

Academic Autonomy for Creative Expression:
Humanistic Learning Theory in High School Theatre

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Abstract

Humanistic Learning Theory (HLT) is a psychology-based learning theory. It prioritizes teaching the whole of a child within their academics. The research conducted in this paper strived to answer the question: How can I incorporate intrinsic motivation in students and teach the whole child in a theatre classroom setting? I spent two weeks teaching in a theatre classroom. I implemented teaching methods that encouraged student autonomy to increase their intrinsic motivation and engagement. I prioritized Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to teach the whole child. From the data I gathered, I conclude that HLT is beneficial for my students and me. It increases student autonomy, develops emotional bonds, and caters to their emotional needs. Students were engaged and excited about the coursework.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The concept of teaching has followed me throughout my life, from my own education, to family encouragement to teach, to finding it to be something that I actually want to do. It has given me many questions and answers, then more questions. I seek to find more answers today.

My personal education history is outside the expected academic career. I grew up in a rural part of the Sacramento Valley in California, where I was homeschooled my entire K-12 experience by my mother, who was a stay-at-home spouse. Our curriculum itself was very informal. It was all outsourced material that my mother found via homeschooling forums and Facebook groups. If I struggled with a concept in our curriculum, we did not have many alternative modes of instruction. While this did lead to struggle, it also led to my developing methods for teaching myself difficult material and self-sufficiency. At times, I could not figure it out on my own, and it ended in my mother scolding me for my lack of comprehension and blaming me when her actions caused me to feel demotivated to learn; she framed it as if I was choosing to fail, versus having genuine frustration with the material. This obviously made my relationship with some subjects, math in particular, incredibly tense. I would regularly cheat on my math work any time I was working on it while not being monitored (which was frequent) because my fear of the consequences of poor performance deeply outweighed my actual desire to learn math and any other subject I struggled with. This led to developing a large amount of anxiety over my academic accomplishments, which I know is something many students feel out of fear of disappointing their parents.

A different struggle I had was my emotional growth. I was not only homeschooled, but I was homeschooled in a rural area, which meant there was a very sparse sense of community around me, and any friends I did have were not easily accessible. I left the house three times a week for two to four hours at a time. Two of those times were for religious activities, while the

other was a show choir for homeschoolers that I was enrolled in (which was my introduction to performing arts). This not only meant that I was receiving just a small amount of social peer experience per week, but my parents were my only consistent source of emotional well-being, which, to put it kindly, they were not very good examples of. Unbeknownst to members of my family and myself until I was a young adult, I am also autistic, which created unique struggles for my initial emotional growth as well, due to the differences in my ability to process emotional situations, notice subtle social interactions, or compromise on things I felt strongly about. All of this created a slow burn on my emotional knowledge until late into my teenage years, when I finally noticed the discrepancies between myself and my peers and the ostracization I was experiencing because of it. This spurred me to independently develop my social skills to stop feeling like I was a problem. I achieved this, but have always wondered what I could have done if someone had slowed down and taken the time to genuinely teach me the skills that most neurotypical children absorb subconsciously as they grow. As theatre is often a haven for autistic students and other forms of neurodivergency, I want to create an intentional space for emotional growth.

My true introduction to theater came during my teenage years. As a young child and into the beginning of my teens, I was in a show choir for homeschoolers. Due to the choir moving locations, my parents decided to switch to a closer after-school theatre program that other students from my choir had switched to in previous years. This new program taught me theater skills and showed me great kindness that I had not experienced in my previous program. It was everything I had loved about show choir and more. I made my lifelong friends during the three years I participated in this program, and my experience here inspired me to keep performance in my life in any format I could.

Additionally, the freedom of exploration actualized my motivation for learning. I had a lot of liberty with my learning styles. At eight years old, my assigned written work became solely creative writing projects after my mother had tried to teach me grammar multiple times, and it never really stuck with me due to my total lack of initial interest. After being allowed to pursue my own ideas, elevating the execution of them became a priority for me, so I studied the formatting and grammar of various books and searched for multiple definitions on the internet. In addition to grammar, I taught myself psychology, biology, mythology, history, and any other subject I had an interest in. I learned research techniques from the ground up so I could improve the realism of my creative works. These self-taught skills also allowed me to independently learn emotional regulation and prepare to catch up on my lost social skills when I began college.

So, despite the difficulties, my K-12 education was summatively holistic due to the self-sufficiency required to teach myself the material, and my problem-solving skills were highly developed. I achieved a satisfactory place academically and emotionally in the end. It is up to interpretation whether my education is responsible for my growth, or if it was me in spite of my education. I tend to see it as the former, because I find my education shaped my abilities even if it did not directly provide them.

When I entered college—my first experience with formal education—I was academically successful. I had an average GPA of 3.8 for my entire undergraduate degree. As it turns out, having a genuine instructor makes learning significantly easier to follow than having to learn *how* to learn something solely on your own. I was able to catch up in my weaker areas quite rapidly in my first year by using my self-teaching skills to my advantage. I encountered many different types of pedagogical practices in my undergraduate degree. Those experiences were how I understood for the first time that a teacher is one of the deciding factors of learning within a classroom setting. In one semester, I had three different classes in which feedback was directly

provided in class by the professor and peers: an acting class, a literature class, and a creative writing class. The former two approached their feedback with a growth mindset and were mindful of artistic interpretation and choice. The professors involved would ask open-ended questions to explore thought and create suggestions to engage in dialogue. As students, we would follow their model of feedback when speaking to each other. In the creative writing class, the mode of feedback was grueling and non-collaborative. The professor would list what he disliked within a story, and any feedback for improvement was given with no encouragement or excitement for growth. The students in the class also followed this behavior. It was such a horrific experience that I, the person who had been writing creative projects since I was eight years old, did not write again for three years. My joy for the work was crushed so severely in that classroom environment.

To look back on my entire academic career, I can recognize that the professors whose pedagogy I enjoyed were also the ones I learned the most from. They were the ones who (1) encouraged collaboration between and with students, (2) encouraged critical thinking by creating an environment where it was safe to be wrong at first and then grow without judgment, and most personally to me (3) had a deep conviction of compassion and belief in the inherent capabilities of their students. The professors who shared these traits were the building blocks of my beliefs on what it means to be an educator. When I combine these three traits with experiences on my learning journey, it drives me to curate a classroom environment where students have high levels of autonomy in what and how they learn in order to reach their own academic goals. I strive to be an instructor who teaches self-sufficiency practices, encourages collaboration and critical thinking, and is a stable pillar of support for students. Students deserve both flexibility and stability to support their learning skills. I want to prioritize long-term ability for growth, which is

already conducive in a soft skill strengthening content area like theatre. That is why I have selected humanistic learning theory (HLT) as a theoretical lens for this action research project to attain my desired classroom environment within the content area of theatre.

