamic process adapting its methods to include an array of subjects and experiences (Boud and Feletti 17). Howard S. Barrows, a guiding force behind the institution of PBL in medical schools, admits that although PBL has “come to represent a wide variety of methods, to include a number of variations, a core model or basic definition must be in place” (5). The six main traits of PBL are as follows:

- Learning is student-centered.
- Learning occurs in groups usually between 5-9 members.
- Teachers are facilitators, guides, or tutors.
- Problems are the focus and the incentive for learning.
- Problems are the means by which students develop problem-solving skills.
- Knowledge is acquired through self-directed learning (Barrows 5-6).

Related to these characteristics are four possible educational objectives possible with PBL. Although Barrows initially wrote these goals in regards to a medical school setting, they can be and have been adapted to suit a number of disciplines. The objectives are as follows:

- The achievement of an integrated multidisciplinary knowledge base
- A knowledge base structured around personal cues thus helping with recall and application
- A knowledge base that incorporates the problem-solving process thus leading to the development of an effective problem-solving process.



- The development of self-directed learning and group skills (6-7).

In order to achieve these goals, students follow a series of steps when presented with a problem. They are as follows:

1. Students are presented a problem without any preparation or study of the problem area.
2. Students interact with the others in their group to explore their existing knowledge as it relates to the problem.
3. Students form and test a hypothesis or outcome for the problem.
4. Students identify further learning needs for making progress with the problem.
5. Students undertake self-study between group meetings to satisfy the identified learning needs.
6. Students return to the group to integrate the newly gained knowledge and apply it to the problem.
7. Students repeat steps 3 to 6 as necessary
8. Students reflect on the process and on the content that has been learned (Schwartz 2).

There are three major components that play a pivotal role in PBL and that can either have a negative or positive affect on the PBL course: the groups, the teacher, and the problems.

### **The Groups**

One of the main components of PBL is that the students work in groups. Many students welcome this change in the educational process, but for some it can create an uncomfortable working environment. This uneasiness of working in groups may the result

of a student's insecurities or self-consciousness or it may be that PBL is not an effective or preferred learning method for the student. Whatever the cause there are ways to set-up and deal with the dynamics of the group before they become dysfunctional.

- Change the makeup of the groups after each exercise so that students are able to work and interact with a variety of other students (Barrows 5).
- Make sure that the students understand from the very beginning the reasons for the use of PBL and the importance that the group work plays in the method. Reinforce these reasons throughout the course and point out situations to the students in which they may need to utilize their group skills (Kaufman 147).
- Assist the student in learning the skills and behaviors needed for group performance. Don't attempt to change their personalities, but impress on them the need for these skills. As they become more comfortable in the situation then their uneasiness should decrease (Kaufman 148).
- Do not allow any one or more students to dominate the group. Use more mature students as junior facilitators or tutors. Encourage them to ask more questions and push the younger group members for answers, instead of offering the answers themselves. Secondly, setup a group dynamic in which all students must present information or take turns serving in key positions (Benbow and McMahon 124-125).
- Establish materials such as learning contracts, self, and peer rating forms to ensure that all members of the group are performing equally (Woods 169-170).

Although some students may be resistant to working in groups at the beginning of the course, time and experience will help to reinforce their self-confidence and abilities and in time they will become comfortable with PBL.

### **The Teacher**

PBL redefines the role of the teacher in the educational process and in the classroom. Teachers are no longer considered to be the primary source of information for the students. This change in the teacher/student relationship can initially create some challenges in the classroom; however, by focusing on the principles of PBL and by making revisions when necessary both teacher and students will adjust in time. To facilitate these adjustments teachers should:

- Serve as tutors, facilitators, or guides in the learning process asking the kinds of questions that the students should be asking themselves to better understand and manage the problem (Barrows 6).
- Have open discussions with the students in regards to the course and the group dynamics. Make adequate revisions when necessary (Kaufman 147).
- Be willing to be part of the community and remain open to learning from the students.
- Not overload the course with content (Courneya 76). Remember context over content. One of the advantages of PBL is that as a result of the self-directed learning, a student may encounter something of interest and may pursue the topic farther and more in depth than the instructor anticipated (Barrows 9).

- Give students regular and timely feedback in regards to their work and participation in the course (Courneya 76).

Suffice it to say that teachers in PBL courses have a more than adequate work load in preparing and facilitating their students through the problem-solving process. Perhaps it is because of the large amount of energy, emotion, and personality that a teacher must put into a PBL course, that they find the greatest satisfaction in their work and their students' work. In fact, studies show that faculty members are more positive about their roles and about students in PBL curricula than in traditional ones (Schwartz 4).

### **The Problems**

As Wim H. Gijsselaers points out, "The design of effective problems is a painstaking process and few theory-based guidelines for problem construction are available in the literature" (20). Although the on-going process of developing problems may rely mainly on trial and error, there are a few conditions that should be considered in the construction of the problem. They are as follows:

- That a range of context and relevancy, from global to local, is present.
- That some aspect of the problem must affect the student on a personal level.
- That the subject is a present-day situation or a creative combination of contemporary understanding and past understanding
- That although problems can be integrated and interdisciplinary, content can emphasize a narrow range of specific subject objectives. For example, "art history weaves through human history with all its politics and technological growth and

reflects general history from the unique perspective of the artists. Art is just one strand that connects too many others” (Glasgow 58-60).

