

Teaching to the Heart and the Mind: Using Live Theater in Family Development Education

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*"Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind."*
--- A Midsummer Night's Dream

In the 16th century, Shakespeare told stories that taught life's lessons -- lessons that remain relevant and meaningful for families today. Even though Shakespeare taught without Powerpoint® or videoconferencing, his devotees remember those lessons and sometimes even apply them in their own lives . . . exactly the kind of behavioral impact Extension educators seek!

Most Extension educators (and other teachers) define their professional role as translators of research and as information resources. In the behavioral sciences, however, information must be linked with motivation if behavior change is likely to occur. Witness the disappointing long-term results from the lecture-based, early days of sexuality education, as compared with today's best practices that combine information and role play. [\(1\)](#)

As powerful a teaching technique as role play can be, it is often impractical in Extension settings. The next best option may be *vicarious* role play -- using live theater to portray important issues in family dynamics.

Georgia Extension periodically teams up with an Atlanta-based drama troupe, Educational Playmakers, Incorporated (EPI), to conduct family development programming that targets the heart as well as the mind. EPI has developed a repertoire of issue-based dramas, including topics such as family violence, substance abuse, changes in senior functioning, and others. Some of these were commissioned by agencies or foundations; others were created from the interests of EPI staff, requests from colleagues, or newsworthy trends in family functioning. When combined with didactic workshops, these dramas result in powerful learning. Most recently, EPI performed

at the opening general session of the 1998 American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences preconference, "Awakening to Aging," in Atlanta.

These plays have been presented in a wide variety of settings: conferences of various professional associations, general audiences, youth groups, seniors, and mixed-age audiences. Because these plays are typically delivered on-site (as opposed to a regular theater), they reach audiences that may not otherwise be exposed to live theater. Audiences do not necessarily expect to be entertained, but it seems that more effective learning occurs when some entertainment is blended with more serious messages. Humor is used extensively. The more serious the subject, the more humor is used to help make the subject more palatable.

The response to live theater can be positive or negative, but the response is almost always one that touches the heart. The negative response is as much a learning tool as the positive. What an individual learns is not necessarily painless, but many people find it easier to approach sensitive issues through live theater. Audience members have been so deeply affected that the need to walk out to escape the confrontation is countered only by politeness or the potential loss of the necessary CEU credit. Dramatic techniques allow the audience to participate in an experience that has universal truths. The result is a group learning experience that goes deeper than intellectual learning alone.

The producer of any program of this nature has a tremendous ethical responsibility to see that situations portrayed accurately reflect realities. When EPI undertakes the development of a new production, the producer reviews research literature, convenes focus groups of professionals working in the area, interviews individuals who have experienced the condition being addressed, and solicits feedback on drafts of the script to help ensure realistic representation of important dynamics and nuances.

EPI uses a technique called "the second act," keeping actors on stage after the performance to interact with the audience. Instead of simply depending on the audience to ask questions, the performers pose issues to the audience, solicit feedback, and respond in role. This has been an effective tool, and discussions are usually lively. The actors have been trained to be knowledgeable in the subject being presented. It requires a special type of performer for this type of program, and they are selected carefully from professional actors in the area.

The use of live theater for education has been limited for a variety of reasons. Availability and accessibility of video has largely replaced the more effective use of theater and role play. Cost of production and availability of scripts and actors may seem imposing, but need not be a major hurdle. A key component of the successful use of theater is having a producer who understands the issues portrayed, can write or secure an effective script, and can assemble the best cast. Most communities of any size have persons with adequate acting experience, and necessary props are

minimal. In the long run, theater may be less costly than other media because of effectiveness and long-lasting results. In Georgia, Extension first teamed up with EPI in the early 1980s for a series of aging conferences delivered regionally. Follow-up evaluation showed that participants recalled some of the seminar discussion, but remembered the drama exactly.

Theater is an illusion of life, allowing viewers to see themselves from new points of view. The power of theater lies in its capacity to arouse, to clarify, and to evaluate. Instead of the comparatively sterile learning environments used too often, with their limited outcomes, consider the possibilities of including theater as an integral part of family development programming . . . the possibilities of reaching the mind *and* the heart.

1. See, for example, Kirby, D., *No Easy Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997, or Daley, D., *Fact Sheet on Sexuality Education*, SIECUS Report, V. 24, No. 6 (Aug/Sept), 1996. [Return to text.](#)

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Cite this article:

Bower, Don, C. Lambert. "Teaching to the Heart and the Mind: Using Live Theater in Family Development Education." *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 3.3 (1998): 10 pars. 29 December 1998.