Guiding Pedagogical Theory

Humanistic learning theory is based on humanistic psychology, which was coined by Abraham Maslow (1943) and Carl Rogers (1969). The prioritization of autonomy in learning encourages students to develop their understanding of the world in ways that best serve them. HLT places trust in a student's intrinsic motivation to learn independently when given emotional support and the freedom to choose how they learn. HLT permits students to learn at their own pace and with their preferred methods. It also allows a classroom to reach beyond the teacher's speciality, because with the teacher playing the role of facilitator in student-centered learning, it opens the possibilities of what students can learn in a single field, including related topics that interest them, which encourages self-motivated learning.

There are no specifically structured tenets of HLT, but there is a general sense of core values in the philosophy. I have identified five core values by combining the ideas of Maslow and Rogers with other researchers who have contributed to the continuous development of HLT. They are: (1) student choice, (2) personal responsibility, (3) intrinsic motivation, (4) self-evaluation, and (5) teaching the whole child. The details of each value are thus:

- (1) Student choice: Students should be the ones who make their academic decisions, such as their content focus and personal goals for their education. A student is going to be more engaged when they have control over both what and how they are learning. Rogers (1969) was a vocal supporter of providing students with the option to choose free learning. He also supported students who wanted to continue to learn from the traditional

guided method of teaching, for its familiarity and structure. This freedom should be available as a student understands how they learn best and is aware of their own interests. Students will be more inclined to learn about what interests them and less inclined to learn about what does not, regardless of whether they have the freedom to choose it or not.

- (2) Personal responsibility: When given freedom, students then become responsible for their learning. Encouraging personal responsibility not only assists students academically but also provides them with a vital lifelong skill. It is then important for the teacher to work as a facilitator for students, rather than a lecturer, and to foster personal responsibility. Rogers (1969) recommends creating class contracts between a teacher and a student. The students pledge to hold themselves accountable, and the teacher pledges to aid them when needed. These contracts can contain the details of what the student's learning goals are, the time frame of the project, and what evidence the student will provide to demonstrate their completion.
- (3) Intrinsic motivation: When a student has autonomy and a clear set goal, they are more likely to be actively engaged. Maslow (1943) believed that people will innately seek out knowledge, that "acquiring knowledge and systematizing the universe have been considered as, in part, techniques for the achievement of basic safety in the world, or, for the intelligent man, expressions of self-actualization" (p. 14). He believed that once all of a person's basic needs were met, they would find new things to desire and would seek to grow into the best version of themselves, express themselves more creatively, and continue to seek to achieve self-actualization and their full potential.
- (4) Self-evaluation: According to Rogers (1969), "The evaluation of one's own learning is one of the major means by which self-initiated learning also becomes responsible

learning. When the individual has to take the responsibility for deciding what criteria are important to him, what goals must be achieved, and the extent to which he has achieved those goals, then he truly learns to take responsibility for himself and his directions” (p. 206). In other words, students who must assess their own growth are more inclined to ensure that their growth is to their own satisfaction, which feeds into their intrinsic motivation, which increases their habits for responsible learning. Training students in critical and compassionate self-assessment could also potentially aid in developing high self-efficacy via gaining an understanding of what it requires to achieve their goals and that they can meet those requirements.

- (5) Teaching the whole child: Humanistic learning prioritizes emotional knowledge for the purpose of educating children as whole individuals (Xiangkui, 2024). When one values and encourages emotional knowledge, it creates a more holistic human being. HLT takes a stance that education should not be limited to testing and grades; humanistic learning is student-centered. So students can leave their education and continue as high-functioning adults with both intellectual and emotional knowledge to best comprehend the world, as well as be active social participants.

In this study, I will apply these ideas in a theatre class setting. My primary research questions for this study are: How can I encourage multifaceted intrinsic motivation in a theatre classroom, and what does teaching the whole child look like in the theatre classroom? I will explore what it looks like to give students more autonomy regarding how they study drama. Students should be able to learn the many aspects of theatre, not just acting. As most arts programs in schools are already underfunded and limited, it is important to allow students as much reach as they can in their performing arts education. The topic of theatre history alone is vast and cannot be taught in a single course on all the relevant information. Theatre arts contain a

multitude of acting methods and techniques, technical aspects, and design elements, all of which are of potential value to young learners.

Connection to InTASC Standards

My primary goal as a teacher is to create an emotionally safe and aware space for students to develop the life skills of perseverance, critical thinking, and self-awareness. I do not want my students to walk away from my classroom with just a list of facts; I want them to go out with experiences and “aha moments” they can utilize when making future life choices. I want to encourage my students to learn from everywhere, not just me. I believe education should encompass the life skills a young person needs to live their life to their full sense of self-satisfaction, and I am aware that that looks different for every student. I have chosen two Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards related to my research to exemplify my ideals. The first standard is standard #6 assessment: “The teacher understands and uses multiple methods of assessment to engage learners in their own growth, to monitor learner progress, and to guide the teacher’s and learner’s decision making” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 30). This standard plays into the previously mentioned student-driven contracts, in which students have a say in what their final product will be and what the assessment standards for that product will look like.

The other standard I chose was standard #8 instructional strategies: “The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop a deep understanding of content areas and their connections, and to build skills to apply knowledge in meaningful ways” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013, p. 38). This standard lends itself to the teacher's role of facilitator by providing a broad net of information, then helping each student as they dive deeper into their chosen topic or subject matter. Both of these standards reflect my conviction to engage students with learning in their own ways and not place

myself as an imposing leader above them, but as a supportive guide who aids them on their own journey of growth and self-discovery. I will do this by finding means of implementing student choice in content and grading criteria according to my first core value, and teaching the whole child through reflection and self-assessment.

Summary

In this chapter, I detail my unique situation as a learner intellectually and emotionally as a rural, home-schooled, and autistic child. I explain the pros and cons of being self-taught. The pros are the benefit of having the options to learn from avenues beyond a traditional classroom setting and being able to learn more about the world through my personal interest in creative writing. The drawbacks are having a limited support network for difficult intellectual trials or emotional modeling. These experiences tie into my goals as an educator to create a space where students can have the benefits of creative liberty within their education, but also have a safe support for their struggles. My theoretical lens of humanistic learning theory, of educating the whole child for a student growing to be capable of reaching their full potential, explains the core values of the theory, which I identify as student choice, personal responsibility, intrinsic motivation, self-evaluation, and teaching the whole child. My InTASC standards that relate to my lens are standard #6 assessment and standard #8 instructional strategies, as these two standards are about the means by which students are taught and assessed within the content area, which should be varied enough for each student to find success.