To assist with the development of problems it may be helpful to have examples of ineffective problem designs. The following conclusions are based on experiences at The University of Limburg:

- Avoid problem descriptions that include questions that can be substituted for student-generated learning issues. These questions become benchmarks for the students while they work at resolving the problem.
- Avoid using a title that is similar to titles in textbook chapters. Some teachers may inadvertently use these titles to lead students and ensure that course objectives are covered.
- Avoid using a problem that does not motivate self-study. Make sure that the problem is not too simple and contains conflict. It also helps if the problem has more than one solution or strategy for its resolution (Gijsselaers 20).

Examples of each of these issues and how they may pertain to a theatre history course might be, an ineffective Elizabethan drama problem would include in the description “Who was the real Shakespeare?” When presented with this question, students would immediately begin to form their solutions to the problem around this topic and perhaps not continue their research into solving the initial problem. An example of an ineffective problem title might be, “The Role of The Church in Medieval Drama” and finally, a problem entitled, “Woman’s Roles on the Elizabethan Stage”, may present the students with the need for some research into the topic, although it does not provide enough

conflicting material in the problem. The actual development of problems can be a difficult and time consuming process; however, by using imagination and innovation a variety of workable and reasonable scenarios can be realized and utilized within the course.

Once the groups have been selected, the problems presented, and the presentations prepared, the final step affecting both the teacher and the students is that of assessment. This can be especially difficult due to the subjective nature of PBL and the fact that traditional educational methods utilize assessment models that emphasize content over context. Therefore the incorporation of standardized testing methods into a PBL designed course would defeat the purpose of the educational model and in all likelihood would prove to be an ineffective gauge of the students' knowledge. This is not to say that students enrolled in PBL courses do not learn or retain the information surrounding a subject. As the editors point out in the introduction in the book, Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice, the interpretation of studies (Albanese and Mitchell 1993; Schmidt *et al*, 1987; Vernon and Blake 1993) regarding PBL or variations of the learning method indicate that:

1. Students from PBL curricula perform equally as well or just below those students in more traditional curricula on conventional assessments of their knowledge.
2. Students from PBL Curricula are more advanced than their peers in traditional curricula in respect to:
  - Approach to study (being more likely to study for understanding rather than for short-term recall);
  - long term retention of knowledge;

- practical performance;
- motivation for learning;
- perceptions of their education (being more positive);
- perceptions of stress during their education (perceiving less stress);
- use of resources for learning (Schwartz 3-4).

Teachers in PBL courses must utilize alternative evaluation methods that balance the students' presentation of understanding the problem with their possession of knowledge (Glasgow 146). The following suggestions and guidelines may help facilitate this process.

- Assessment methods should be clearly explained, understood, and agreed upon at the beginning of a project. These can include self-assessment instruments such as weekly learning logs (Glasgow 147).
- Whenever possible students should receive critique and feedback on their performances from a wider audience rather than just one teacher. This makes the presentation more authentic thus motivating the students to perform at their best (Glasgow 62).
- Rubrics can be used to outline and define the physical criteria that students need to turn in as part of the project process (Glasgow 147).
- Created and presented responses to the problems should be based on real-world standards rather than "school grade" responses. Real world expectations should define the acceptable outcomes of the presentations (Glasgow 63).

- Criteria and standards for assessment of performance must be explicit, clear and consistent with the philosophy of PBL (Kaufman 147)

Like the development of problems, assessment methods in PBL courses have the potential to be as creative and imaginative as the instructor sees fit.

---

<sup>xi</sup> “My Pedagogic Creed”, written by John Dewey was first published in *The School Journal*, Volume LIV, Number 3 January 16, 1897 pages 77-80.



## CHAPTER 7

### The Course Design

As with any new design, the first step I took in creating a problem-based undergraduate theatre history course was to ask myself a series of questions. I knew that these questions would not only allow me to stay focused on what I was attempting to accomplish, but more importantly would provide me the opportunity to make a personal connection with the material and the course. I felt that it was imperative that I make this link if I were going to ask my students to do the same. I also believed it was equally important that I respond to the questions as directly as possible as a theatre professional, educator, and student. The questions and answers follow:

**What is the purpose of an undergraduate theatre history class?** Like many educators and scholars, I believe that one of the main objectives of education should be the encouragement and the development of an inquiring mind (Brockett 43). This goal is especially important in theatre education because of its liberal arts foundation, and because of the role that questioning plays in the discipline.<sup>xii</sup> There are a number of academic reasons why I believe theatre history should be studied on an undergraduate level; however, I believe that such a class should go beyond the realm of the theatre to expand a student's understanding of education and knowledge. Instead of limiting itself to a class about just learning facts, undergraduate theatre history courses should be designed to encourage and inspire ideas, to teach students how to think independently, and give them

the chance to actively explore and experience various points of views. It is impossible and impractical to think that in such a course there could be no dissemination of factual information and data; however, the emphasis of a theatre history class should be on the creation of an environment that promotes and strengthens individual, intellectual, conscientious, and moral thinking (Abel 147). This emphasis may cause the focus of the class to shift from content to context; however, by allowing the students to study history on a personal level they will be more likely to retain the information and have a more thorough understanding of the material. Abel comments, “at the undergraduate level there is no predetermined body of factual material the instructor must get through in class” (150). If we presume that history is something to be investigated, questioned and experienced then is it not logical that we provide our students with the opportunity to fulfill this task? In a class full of endless possibilities for intellectual and personal growth, the question to our students should not be “What do you know?” but rather “How do you know it, how did you learn it, and why do you know it?”

