

This Business of Theater

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The class begins with an exercise in remembering the names of those around you. It seems very simple at first, until all thirty (30) names in the circle are called and one individual must recall each one! “Why is this important?” groans one student. The instructor gently reminds the business student, that when they meet with other companies as businesspersons, they will have to instantly remember the names of those they are working shoulder-to-shoulder with.

The student reconsiders his question, and jumps wholeheartedly back into the exercise. This is a reoccurring theme in a theater class that is taken mostly by business students. One would usually not consider that two wildly different disciplines, theater and business, could have anything in common. Indeed, why would a business student ever need to take a theater class? A theater class can be truly beneficial for business students. They develop critical thinking skills, and theater classes teach students to work effectively in teams, and develop the confidence they need in order to be leaders and innovators in a business environment.

They develop numerous skills that can allow one to become a better thinker, more observant, more focused and overall a better proponent of the business world. Theater classes teach critical thinking skills. Critical thinking involves observation, interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation and explanation. These notions are at the heart of what

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creates great theater. Actors, designers, directors, and numerous other theater artists observe, interpret and evaluate as a way of life. The art of theater requires its participants to routinely think “outside of the box”.

Actors routinely use a number of methods, including historical study, the placement of words in the script, and even altering the manner in which they breathe in order to connect with a character. Designers make use of obscure motifs to suggest different settings, time periods and moods by manipulating metal, wood, light and various other materials. In the business world, observation, interpretation and evaluation of trends related to specific products, goods or services is critical in the creation and maintenance of a successful company.

Theater classes undoubtedly teach students, business students included, how to use these specific skills. One activity involves two students observing each other for thirty (30) seconds. Both students then stand back to back and change three (3) things about their appearance. Then, the students turn back around and try to analyze whatever changes that their partner has made. This exercise hones the skills of evaluation and analysis in an outside-the-box format.

Another activity involves positioning static actors in various positions onstage so as to tell a story or suggest a relationship. These tableaux are known as “stage pictures”. Generally, these “stage pictures” are imperfect at first and must be corrected. The creation and correction of these tableaux involves much inference, evaluation and explanation as the students work together to create the most detailed, complete tableau. Theater classes can help business students learn to work effectively in teams.

Teamwork is a cornerstone of a good business, as delegating and being accountable for various responsibilities can result in either the success or failure of an enterprise. Theater is by nature a collaborative art. It takes many different individuals: actors, directors, seamstresses, carpenters etc., in order to create a complete work of theater. These individuals may have varying backgrounds and beliefs, but they come together with one

common goal in mind: 21 to make the production work. Looking back to the activity of the “stage picture”, the students must work together to achieve their goal.

This means that the team must work out any disagreements, accept criticism from their peers, and moreover, come to a general consensus as to what should be done, and how those actions should take place. This is in direct correlation to the business world. Often, employees are put on teams with the task of solving a particular problem or issue. Imagine the inefficiency of a team that spends its time arguing with others, berating one another and not focusing on the task at hand. The ability to work past disagreements, give and accept constructive criticism and develop a plan of action will largely generate a successful and communicative team. These are all skills that can be learned and developed in a theater class. Finally, theater classes provide a foundation to build the confidence that successful businesspeople need in order to function at a high level. In any given theater class, a student will be asked to present something, be it a monologue, scene, or project, to the entire class.

The student must have the confidence to create something, be confident in its effectiveness, and present that something to an audience of his peers. Theater classes foster confidence by making the students become confident in themselves and their presentations. It is a rule that a theater class is a “safe place”. This means that any criticism must be constructive in nature and should never be used to scold the recipient of that criticism.

Thus, the student grows in confidence in that whatever they present will be received with an accepting, albeit critical eye. Since the theater class is a safe space, it provides a sheltered haven to nurture presentation methods. Students learn what is acceptable and unacceptable, and also what is effective and ineffective. These same students can then transfer those learned skills into business presentations.

This has a direct parallel in the business world, as employees are often tasked with presenting ideas, figures, or analyses to an audience of their peers. Students who have taken a theater course are then prepared for criticism, even if it comes in the form of negative

feedback. The students are armed with best practices for presenting. Most importantly, however, the students have practiced giving presentations in the theater class, serving as a rehearsal for corporate endeavors.

Theater classes are very important for business students. These classes can teach critical-thinking skills, develop the teamwork necessary for successful business people and instill and build confidence that will lay the groundwork for many future non-theater activities. All business students should take a theater class and immerse themselves in a world that, while seemingly being very different from the world that they wish to enter, is truly a parallel that will serve to steer them in the right direction.