Chapter 2. Review of Relevant Research and Scholarship

The theoretical framework for my action research project is Humanistic Learning Theory (HLT), which focuses on student-centered education and how I can incorporate autonomy and choice into a theatre arts classroom and prioritize student emotional learning and well-being while also teaching them about theatre arts. My reasoning behind this choice is that my freedom to engage in academics in ways that best suited me greatly increased my desire to learn, taught me self-efficacy, and allowed me to create my own sense of purpose while learning. I believed my students would benefit similarly. Although there were limitations to the amount of information I was able to learn on my own as a child, I attempted to blend my self-driven learning style with professional instruction for students to see if they could get more out of their education than my peers who attended public school, or I did. I sought out articles from Western Oregon University's Hamersley Library that pertained to humanistic learning theory or related theories, both in general and in education, and cases of student autonomy experiments in the classroom.

Literature Review

An article by Connolly (2016) contains the results of a coach's research on how to utilize psychology to connect with the athletes beyond apathetic performance metrics and connect with their "human side." The methods were a research-based literature review of best practices for coaches. This research was conducted through the lens of humanistic learning theory. Connolly concluded his results of the article in an explained list of four principles of applicable humanistic learning theory in coaching sports: communication, self-concept, affect, and personal values. Then, how to apply them in cases of congruence, success promotion, interaction, and empathy. I found this article to be a short yet valuable example of HLT in the field of coaching, which, while not directly related to theatre, shares a lot of concepts. They are both common

extracurriculars in school, are team-focused towards a common goal, have a head director/coach who provides the team with a vision of what the group goal looks like, and directors and coaches hold a unique emotional position with students as instructors who will see them in emotionally vulnerable places as they work on their goals. The principles and applicable actions do connect with a theatre director due to the level of involvement both positions have. Connolly has a strong stance on what the internal process a coach should take to enact HLT in coaching. It would be relevant to provide personal anecdotes about how it has impacted Connolly's own coaching, which is a property I have added to my own research.

An essay by Darom (2000) contains a scholarly interpretation of the defining components of humanistic education and values education, and how those two educational methods should be ideally implemented together despite what Darom identifies as their apparent opposition. The lenses for this analysis are HLT and value education theory, intertwined. Darom concluded that more polarity, or ways of thinking that appear polarized, in the teaching space, must coalesce for the most beneficial outcome for either side. Whether it is the methods described or the notion of the theorist or the practical educator, this chapter's essay provides me with a clear outline for the core values of humanistic learning theory that I can pull from. HLT has no definitive tenets stated by Maslow or Rogers. Modern HLT evolved from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Rogers' unconditional positive regard. The core beliefs of the theory have been summarized in various ways. Darom provides his own summary of the core values of HLT in a manner I find succinct and accurate.

Kurniasih and Hasbiyallah (2024) wrote a report of their findings on how an Indonesian Islamic middle school attempted to promote critical thinking in its students while learning their PAI (Pendidikan Agama Islam) curriculum, with a focus on differentiating between halal and

The school utilized both HLT and SAVI (Somatic, Auditory, Visual, and Intellectual) methods of learning to improve its students' learning. They performed qualitative research conducted over five days in a class of one instructor and twenty students via interviews, observation, documentation, and questionnaires. The research concluded with a summative test to see if the students had accurately learned the material. Their findings reported that the students involved in the research achieved an 80% average on the summative, and interviews with additional observing PAI teachers concluded that the efforts to effectively teach by utilizing HLT and SAVI methods were a success. The article only provides the conclusive summative and interviews as evidence, which left me wanting more background context of previous student performance to better measure their growth in success. This article introduced me to the SAVI teaching style, which I believe will be beneficial in my action research going forward.

Li (2025) reports the benefits of humanistic and emotional intelligence-based teaching methods and their impact on mindfulness and emotional learning in students to enhance their individual development in addition to academic achievement. This was completed with quantitative research of four teaching methods on four groups of learners. The four methods were leveled with differing amounts of included humanistic learning theory aspects. The lens was a humanistic learning theory approach for the hope of holistic learning and emotional development for students. It concluded that while traditional methods of teaching can improve a student's academic capabilities, teaching through a lens of humanistic psychology can improve both academic and emotional qualities of students, which leads to higher levels of achievement in students overall. This article provides a large picture of developing curriculum for humanistic education and provides vigorous research on the effects of incorporating humanistic learning theory in education. It also gives realistic expectations for open-minded and intentional planning

for creating student-centered learning, and how to create choice within the school structure, so that students can achieve their best in their own ways.

Núñez et al. (2015) present a detailed study on the effects of autonomy on students' sense of vitality in courses at a college level. The researchers had participants complete questionnaires on the subjects of autonomy and subjective vitality that were filled out over the course of three months, from a beginning number of 422 students to an ending number of 216 students. Núñez et al. approached the research through the self-determination framework. They found evidence that when they felt like autonomy was supported by a professor at the beginning of a semester, students were more likely to build upon their autonomy and then find more satisfaction within their subject, which supports the self-determination theory core principle of need-based psychology. This article expands with advice for others who wish to undertake a similar study, encouraging a larger time frame and alternative modes of researching besides self-reporting. It provides me with more frames of reference for documenting my research going forward.

Robinson et al. (2000) explore the philosophy behind the concepts and compare and contrast the purposes of HTL and character education—teaching students how to have strong moral character—in U.S. schools. The article presents these ideas through a literature review comparing the two methods, but favors the lens of humanistic learning theory. Robinson et al. concluded with the high relevance of character education and how educators need to understand its importance. They sympathize with the criticisms of character education being used as an indoctrination tool, but argue its importance, as its primary goal overlaps with HLT. That is, they are both geared toward the holistic growth of children. The article provides insight into both the legally required character education and valuable critiques and discussions of HLT. It discusses its level of effectiveness and potential oversights of the philosophy, which is important for me to consider in my research going forward.

Carl Rogers is one of the founders of humanistic learning theory. His book *Freedom to Learn* (1969) is a compilation of his theory, as well as multiple written testimonies from teachers who have incorporated student choice into their education. His methods were interview and testimonial-based for the purpose of developing the humanistic learning theory lens of education. Rogers determines that student freedom is vital for intrinsic motivation in student learning. He builds off of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and argues that students will seek self-actualization if given the opportunity. In order to do this, students must be treated with unconditional positive regard by their instructors. Rogers, as one of the founding philosophers of humanistic learning theory, offers insight into the core principles of the theory. He presents his thoughts carefully and articulately. He also compiled testimonies from various individuals of vastly different experiences in education and builds on them while discussing his philosophy. His direct insight will help me develop my interpretations of the core principles of humanistic learning theory and can be a guide for when I am planning my next steps.