**What do I want my students to learn?** Besides the obvious response of wanting my students to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the history of the theatre, and my ideological answers to the previous question, I want my students to recognize the multifaceted role that history plays in culture and in society. History is constantly changing due to new evidence, new insight, and new interpretations; thus while introducing our students to someone else’s point of view we must allow them to find their own understanding of history (Vince 13). I want them to learn that they too have the ability to use their analytical and interpretational skills to arrive at valuable and worthwhile

interpretations (Brockett 48). I want them to learn that history is more than the deciphering and reporting of facts, and that in order to understand the information students must use their perception and intuition when interpreting and responding to the material (Abel 153).

**What should I expect from and of my students?** Since the majority of students only enroll in theatre history courses to fulfill a requirement, the motivating of students to want to learn and to retain what they learn is most likely the most common problem facing theatre history teachers (Brockett 43). Thus if I were going to teach a traditional theatre history class based on the banking educational model and had decided to rely on lecturing as my main source of communicating information to my students, I would more than likely be fighting an uphill battle trying to keep my students stimulated and interested in the material. On the other hand, if I were planning to teach a theatre history course utilizing the problem-based learning model I would perhaps be faced with a classroom of students resistant to this alternative educational method. I believe that this dissension would not be as a result of the amount of required work, but rather the result of how this work was going to be accomplished. Even though as theatre students they are accustomed to and comfortable with instructional models that include group work, problem-solving, and various other methods, they are also in the habit of reverting into academic mode for classes such as theatre history. Therefore, the students' unfamiliarity with problem-based learning as well as the shock of being asked to be physically and mentally active in an "academic" class could initially hamper the students' ability to focus on the matters at hand. Nevertheless, I believe that once the students became familiar with the organization

and expectations of the class they would welcome the challenges that they faced or at the very least tolerate them.

Once fully acclimated to the structure of the class and equipped with the proper tools, I believe that the students will be able to live up to their expected potential as long as the expectations are presented to them in an explicit and definite manner. However, students must recognize that in order to receive the full benefits and succeed in the class they must be willing to become active participants in their education, must be open to and active in self learning, must be willing to ask questions, and must use a reasonable amount of intelligence and discipline (Brockett 44).

**What is the role of the teacher in this process?** Brockett reminds us that as teachers it is important for us to remember that while no subject is easy to teach, it is up to us to “find ways of maximizing the potentials and minimizing the difficulties” (Brockett 42). Thus an important component to the success of the students and the problem-based course is the intricate role of the instructor. The nature of problem-based learning requires that the instructor become a guide rather than a lecturer in the educational process. Since the onus of learning becomes the responsibility of the individual student, the teacher’s job generally becomes that of presenting students with assignments, clarifying information, directing students to resources, keeping students motivated and focused on the task at hand, checking the students progress and dealing with any behavioral issues. This does not mean; however, that the instructor has any less work to do in preparing for the class; in fact, because problem-based learning is considered to be an unconventional educational model and is not readily utilized in all disciplines, the planning of exercises and

assignments requires probably more work on the teacher's part than the preparation of a lecture. The task of lesson preparation can be exceptionally difficult in a course such as theatre history where the problems have to be structured so that they achieve the goals of the assignment and do not take on a life of their own. To facilitate this challenge it is essential to remember that in order for our students to perform history, we need to create and lead them through a logical process and since we are not expecting our undergraduate students to carry out complicated historical analyses, the approach to historiography should be kept reasonably easy. Furthermore, "we can look at the classroom space as a laboratory, where the instructor leads students in hands on testing of historical material" (Abel 154-155). Even with the most carefully planned exercises and the most competent and willing students, to aid success a teacher must show the students that history is interesting, thus inspiring the students' interest and motivating their desire to learn (Brockett 45-46).

**What is the best way for them to learn the material?** To say that the best way for students to learn theatre history is through problem-based learning is not enough. It is how the model is utilized and incorporated into the class design that will determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the learning process. There are certain characteristics indicative to a problem-based theatre history class that educators feel should be addressed in all learning models. First there is the notion of questioning. In a problem-based course students are required to ask questions not only about what they know, but about what they need to know. Once they have located the material that they plan to use to answer these questions, they are encouraged to pose still more questions about the data. As Abel states, "Students learn to see history as a series of questions rather than as received facts

describing a linear progression of events” (151). This process raises the probability of material retention and expands the interests of the students. In turn, students are more likely to explore those subject areas of personal interest; while developing the discipline and skills needed to achieve their goals (Brockett 44). This encouragement of self-learning is essential due to the fact that it is impossible to cover all the historical information related to the theatre.

Finally and especially pertinent to a theatre history class is the encouragement and incorporation of the student’s imagination into the problem-solving process. The hypothetical details imbued in the problems not only can provide a central point for learning, but also provide students the opportunity to study all aspects of the theatre. Potential topic areas can include the interior and exterior building designs, set design, acting and directing methods and styles, stage management, props and costume design, company management, as well as audience dynamics (Brockett 50). Through their research and imaginations students are able to bring the history of the theatre to life for themselves and their classmates.

After having established and clarified for myself my vision of how a problem-based theatre history class would work, I began to concentrate on more of the fundamental elements of the course design such as course layout, material, potential problem-solving exercises, and assessment methods. Finally, I looked for and at any potential problems within the course design.

I decided that in order to facilitate the layout of the class I first had to define the class and its objectives. Because this class is going to emphasize context over content I

wanted to establish that it would not be a survey course in the traditional sense in that it would not take a broad comprehensive look at all of theatre history. Instead I utilized the third notation of the definition of “survey” found in the OED that reads, “to look carefully into or through; to view in detail; to examine, inspect, scrutinize; to explore.” I felt that this was a better description of what I wanted the students to accomplish in the class. For the most part I relied on the same course objectives as lecture based theatre history classes in that I believe that they provide the essential and necessary reasons for studying theatre history. I also added certain objectives that I found not only to be fitting for a problem-based class, but also that would include the theatrical forms from other cultures and countries. Course objectives include, but are not limited to the exploration and familiarity with the major theatre developments and professionals of specific eras, cultures, and countries; the ability to determine the role of the theatre in certain societies and cultures as well the societal and cultural conditions that predicated this role; the ability to ascertain what information is needed in these discoveries and the ability to complete the needed research in an efficient manner; the development and enhancement of interpersonal skills needed to work effectively in groups; and the ability to express oneself in an imaginative and creative way.

The final step in describing the class to the students was to make it a studio course rather than an academic course. This is not to say that this class will not have or meet academic standards, but as the word “studio” might suggest, this class is intended to actively engage the students and offer them hands on experience thus employing the educational philosophy of “learning by doing.”

The material I want to cover in the class is basically the same material that all theatre history classes cover with the exception of taking a more detailed look at the theatrical forms of other countries and cultures both in an historical and contemporary context. Although I feel it is important to cover all the major historical incidents and people, I do not believe that they necessarily have to be presented in a chronological order. Having said this, I do feel that it is important to offer students a visual time line that not only notes theatre history, but also notes other major historical events. I feel that by being able to see when these events occurred, students will be able to more readily recognize the influence that these events had on the theatre and vice versa. This exercise can be accomplished by posting a time line around the walls of the room and having the students fill in the necessary data. In addition, from time to time during the semester there will be a class discussion about the information on the time line to provide the students with an appropriate historical framework.

In keeping with the tradition of research being a basis for problem-based learning, I will not use the classic theatre history text per se. Instead I will provide the students with a variety of resource materials in the form of books, audio and visual tapes, journals, and handouts that will be kept in a library type format that may be checked out if needed. I will also schedule one of the first class periods as a “library” day in which students are taught the various research methods and options from the Research Librarian. I will make traditional theatre history texts available to the students, although, I will encourage that the books only be used as a starting point for research. As part of developing their research abilities, this exercise will not only allow students to recognize the difference in the quality



of sources, but will illustrate to them how the same event might be described or perceived in different ways by different people.

The development of potential problem-solving exercises was a more difficult task than I had imagined due to the nature of the subject matter. Luckily, I was able to utilize several of Dr. Barnes' exercises (with her permission of course) and adapt several from Donald A. Borchardt's book, Think Tank Theatre, and even come up with a few of my own. Because this process requires both an educational and creative dimension, I feel it is safe to say that it will and should be a continual, growing development. Examples of some of these exercises are as follows:

**The Historiography Exercise:** I was first introduced to this assignment as a graduate student in Dr. Barnes' Historiography course and felt that it would be a beneficial exercise for students to discover how historians make judgments about specific historical events based on the evidence that they have on hand. Each group of students is given an "incomplete" package of production material from a theatrical performance. In their envelope are "pieces" of items related to the rehearsal process and performances of the show including such things as production notes, stage photos, set drawings, costume renderings, programs, and dramaturgical information. The students are then asked to imagine that they are a group of historians, sometime in the future, and that they have had the wonderful luck of finding this information. In preparation for an upcoming theatre history symposium, students must go through the material and make certain assumptions about the performance and the theatre of the time based on what they can piece together. For this exercise students are only allowed to use what is in the envelope for there

hypotheses. The students are then required to present their findings and their conjectures as a panel of historians at said symposium.

**The Commedia Exercise:** I feel that this exercise, of Dr. Barnes', is extremely useful and fun for this class. It was explained in detail in the Introduction of this paper. To enhance this exercise, as the students prepare for their pieces certain circumstances could arise that force the students to adapt to the situation. An example might be that the Commedia troupe in Spain has found itself without a main character due to the jailing of the actor. They are set to perform in three hours to a large crowd. What do they do? The group affected by the challenge would have to research how the troupes historically handled such a situation, and then come up with a solution based on the information that they located.

**The Reality Show:** The premise of this exercise is that there is a new reality show being filmed that pits acting troupes against one another. This project could be used to encompass a variety of eras. For example, each group could represent a different European country and be assigned to present their country's version of a liturgical drama. Although the show is taking place in the present, the troupes must rehearse and present their production in its original manner. As part of the exercise students, would be responsible for finding an audience for their presentation. This exercise could be expanded to include problems such as, audience members being secretly versed in the audience behavior of the time period, the theatre could catch on fire, or one of the actors could show up to rehearsal drunk. As a means of feedback and assessment it might be interesting to set up a "confessional booth" with a video camera so that the students could comment on the exercise.

**It's all Greek to Me Exercise:** Based on the exercise "Scheduling a Performance" from Think Tank Theatre (39), the entire class must work on producing a Greek play to be presented in its original form as part of a festival in Athens. They have been hired by The United States Government as a special artistic envoy to make sure that the production process is as smooth as possible and that the play is presented in its historical context. The class as a whole must first decide on what groups need to be formed and what the tasks and the responsibilities are for each group. Once broken down, these groups work to not only finish their task, but to keep the other groups apprised of pertinent information.