PR et al. (2023) conducted a study within an Islamic Middle School in Indonesia on the application of humanistic learning theory to the student body. The descriptive qualitative methods used were observation, documentation, and interview. This research was dedicated to the application of humanistic learning theory. The school principal reported that students were more actively engaging in religious activities and displayed improved relationships with elders, so the results of the study were considered a confirmation of the hypothesis. Something I wish this article included was a more detailed depiction of how the research methods were implemented. There was a small section dedicated to words from a student and a teacher, but beyond that, they skipped from introductions of the methods to the results reported by the principal. This left me questioning what the process in between looked like. Despite this, it is another example of HLT's applicability in a classroom setting.

Swisher et al. (1983) wrote an assessment of research conducted on humanistic learning theory in education. Swisher et al. selected studies to review based on their focus and means of measuring success. The article reviewed over 100 research reports. The article is dedicated to HLT and finding research support for its validity as an educational theory inside the classroom. Swisher et al. concluded that HLT was effective in the classroom, with only one record of HLT having a negative effect on the classroom environment, while 95 reports concluded it had a positive impact. This article is deeply beneficial to my confidence in my future research. It displays that the baseline of the theory does work, which allows me to focus more deeply on the specifics of my research in my classroom. Its role as a literature review provides extra insight into previously performed research and presents it in a compact but thoughtful analysis, which will be a beneficial frame of reference when I am conducting my own research.

Tasnim and Ahmed (2022) provide a detailed explanation of the rise, pros, and cons of humanistic learning theory. They review the history and impact of humanistic learning theory on education. The methods they used were academic research on the historical relevance of humanistic learning theory and, more specifically, its impact on English language teaching. Researchers concluded that when teachers complete sufficient preparation, such as reframing their state of mind to be student-focused and incorporating student autonomy ahead of time, humanistic learning theory is an incredibly effective method that enhances student learning and capabilities. This article created a holistic picture of humanistic learning theory in education that compiles the core components of its history and applicability in a manner that goes on to provide advice and instruction for future educators. It strongly supports the core tenets of humanistic learning theory and describes their applicability in education.

Wang (2024) completed an analysis on the implementation of HLT in China by comparing the recent growth of HLT with its initial implementation in China. Wang discussed

the conflict between traditional teaching methods in China and a cultural desire for westernization, especially in Chinese private schools. Wang explains that there was friction between the traditional education methods and the high levels of individualism in HLT, particularly when HLT began to gain popularity in Western education. In recent years, with more studies completed on HLT, it has been blended into current teaching practices and heavily mixed with what Wang calls “Smart Teaching.” Smart teaching appears to be in reference to conducting education virtually using many technical tools. Wang’s analysis of HLT provides me with a multicultural understanding of how humanistic learning can be implemented. His examples of educational practices in Chinese schools expand my understanding of implementations of HLT beyond Western individualism. Although he expresses the limitations of his essay being confined to China and not having global applicability, the insight of his analysis is a considered addition to my research approach.

Zenger et al. (2025) emphasize the impact of fostering student independence on their academic performance. Zenger et al. “investigated whether five autonomy-regulation strategies (creating choices, recognizing one's own perspective, using invitational self-talk, acknowledging one's own feelings, and displaying patience towards oneself) can be differentiated from established motivation-regulation strategies, like mastery self-talk” (p. 1). Researchers argue that when students are given tools to perform independently, they can utilize intrinsic motivation. The methods of the study were questionnaires for university students. The questionnaires contained a 1-5 scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The study was conducted through the lens of self-determination theory. The results were varied, with Zenger et al. concluding that their parameters were too general to answer their research questions. Despite this, the study found some patterns between students who are predisposed to engage in self-talk and inner-sourced motivation that lead to more emotionally stable academic outcomes and increase their desire to

learn. This article provided some insight into the effects of self-talk, specifically in the inconclusive nature of the results. Although Zenger et al. did not determine a direct causation between self-regulatory techniques, but focused more on the perspective of students regarding their sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation than previous articles I have researched provided me with a reference to what analysis I can complete in cases of my action research not reaching the conclusions I had initially hoped.

These resources gave me insight into the practical applicability of humanistic learning theory and how it has been observed in schools. While most of the related research I found was overviews or other forms of literature review, they solidified the basis of humanistic learning theory, which proved invaluable due to the theory being an ever-evolving movement with no tenets, but simply core ideals. The patterns of thought found in the philosophical discussions around the theory gave my future action research a foundation to build upon. With this knowledge, I was able to narrow my focus to my goal of seeking self-actualization for my students by utilizing these research-supported tactics to provide student-centered learning for the theater classroom specifically.

Chapter 3. Methods

According to Sagor (2000), action research is an individual taking on the role of both the researcher and the researched. He describes the steps to completing action research as “1. Selecting a focus 2. Clarifying theories 3. Identifying research questions 4. Collecting data 5. Analyzing data 6. Reporting results 7. Taking informed action” (p. 3). I have taken these steps and condensed them into three actionable phases. I classify the first phase in steps 1-3 as the preparation phase. I will select a focus point or issue they wish to explore with action research. Then I will seek out information about my focus to see if my initial idea has been addressed previously and what other scholars have to say on the matter. Once research is complete, I will narrow their focus down to specific research questions. These questions guide me toward the next phase, which are steps 4-5, the data phase. In the data phase, I will collect relevant and qualitative data from their classroom. This data can take the form of personal documentation, student work samples, exit tickets completed by students, and most other assessment measures. I will take their data, compare my findings with prior research, identify thematic patterns, and code the data into themes. The final phase is steps 6-7, the next step phase. This phase is when I report and implement my findings into my future teaching methods. The results of the research analysis, if done correctly, should illuminate whether I am taking the correct steps to improve my teaching, or if I need to pivot to researching a different method. Action research is an easily repeatable process. A dedicated teacher should ensure they complete the action research process in order to continue honing their techniques for both their sake and the sake of their students. For this reason, action research is the most applicable method for my study as a student teacher.

I spent two weeks gathering qualitative data regarding the effects of my own actions on my students’ academic success over the course of a unit on vocal acting techniques. During my teaching, I incorporated options for student choice, self-reflection exercises, and emphasis on the

similarities between acting and real-life communication methods. The focus of my action research was to answer the questions: (1) How can I encourage multifaceted intrinsic motivation in a theatre classroom, and (2) what does teaching the whole child look like in the theatre classroom? Because theatre arts is a creative space known for artistic growth and self-expression, I want my students to engage their own feelings and perceptions alongside their academic understanding of the art form.

Participants and Setting

My research site is a Title I school in a low-income urban area in central Oregon. It is near bus stops, businesses, and the local train station. Students often walk to and from school every day, including students from the neighboring middle school. Students also frequent a nearby grocery store to get food and snacks at lunch and after school. The school itself is well-maintained and was recently remodeled to add new buildings and facilities. The rigging in the theater department has been renovated in the past year.

The class that I collected data from had 16 students. The racial demographics are 43% White, 37% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 7% Pacific Islander. Twenty percent of the students are English Language Learners (ELLs). About 50% of the class are freshmen, with the other 50% being upperclassmen. The class is majority female, with 70% females, 18% males, and 12% non-binary students. Twenty-five percent of enrolled students are transgender. Twelve percent of my students are on IEPs, and one of them has a modified diploma. I have both formally diagnosed and undiagnosed neurodivergent students who greatly benefit from social and emotional support. The whole class is able-bodied.

I have been with my students since the beginning of spring 2026. They have displayed open-mindedness and strong communication skills. Many of them have a vocal interest in social justice and activism. They all have some prior experience in a form of creative art, such as choir,

writing, drawing, or theatre. I have had success with asking them for their authentic feedback on matters such as our summative rubric criteria and our classroom expectations. We have built mutual trust over the course of the semester. This has emboldened some of the more shy students to open up and thrive.

My role in this setting is both the researcher and active participant. My strengths as an educator include my ability to adapt scaffolding and gamification to help students build confidence and develop skills simultaneously. Students report feeling safe in environments I facilitate, and I have been observed by multiple people who say I bring a calming energy to a space. My strengths come from the joy that I experience when a student feels safe enough to connect with me. An area for growth is to maintain grounded classroom transitions. I need to develop strategies to keep myself in order. Because when I am in the moment, my brain runs faster than I can keep up with, and I skip over details and need to circle back to reexplain a concept. As a participant, I will adapt my behavior and practices to improve my skills. As a researcher, I am going to be gathering data on the effectiveness and student response from my methods and adjustments.

Data Collection and Analysis

Sagor (2000) describes traditional forms of qualitative data as preexisting records held by the school or student portfolios, observed data, which is the data documented by the researching teacher, and probed data collected from student tests, surveys, etc. The qualitative sources for my collected data are daily reflection responses written by my students, my own reflective assessment, documented interactions with my students, and feedback from my supervisor and clinical teacher. As my research question pertains to intrinsic motivation and interest-based engagement, direct student responses and documented behavior serve as key data sources to triangulate my research. With insight from my clinical teacher, I reviewed my data in search of

patterns and created deductive codes based on those patterns to develop central themes that pertain to my research question.

Research Positionality

To take a moment to address how my social identity is connected to and will interact with my research: I am a lower-middle-class White femme/androgynous presenting genderqueer person. I grew up in rural California with my K-12 education completed entirely at home. My family is very devout evangelical Christians. My identity as a queer person is a visible factor about me that directly influences others' perception of me, including my family's. I am a low-support needs autistic person who, while high-masking as an adult, did not grow up that way. My perception of mental health and social hierarchy is hyper-aware due to the alienation I experienced as a child and teen. I am accustomed to experiencing the forms of social and systemic oppression that LGBTQIA+ people and women face in our current society, but I am aware of the ways that my social position inherently profits from colonialism, racism, and ableism.

Chapter 4. Data

After I completed my two weeks of research, I analyzed my data. I searched for consistent themes regarding the core values of HLT in my students. My primary research questions were: How can I encourage multifaceted intrinsic motivation in a theatre classroom, and what does teaching the whole child look like in the theatre classroom? Four consistent themes emerged. The first three themes have subcategories, while the fourth is a brief standalone that could not be sorted into the other three.

- Students respond positively when they have a say.
 - Say in criteria.
 - Say in content.
- Social learning is engaged learning.
 - Gamification.
 - Group work.
- Trust leads to safe risk-taking.
 - Build community-focused expectations.
 - Prioritize strong emotional connections.
- Self-reflection makes it their own.

Each of these themes is discussed in this chapter.

Students Respond Positively When They Have a Say.

I have identified a consistent pattern of positive responses and outcomes from my data regarding when my students have direct input into academic materials, such as the contents of their projects or their grading criteria. This theme ties into my research question regarding intrinsic motivation and the HLT core values of student choice and personal responsibility. I have seen from their reflections, my own observations, and their finished products that when my

students are allowed to stake their claim in their academic work, it leads to stronger positive regard for their classwork. The supporting examples can be further broken down into categories: say in criteria and say in content.

Say in Criteria

The method by which I allowed students input into the grading criteria was a system we used the entire semester. I began by compiling a list of potential criteria, all of which could be valuable to a performance; in the context of this unit, a vocal performance. Within this unit, I listed memorization, characterization, vocal clarity, energy, vocal dynamic, and preparation. I selected two from this list to be my contribution to the rubric. Then we spent a couple of class periods engaging with the different needs of a vocal performance. At the moment, I have asked my students to genuinely contemplate what makes a performance good, drawing on things they have already seen. With these ideas already planted in their minds, I reinvested in them during the following period through related theatre games. In the final part of the period, I showed them my list. They had five minutes to create their personal ranking of the most to least important of the criteria provided. I then put them into groups, and they would spend another five minutes creating the same ranked list, but as a group, which required each of them to present what they thought was valuable and come to an agreement together. After they completed the group rankings, I revealed my two selected criteria: memorization and vocal clarity. Then we compared the group lists together to create the final ranking through a whole-class discussion I facilitated. The remaining two criteria were pulled from the top four group rankings. The other criteria my students selected were energy and characterization.

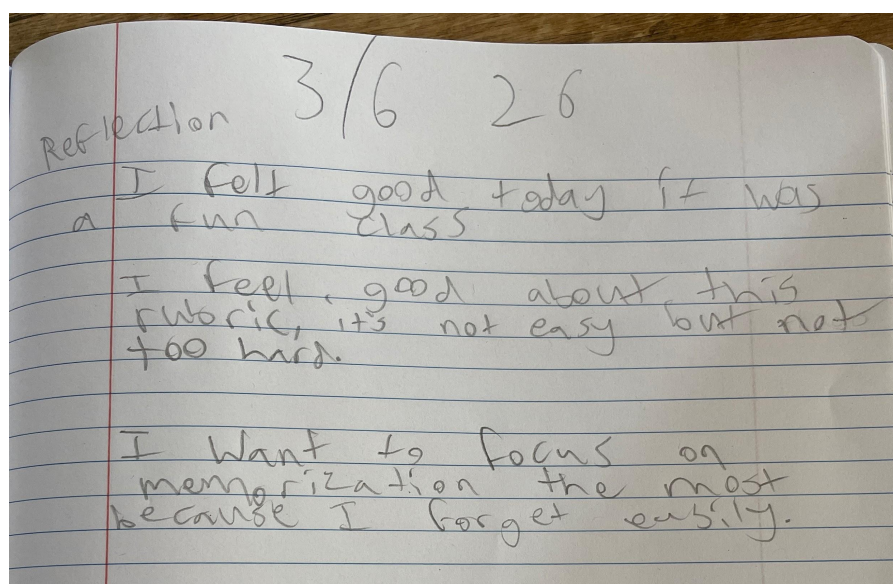
The response I observed from my students was high levels of engagement in critical thinking regarding adequate qualifications for a performance. Every student had an opinion, and students listened to each other and utilized strong communication skills. According to my

observations, this method provides a balance between giving my students autonomy while also ensuring I am able to model for them what a quality performance looks like. By granting them the opportunity to complete their rankings first, I was able to gauge their understanding of the class content. In this particular case, I uncovered that my students had not fully comprehended the vitality of memorization to live performance, as it was not present in any group's top four. This allowed me to make changes in my lessons and expectations to account for that.