As can be seen from the examples of the exercises, student assessment can become difficult as well as extremely subjective in a problem-based class such as this. Due to the design of the class and the philosophy behind problem-based learning, the idea of making students take a classic essay or term identification test seems to defeat the objectives of PBL. Therefore, I feel that student assessment should be based on a more creative or unconventional approach. There is always the assessment of the student's work within the group. Are they fulfilling their obligations to the exercise and to their group? Are they doing their share of the work? Are they doing exceptional work? Then there is the assessment of the group itself. Did the group fulfill the objectives of the exercise? Did they put the time that was needed into the exercise? Were their presentations exceptionally well done, etc? Finally there is the assessment of the student as an individual and how he or she perceived the material that was learned. An excellent way to check a student's comprehension of a topic is through personal journals, letters, and diaries. There is also the option of having the students' record what they observe and learn from the other

groups' presentations. Another assessment exercise is a variation of an exercise that Dr. Barnes uses called Dead Divas. This exercise simulates a talk show in which a group of deceased theatre professionals talk about their careers. Students are encouraged to dress as their selected 'personality' and embody the persona based on their research. After students present a short introduction and bio of their person, the other students ask planted questions to each guest giving the panel members the opportunity to expand on their presentations. This exercise could be assigned at the end of each section so that students must choose a person from that particular era. This would allow for students to become familiar with those notable professionals not always covered in the standard theatre history texts while also serving as way to assess students on an individual basis. In addition, this exercise not only maintains the PBL method, but also focuses on the application of knowledge in problem-solving situations (Boud and Feletti 271). While it may take some trial and error to come up with alternative assessment methods, the problem-based learning model provides a number of unique and creative options to employ.

The final step of my course design is to try to identify the problems and challenges that might arise with the course. Some of these problems may be blatant and easy to discover, however, others might not appear until during the actual execution in class. Also to an experienced teacher some flaws may be more conspicuous, while appearing less obvious to a less experienced teacher. Fortunately, as with any course the design and presentation can be altered and revised to solve problematic areas.

I believe that perhaps the most apparent and difficult obstacle to overcome will be the problems that arise from group work. From the initial step of assigning students to

particular groups, to the personal conflicts that tend to always appear in any group work, I believe there will need to be ongoing attention paid to make sure that the groups are operating in an optimal, professional manner. This includes making sure that all students are participating in the exercises and respecting the points of views of their fellow classmates. In addition, students generally despise group work for these very reasons, so it is important to that they understand their individual responsibilities and the expectations of the group and of the class.

Another challenge somewhat associated with group work and that tends to be an issue in most classes is that of time. Ideally this class would work best with a schedule in which it met twice a week for an hour and twenty minutes each class. As long as the groups were organized and focused, I believe that this would give them ample time to complete all the necessary group work. In an attempt to reduce the number of student complaints concerning the difficulties involved with organizing group meetings outside of class, it is not only imperative to allow enough class time for such work to take place, but it is important to impress upon the students the need to use this time to their advantage and to come to class prepared to work. Like all classes there will be a certain amount of work that will need to be done outside of regularly scheduled classes, but this should be work that can be done on an individual basis.

Another obstacle that may need to be rectified is making sure that the groups stay within the guidelines of the exercise. As Brockett explains, “while it is important to give students a certain amount of freedom in their endeavors it is also important that they learn to pursue that interest to the fullest extent” (45). Perhaps further complicating the challenge

of keeping the groups focused and on target is the possibility that “creative work may become so imaginative that the students lose focus from the facts” (50). Although in problem-based learning it is ultimately the students’ responsibility to ensure that assignments and exercises are completed thoroughly and to the best of their ability, the maturity and discipline of some undergraduate students will require close monitoring from the instructor. In addition, the instructor will have to carefully design and plan the problem-based situations so that they remain interesting and challenging, but still fairly easy to execute. The more precise the “problem,” the less likely there is the chance of students straying from the exercise.

Perhaps the final most obvious challenge to this type of course is that of departments’ ability to provide and give access to the necessary materials needed by the instructor and the students. While this may not be a cause for concern in large, well-funded departments, for the average theatre department it will not only require careful planning, but also perhaps the relaxation of departmental regulations concerning student use of props and costumes. First and foremost there will be a space requirement. The best case scenario for the continuity and the ease of the class would be the ability to be assigned to a permanent room that would not only provide ample storage for the reference materials, but would also be large enough so that several groups could work comfortably together. The room would also need to be large and versatile enough so that there was adequate space for the presentation of exercises. In addition, students would need to have access to props and costume pieces to fulfill portions of the assignments. There might also be the issue of providing the books and other material that students will need to have on hand for

research. Although the initial cost in instituting a PBL designed course may be great, once established the cost of running a PBL curricula is comparable with that of running traditional ones for class sizes up to about 100 (Schwartz 3-4).

Though there seem to be a number of challenges facing the development and institution of a problem-based theatre history class, I believe that with careful planning and consideration on the part of the instructor and the department the results would far out weigh the sacrifices.

---

<sup>xii</sup> Students enrolled in theatre programs generally spend years looking for different answers to the question, 'What if?'

## CHAPTER 8

### Conclusion

Theatre, like many art forms, has the innate capacity of reflecting the human, social, and political experience of any given epoch. Whether used as a means to promote, question, expose, explore, criticize, or simply entertain, the theatre has provided historians and theorists of all disciplines a unique perspective into the past. The history of the theatre is extensive and rich, made up of colorful individuals and remarkable innovations that have come to form the modern day theatre. This strong tradition and foundation gives the theatre the ability to transform, adapt, and re-invent itself as an art form.