My students' responses to the rubric were mostly positive. The most negative response was vague neutrality. Students recorded their reflections in writing when we designed the rubric and at the end of the unit. They said that having a direct say made it easier to understand what was being asked of them, what they should prioritize, and made the entire process clearer. One student wrote in his notebook, after the rubric was created (see Figure 1), that the work was "not easy but not too hard." There was a strong consensus of confidence amongst the students that performing well according to the rubric would be possible.

Figure 1

Student Written Reflection 1



Say in Content

An additional area of choice I supported for my students was their choice of performance material. They also got to choose if they worked in pairs or individually. I provided them with stacks of available scenes and monologues for them to look through, databases to search online, and even encouraged them to select a vocal piece from their favorite movie, TV show, or video game. I urged them to select a piece that they felt strongly about. This was to increase the chances of connection to whatever character each student portrayed. If they had a personal relationship with the source material or found a character who was like them, they would have a more enjoyable time completing the required character work and would be more inclined to practice their material.

The pieces that my students selected varied greatly. Most of them decided to pair with a partner and chose pieces together. The majority of students selected pieces from the physical copies that were provided, while some found scenes online. A pair chose a scene that one of them had written themselves, and another selected a monologue from a video game he loved. The students recorded their reasoning behind their choices in their reflections. Over half of them listed finding the scene humorous as a reason for their selection, while some said that they related to the characters inside the piece. Every student reported a positive attitude towards their selection.

From my observations of rehearsal, I witnessed students laughing and engaging creatively with the pieces they chose. Their positive regard for their pieces encouraged them to make them their own. I observed my students build directly upon our previous unit, which was physicality. Even though they had just created the rubric, which did not include physical action for our vocal unit performance piece, they all enthusiastically combined these elements automatically out of excitement for quality performance and storytelling.

The results of the summative assessment yielded positive results, indicating the benefits of allowing student choice. Students arrived on the day of our summative assessment prepared and enthusiastic to perform. The majority passed with a level of proficiency to excellence on a proficiency-based grading scale. All but two students displayed growth from the previous unit. Those who did so specifically maintained a proficient level of stage movement in their piece, despite it not being a component of their grade for the project. Students reflected on the day of the summative that they did not feel highly confident about their performance, vocalizing that they believed they could have performed it better, and explained what steps they would take to do so. Comparing this data with the actual results of the summative indicates that the students were holding themselves to strong personal expectations, which can also be described as a strong sense of personal responsibility for their work, just as Rogers (1969) described.

Social Learning is Engaged Learning

The concept of social learning as engaged learning is derived from the frequency at which students display a visible increase in enthusiasm and interest when the activities of the day allow them to collaborate with peers. This theme is most strongly tied to my research question and the core value of teaching the whole child, as well as the core value of intrinsic motivation. There are two subcategories for this theme: gamification and group work.

Gamification

Gamification is a tactic that has proven invaluable in the theatre classroom because the core of acting lies in the power of play. It allows students to engage in academic material with lower social stakes. Gamification helps translate ideas into a student's body. This tactic is helpful in most circumstances, but especially in theatre, where movement and whole-body response are key aspects of the content material.

An example of this is the various circle games I conducted throughout the semester. After daily warm-ups, the class would stand in a circle while I demonstrated with a TA the game we were going to play. For the vocal unit, we played a variety of games, but I will describe the singular game, One More Time. The rules of One More Time are that one person chooses a simple phrase, such as “that was really funny.” The first person starts, then the phrase is passed around the circle, but each person must say it with a new tone that gives it a new meaning. This game explores subtext through tone, something that students were aware of on a social level, but reframing it as a game provided students with a new perspective that also put content area vocabulary into a context that they would relate to.

When students played this game, they communicated sarcasm, sincerity, and many other subtle emotions through this activity. I observed the students participating in active listening to the students’ turns before theirs and creative thinking in how they would create a new tone and meaning, with particular effort to ensure they were funny. The game also supported their social and emotional learning (SEL), as it draws directly from social communication and subtext. This factor is a convenient overlap of learning opportunities. Theatre is a fantastic subject for SEL education due to its social outlet and content area focus on listening and communication. Students’ participation gives them both social validation and community. These reasons are key factors in students’ self-motivation.

When reflecting upon the class period in their class notebooks, multiple students noted how fun they found the material. They have consistently made this note after class periods in which the day’s lesson primarily uses gamified concepts. Their self-reflections also contained proof of understanding concepts taught through gamification. Students were frequently given a reflection prompt that asked them how they could utilize the concept taught that day in their day-to-day life. Using an example from this unit, students were asked how they could use the

concepts of projection (speaking loudly without shouting or straining one's voice) and diction (enunciating with crisp consonants). Students responded to the prompt with valid examples of using the vocal techniques around teachers, family, or in public. This display of understanding leads me to believe in the effectiveness of teaching concepts through gamification.

Group Work

During this unit, students were permitted to pair up and select a scene to work on together, and were to be graded individually regardless of choice. They were encouraged to do this for emotional support, peer accountability, and learning mode preference. All but one student chose to work on a shared piece. Most students sought out the partner they worked with during the previous unit. Students who sought out a partner did so because they thought it would be more enjoyable to work with someone, or were still nervous about performing alone. An example of the latter is one student who did not have a project partner, approached me, expressed her discomfort in performing alone, and asked what she should do. Thankfully, I had a TA available to pair with her for her piece. After having the arrangement made, she continued in the unit without issue.

My emphasis on group work is another reason behind my method for the student ranking system for rubric criteria. While they did make their own original rankings first, they then had to engage in communication, negotiation, and compromise in order to complete small group rankings. This ensured that the rubric would be a group effort instead of solitary, anonymous votes. By making it group work, it pre-emptively reduced any hostility or resentment towards the chosen criteria, as all students were able to make their own voice heard multiple times, first in small groups and then as a class body.

Students also had a designated rehearsal period where they were assigned feedback partners. During the class period, each student was to observe someone who was not their scene

partner rehearsing and would provide that partner with feedback, both verbal and written. The verbal feedback was structured to be rooted in observation and communication. A student would watch, observe, report to their feedback partner what they saw, and then ask questions about anything that might have confused them or was unclear in purpose. The goal of this format was to steer students away from being reductive by only listing what they liked or did not like about their partner's performance. I observed that students struggled to keep to the exact format, but maintained the key goal. I observed students engaging in collaborative verbal feedback with each other to fine-tune moments of comedy for their feedback partner. The written feedback component took the form of a handout with a copy of the class-created rubric, along with a designated space for students to explain their reasoning. Students were instructed to score their feedback partner according to how they performed that class period, and then provide why, and any additional feedback they believed would be helpful.

The results of the feedback were overall positive. The scores were generous and honest in judgment. Students wrote in relation to energy levels, the effectiveness of facial expression, and the completeness of memorization. There were only two exceptions to the quality of the feedback exercise. One student was inconsistent between their verbal and written feedback, which resulted in confusion and frustration for their partner. Another student was hypercritical of their partner, resulting in unhelpful feedback overall. Despite this, most students engaged in kind, thoughtful, and useful feedback. A prime example of this can be seen in Figure 2, in which the student writing feedback lists examples of things they observed their partner do during rehearsal, and stated points of strength and growth. While there was some "I liked" language within it, I can assert that, in this case, it was the student attempting to say that what they were witnessing was working for the scene.

Figure 2

Student Feedback Sheet

Graders Name _____ Name of Graded _____

Grade your Feedback Partner according to our class rubric. Be generous but honest. In the space below, tell me why in as many words as possible

Characterization: Emotional and physical consistency, commitment to choices, and visible objectives/tactics

1 2 3 (4)

The emotional and physical connection was really good and I liked the tone throughout the scene

Vocal Clarity: Projection and Diction allows the audience to verbally understand the performer.

1 2 (3) 4

You spoke very clear and I could understand everything good just maybe next time talked a little louder.

Memorization: The performer's ability to remember all their words in the moment

1 2 (←→) 3 4

I did notice you looked at the script a couple of times but there was also times where you didn't have to look at all

Energy: The performer's energy on stage

1 2 3 (4)

The energy was there and the type of energy really fits the scene

Another vital part of our classroom routines was our beginning question of the day. This is a routine that I learned from my CT. At the beginning of every class period, there is either on a whiteboard or a slide a question of the day. Students are instructed to leave their seats and “go for a walk” around the space. After they mix up a bit, I call for them to hold where they are and to pair up with the person closest to them. They then must take turns introducing themselves with their name and pronouns before answering the question. Oftentimes, to help them get started, I will instruct that the person who is taller, the person with shorter hair, or the person who woke up

first that morning, etc., is the person who will go first. We will then repeat this process a couple of times until students have had conversations about the question of the day with multiple other students. I then call on some students to share their answers with everybody, and I facilitate a brief whole-class discussion. This allows students to learn from one another, practice exchanging ideas, and get to know the people in class. When students participate in this activity, they have the opportunity to predict concepts that will be covered in the class that day and provide me with data on their current understanding of the content.

Using this evidence, I am able to conclude that when students are able to engage socially with their peers, it transforms classwork from something they are stuck at school doing into the chance to interact with their peers. Gamification takes the pressure off of their direct performance and encourages participation based on fun connection. Direct support peer work additionally provides a safety net to fall back on should students feel unsure and allows them to practice collaboration within the artistic medium of theater.

Safe Risk-Taking is Reinforced by Trust

Student rapport is an area I highly prioritize as both a teacher and individual. Strong, positive relationships with students foster trust, and they become willing to try new and bigger things, despite fear of embarrassment or judgment. This theme is tied to both of my research questions and the core value of teaching the whole child. In this section, the subcategories of this theme are: build community-focused expectations and prioritize strong emotional connections.

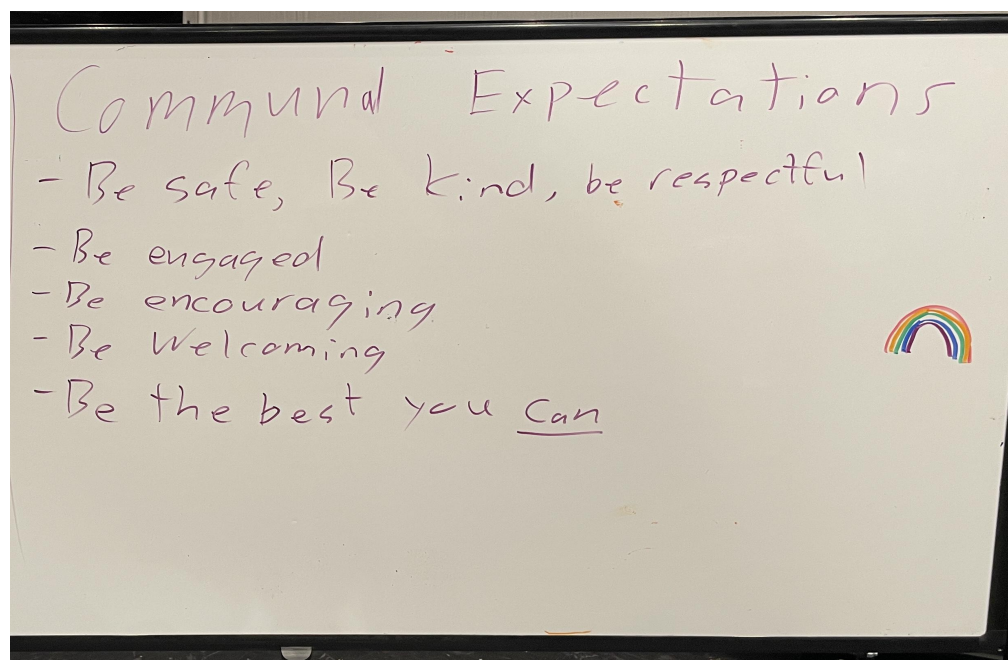
Build Community-Focused Expectations

At the beginning of the semester, I dedicated a class period to a discussion in which all my students decided on our classroom expectations beyond my rules for the space. The purpose of this discussion was to give students a sense of ownership of the classroom that they might not

have had if I had created and enforced my own expectations. They decided that being welcoming and encouraging, among others (see Figure 3), were values of our classroom.

Figure 3

Communal Expectations on Whiteboard



Establishing these rules as a communal activity at the beginning of the semester greatly increased rapport with my students. There was visibly less tension in students after having these conversations, and they displayed higher levels of comfort and began taking larger risks with that safety net in play. This factor ties back into gamification, which, apart from increasing engagement, can also be utilized to set the tone of the classroom. Employing group games as the first activity that students completed established a light-hearted atmosphere where students could laugh, bond, and feel safe being a little silly. This is supported by the level of comfort I observed from the first through the latest unit, as students were willing to engage with content that would be potentially embarrassing in this class, despite how many of them voiced fear of embarrassment at the beginning of the semester in their reflections.