Since its inception into higher education, theatre education has typically been connected, in some shape or form, to other liberal arts or humanities disciplines. Although, this affiliation of theatre studies to other fields may be a means to justify and incorporate a theatre curriculum into a college's educational mission, the interdisciplinary nature of the theatre and many of its courses successfully lends itself to this type of symbiotic relationship. As Vera Mowbray Roberts writes:

Perhaps more than any other area of specialization, theatre...takes the student into major areas of human knowledge-literature, art, music, politics, economics, philosophy, science, invention- exploring practically all of men's activities and ideas. The study of the theatre can be and ideally is the most liberalizing of all the liberal arts. (qtd. in Vince 12)



Because it allows the students to understand the role of the theatre in a specific time and culture courses in theatre history benefit from this connection. Although these subjects are generally studied in great detail by graduate and doctoral students, in most B.A and B.F.A. programs undergraduates are rightfully required to take such courses in order to enhance their theatre education. The examination of theatre history remains important because it gives students an insight into the major developments and movements in the theatre. While the acquired knowledge benefits students in their educational and professional lives the historiography introduces them to the changing theories and analyses pertaining to historical events and presents them with multiple view points of a specific event. In order for students to fully realize the social importance of theatre and its' history, it is imperative that we, as educators, provide them with ample opportunities to experience history. As John Dewey wrote in his Pedagogic Creed:

I believe once more that history is of educative value in so far as it presents phases of social life and growth. It must be controlled by reference to social life. When taken simply as history it is thrown into the distant past and becomes dead and inert. Taken as the record of man's social life and progress it becomes full of meaning.

Prescribing to the tenets of John Dewey, Problem-Based Learning provides an alternative educational model for students ranging from elementary school to the university level. Originally used by medical schools, as a means to provide their first year students with a constructive form of learning, PBL or components of PBL have been instituted in a variety of programs and curriculums around the world. The incorporation of PBL into a theatre

history course allows the students to become active participants in their education. By working to find solutions to specific problems, students are given the opportunity to experience the history of the theatre. Through this experiential education, students are able to acknowledge the lasting effect that history has on the present and understand that it is in fact not, nor should be considered a static phenomenon existing in only one specific time and made up of only facts, dates, and people (Abel 153). As a result students become members of a community experiencing the fluidity of the theatre and theatre history.

In the article, “Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy: A Reassessment of the Undergraduate Survey Course”, authors Jerry Dickey and Judy Lee Oliva convey the need for the introduction of new pedagogical methods in the teaching of theatre history. They maintain that these revisions are needed in order to stay current with new theatre trends, the contemporary global theatre, and the changing historiography surrounding the theatre. In the article, the authors examine the traditional approaches used by instructors in teaching theatre history. Dickey and Oliva based these conclusions on the information they received as part of their syllabus exchange project and in response they wrote:

The tone of many of these syllabi sadly reflects our frustrations as historians/teachers at having to teach not only theatre history, but also writing, research, behavior, group dynamics, and textual analysis. Curiously, though we charge ourselves and our students with the above responsibilities, little evidence exists to suggest that we teach students how to achieve them. We ask students to write a research paper but do not

teach them about basic theatre history research. In fact, we ask students to be creative, spontaneous, and participatory in class but then rarely give them an opportunity beyond responding to lecture notes. (Dickey and Oliva 47)

Dickey and Oliva then offered non-traditional methods as a way to expand and enhance the modern theatre history class. Although they encourage and suggest the use of active learning and creative group projects as well as other potential teaching methods, Dickey and Oliva fail to offer a comprehensive course design that fully integrates the components of an alternative educational model, such as PBL, into the teaching of a theatre history course. As educators, our students are our first priority and in order to make our classrooms a dynamic experience, for our students and ourselves, we must actively look for and incorporate learning methods that engage our students' minds, bodies, and spirits.

**Works Cited**

Works Cited

- Abel, Sam. "Learning History by Doing History: Alternative Approaches to the Undergraduate Theatre History Course." Perspectives on Teaching. Edited by Halvorsen Smith, Bruce A McConachie, and Rhonda Blair Raynette. New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2001. Pages 145-159.
- Abrahamson, Stephen. "Good Planning is Not Enough". The Challenge of Problem-Based Learning. Edited by David Boud and Grahame Feletti. Great Britain: Kogan Page Limited, 1991. Pages 59-64.
- Barrows, Howard S. "Problem-Based Learning in Medicine and Beyond: A Brief Overview". Bringing Problem-Based Learning to Higher Education: Theory and Practice. Edited LuAnn Wilkerson and Wim H. Gijselaers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1996. Pages 3-12.
- Benbow Emyr W. and Ray F T McMahon. "Mature Students?" Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice. Edited Peter Schwartz, Stewart Mennin and Graham Webb. London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2001. Pages 119-125.
- Berkeley, Anne. "Changing Views of Knowledge and the Struggle for Undergraduate Theatre Curriculum, 1900-1980." Teaching Theatre Today. Edited by Anne L. Fliotsos and Gail S. Medford. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Pages 7-30.

Borchardt, Donald A. Think Tank Theatre Decision Making Applied. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1984.

Boud, David, and Grahame Feletti, eds. The Challenge of Problem-Based Learning. Great Britain: Kogan Page Limited, 1991.

Brockett, Oscar G. "Historical Study in The Theatre Curriculum." Master Teachers of Theatre. Edited by Burnet M. Hobgood Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. Pages 37-57.

Brockett, Oscar G. and Franklin J Hildy. History of the Theatre. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2003.

Courneya, Carol-Ann. "Too Little, Too Late?" Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice. Edited Peter Schwartz, Stewart Mennin and Graham Webb. London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2001. Pages 71-77.

Davis, Barbara Gross. Tools for Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993. 13 Nov. 2005 <[www.netlibrary.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu](http://www.netlibrary.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu)>.

Dewey, John. My Pedagogic Creed. 7 Nov. 2005. <<http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/e-dew-pc.htm>>.

Dickey, Jerry and Judy Lee Oliva. "Multiplicity and Freedom in Theatre History Pedagogy: A Reassessment of the Undergraduate Survey Course." Theatre Topics 4.1(1994): 45-58.

Evensen, Dorothy H, and Cindy E. Hmelo, eds. Problem-Based Learning A Research Perspective on Learning Interactions. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2000.

Gijselaers, Wim H., "Connecting Problem-Based Practices with Educational Theory." Bringing Problem-Based Learning to Higher Education: Theory and Practice. Edited LuAnn Wilkerson and Wim H. Gijselaers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1996. Pages 13-21.

Glasgow, Neal A. New Curriculum for New Times A Guide to Student-Centered, Problem-Based Learning. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc., 1997.

Hobgood, Burnet M. "The Mission of The Theatre Teacher". Master Teachers of Theatre. Edited by Burnet M. Hobgood. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988. Pages 1-21.

Kaufman, David M. and Karen V. Mann. "I Don't Want to Be a Groupie". Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice. Edited Peter Schwartz, Stewart Mennin and Graham Webb. London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2001. Pages 142-148.

Margetson, Don, "Why is Problem-based Learning a Challenge?" The Challenge of Problem-Based Learning. Edited by David Boud and Grahame Feletti. Great Britain: Kogan Page Limited, 1991. Pages 42-50.

Neill, James. "John Dewey, The Modern Father of Experiential Education". Website Updated January 2005. Accessed 7 Nov. 2005.  
<[http://www.wilderdom.com/experiential/Experiential Dewey.html](http://www.wilderdom.com/experiential/Experiential%20Dewey.html)>.

Postlewait, Thomas. "Theatre History and Historiography: A Disciplinary Mandate." Theatre Survey 45.2 (2004): 181-188.

Roach, Joseph. "Reconstructing Theatre/History." Theatre Topics 9.1 (1999): 3-10.

Schwartz, Peter, Stewart Mennin and Graham Webb, eds. Problem-Based Learning Case Studies, Experience and Practice. London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2001.

Simpson, JA and ESC Weiner, Eds. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Clarendon Press Oxford England 1989. Oxford University Press.

Vince, R.W. "Theatre History as an Academic Discipline." Interpreting the Theatrical Past Essays in the Historiography of Performance. Edited by Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1989. Pages 1-18.



Wilson, Edwin and Alvin Goldfarb. Living Theatre A History. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York:  
McGraw Hill, 2004.

Woods, Don. "They Just Don't Pull Their Weight". Problem-Based Learning Case  
Studies, Experience and Practice. Edited Peter Schwartz, Stewart Mennin and  
Graham Webb. London: Kogan Page Ltd., 2001. Pages 163-170.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **THEATRE HISTORY SYLLABUS FALL and SPRING SEMESTER 2005/2006 TUES and THURS 11:00 A.M.-12:15 P.M.**

---

#### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course will cover the historical movements of the theatre from classic Greece through the Renaissance. Included in this study will be the Western and European theatre as well as the examination into the historical and contemporary theatres of Asia, Africa, and other “non-western” countries and cultures. This class is designed as a constructive course that utilizes the Problem-based Learning Method. Students will be required to become active participants in their education. This includes but is not limited to participating in and contributing to all group activities; the employment of self-directing learning methods; partaking in peer and self assessment; and developing an awareness of the role that theatre history plays in the contemporary theatre. Students will be expected to apply their existing knowledge of the theatre and their particular skills to enhance their understanding of how the theatre operated in a specific time and culture. This exploration will include a comprehensive examination of the social, political, and economic factors surrounding the era of study. Students will gain first-hand experience in the historiography process consisting of the compiling, discernment, interpretation and application of primary and secondary sources and their influence on written history. This course is research and writing intensive and is intended to challenge the student academically and personally. It is also designed to accommodate the interests and specialties of all students, provide opportunities for students to explore other areas of interest and to promote and utilize the student’s creativity, imagination, and artistic abilities.

---

Upon the completion of this course students will have:

- Gained and strengthened their research abilities, decision making processes and collaborative and interpersonal communication skills.
  - Acquired the comprehensive knowledge of the role of the theatre in a specific society and time period including the major movements, innovations and artists.
  - Become familiar the development of theatre historiography and expanded their ability to analyze and synthesize the material into contemporary terms.
  - Developed a personal and professional view of theatre history and its influence in and on modern day theatre.
-

## **GRADING**

Students will be graded according to their level of participation and contribution in their assigned groups and on each assignment. Due to the collaborative nature of this course it is important that all students respect the opinions and views of their fellow classmates. In addition, students will be given grading guidelines and criteria for each assignment. Students are encouraged to look upon this class as a professional endeavor and are expected to act and operate accordingly. Students are expected to adhere to and follow the University's Honor System as well as abide by the policies and rules concerning student behavior and disabilities.

---

## **COURSE SCHEDULE** **FALL 2005 and SPRING 2006**

### **THUR. AUG. 25<sup>TH</sup>**

Course overview. Why study theatre history? What is historiography? Assign groups for Historiography Exercise.

### **TUES. AUG 29<sup>TH</sup>**

Historiography Exercise

### **THUR. SEPT. 1<sup>ST</sup>**

Historiography Exercise

### **TUES. SEPT. 6<sup>TH</sup>**

Historiography Exercise

### **THURS. SEPT. 8<sup>TH</sup>**

Historiography Exercise Presentations

### **TUES. SEPT. 13<sup>TH</sup>**

Historiography Exercise Presentations and Discussion

### **THURS SEPT. 15<sup>TH</sup>**

Reference Day at Library. Learning efficient referencing skills.

### **TUES. SEPT. 20<sup>TH</sup>**

Assign Greek and Asian Theatre Project and Groups.

### **THURS. SEPT. 22<sup>ND</sup>**

Work on Greek and Asian Theatre Project

### **TUES. SEPT. 27<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Greek and Asian Theatre Project

### **THURS. SEPT. 29<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Greek and Asian Theatre Project

### **TUES. OCT. 4<sup>TH</sup>**

Greek and Asian Theatre Project Presentations

### **THURS. OCT. 6<sup>TH</sup>**

Greek and Asian Theatre Project Presentations and discussion

### **TUES. OCT. 11<sup>TH</sup>**

Assign Roman/Byzantine Project and Groups

**THURS. OCT. 13<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Roman/Byzantine Project and Groups

**TUES. OCT. 18<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Roman/Byzantine Project and Groups

**THURS. OCT. 20<sup>TH</sup>*****\*NO CLASS READING DAY\******TUES. OCT. 25<sup>TH</sup>**

Roman/Byzantine Project Presentations

**THURS. OCT. 27<sup>TH</sup>**

Roman/Byzantine Project Presentations and discussion

**TUES. NOV. 1<sup>ST</sup>**

Where are? Quick review of what has been learned and its applications. Assign Medieval Projects and Groups.

**THURS. NOV. 3<sup>RD</sup>**

Work on Medieval Projects

**TUES. NOV. 8<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Medieval Projects

**THURS. NOV. 10<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Medieval Projects

**TUES. NOV. 15<sup>TH</sup>**

Medieval Projects Presentations

**THURS. NOV. 17<sup>TH</sup>**

Medieval Projects Presentations and Discussion

**TUES. NOV. 22<sup>ND</sup>**

Assign Renaissance Project and Groups.

**THURS. NOV. 24<sup>TH</sup>*****\*NO CLASS THANKSGIVING\******TUES. NOV. 29<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Renaissance Projects

**THURS. DEC. 1<sup>ST</sup>**

Work on Renaissance Projects

**TUES. DEC. 6<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Renaissance Projects

**THURS. DEC. 8<sup>TH</sup> ***\*LAST CLASS\******

Work on Renaissance Projects

**THURS. DEC. 15<sup>TH</sup> ***EXAM PERIOD 8:00 A.M.-10:50 A.M.*****

Presentation of Renaissance Projects

**COURSE SCHEDULE**  
**SPRING 2006**

**TUES. JAN. 17<sup>TH</sup>**

Second Semester Course Overview. Comprehensive review of Fall Semester.  
Indoctrination of new students to the class. Assign Restoration Project and Groups.

**THURS. JAN. 19<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Restoration Projects

**TUES. JAN. 24<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Restoration Projects

**THURS. JAN. 26<sup>TH</sup>**

Restoration Project Presentations

**TUES. JAN. 31<sup>ST</sup>**

Restoration Project Presentations and discussion

**THURS. FEB. 2<sup>ND</sup>**

Assign 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects and groups.

**TUES. FEB. 7<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects

**THURS. FEB. 9<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects.

**TUES. FEB. 14<sup>TH</sup>**

18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Project Presentations

**THURS. FEB. 16<sup>TH</sup>**

18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Project Presentations and Discussion

**TUES. FEB. 21<sup>ST</sup>**

Assign -Ism Project and Groups

**THURS. FEB. 23<sup>RD</sup>**

Work on -Ism Projects

**TUES. FEB. 28<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on -Ism Projects

**THURS. MAR. 2<sup>ND</sup>**

Work on -Ism Projects

**TUES. MAR. 7<sup>TH</sup>**

-Isms Project Presentations

**THURS. MAR. 9<sup>TH</sup>**

-Isms Project Presentations and Discussion

**TUES. MAR. 14<sup>TH</sup>**

***\*NO CLASS SPRING BREAK\****

**THURS. MAR. 16<sup>TH</sup>**

***\*NO CLASS SPRING BREAK\****

**TUES. MAR. 21<sup>ST</sup>**

Assign 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects and groups.

**THURS. MAR. 23<sup>RD</sup>**Work on 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects**TUES. MAR. 28<sup>TH</sup>**Work on 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects**THURS MAR. 30<sup>TH</sup>**Work on 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects**TUES. APR. 4<sup>TH</sup>**Work on 20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Projects**THURS. APR. 6<sup>TH</sup>**20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Project Presentations**TUES. APR. 11<sup>TH</sup>**20<sup>th</sup> Century World Theatre Project Presentations and discussion**THURS. APR. 13<sup>TH</sup>**

Assign Contemporary Theatre Projects and Groups

**TUES. APR. 18<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Contemporary Theatre Projects

**THUR. APR. 20<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Contemporary Theatre Projects

**TUES. APR. 25<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Contemporary Theatre Projects

**THUR. APR. 27<sup>TH</sup>**

Work on Contemporary Theatre Projects

**TUES. MAY 2<sup>ND</sup> \*LAST CLASS\***

Work on Contemporary Theatre Projects

**THURS. MAY 11<sup>TH</sup> \*EXAM PERIOD 8:00 A.M.-10:50 A.M.\***

Contemporary Theatre Project Presentations and Discussion

## VITA

Mary currently is the Production Manager at The American Theatre in Hampton, VA. She has earned a MFA in Theatre Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University, and a BA in Theatre from Old Dominion University. In addition, she was awarded a Preparing Future Faculty Certificate after completing the PFF Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. Mary, also an Equity Stage Manager, has worked in the professional theatre for the past twelve years in a variety of positions including as a stagehand, lighting and sound technician, production assistant, and stage manager. While living in Washington, D.C. she worked for Arena Stage, Studio Theatre, and The Shakespeare Theatre and more recently has worked with The Virginia Stage Company and the Virginia Ballet Theatre.