The final aspect of the sub-theme of expectations is the ones set for student performances. The ground rules for student performances included many of the expectations that might immediately come to mind: pay attention, no talking, and no heckling, but I established additional boundaries for applause. Before all class performances, including the summative for this unit and the previous unit, I established ground rules for performance etiquette. It was that they were to treat everyone's performance with the same amount of love and appreciation. The method by which I enforce this is that at the end of every performance, students could not applaud the performance; they snapped instead. The goal of this method was to ensure that students did not compare themselves to each other based on outsourced peer validation. I reason that this method can prevent students from getting into their own heads and playing games of self-comparison. My evidence for this is that students followed these rules with intention. The only times they did not were because of the socialized habit to clap. I did not hear any students compare themselves to other students' performances. In my students' self-reflections, any critiques made were on their own performance and not comparing themselves to other students. From this, I conclude that establishing a community-focused approach to the classroom enables students to participate freely and reduces potential competitive animosity.

Prioritize Strong Emotional Connections

I have found that having open conversations about emotional states and energy levels is a very strong rapport-building strategy. A SEL practice that I incorporate in my classes daily is asking my students to provide me with what I call a thumb-o-meter. This is simply a sliding scale of thumbs up to down, where they communicate to me their emotional state or energy level of the day. This has proven to be a very valuable rapport-building exercise as we get to check in every day before class in a no-strings-attached kind of way. If students wish to volunteer explanations for their energy level, I happily listen, but if not, then I do not pry, and we move on.

With this information, I am able to adjust my energy output so that it is at a level that will be most beneficial to my students. This has resulted in students trusting me with their emotions and emotional safety. My advisor also noted this and validated it as a visibly effective and positive practice in her observation reports.

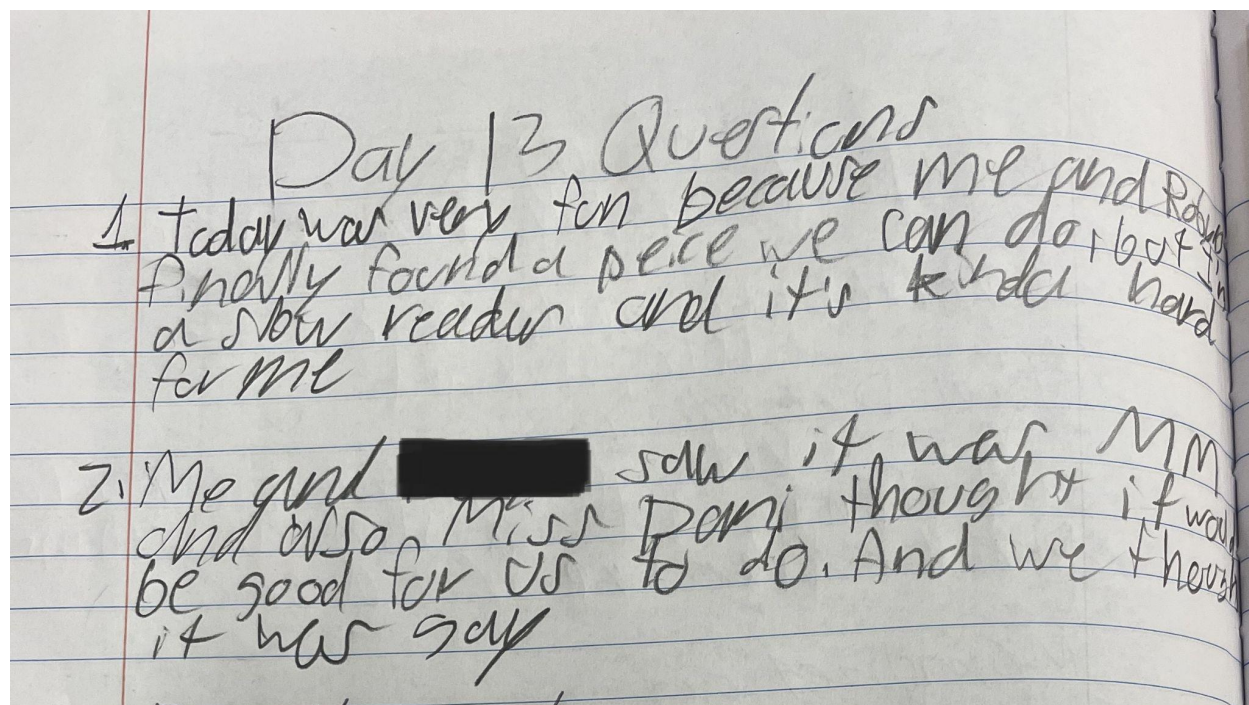
When I validate students' feelings, it makes them feel seen and respected. In turn, when I share how I'm doing that day (even if it is just a small glimpse into my personal life), it allows students to feel like they have a connection with me and gives them something to humanize me with. Especially on days when my personal energy is low, my students appreciate my honesty, which also communicates that I trust and respect them. I have found that this mutual respect and validation of emotional states, whatever they may be, has been vital for my classroom environment. An example of this was when I had conversations with students who had chronic absence. I verbally encouraged them to come to class. I said that it would make me really happy if they were here and that I believed they would have a good time if they gave it a chance, despite their visible anxiety about the class content. With that positive affirmation and gentle push, the student began attending more frequently and visibly had fun participating in my gamified activities.

I have two examples of this. One is a previously mentioned situation where a student approached me while selecting our vocal pieces and told me that she felt very nervous and that she wasn't brave enough to perform by herself but still wanted a partner, so I helped her by assigning her a TA to be her scene partner. This story is factored as a secondary data point because she trusted me with her nervousness, both to validate it and to do something about it. The other is during the same class period, when a pair of students was searching through the physical script copies. I took note of the piece that they were currently looking at. I remarked that that piece had made me think of them earlier when I was organizing the scripts, and that I

believed they would do it very well. A student that day wrote in their notebook that my suggestion was a factor in their selection of that piece (Figure 4), as well as the piece connecting to their lived experience.

Figure 4

Student Written Reflection 2



By developing strong positive relationships, students can enjoy the class content more, as intentional relationship building decreases anxiety and increases engagement and participation. Mutual trust makes risk-taking feel safer. I ensured that I developed strong personal connections with each student and created opportunities for students to develop positive relationships with each other.

Self-Reflection Makes it Their Own

Consistent self-reflection is both a data point and a valuable method that I will be continuing to use in teaching for years to come. Reading students' self-reflections provides me insight into their understanding of the content, their emotional well-being, and a way to closely

track their progress through the semester. This is additionally supported by my advisor's encouragement and my own results from implementing student-written reflection. This theme ties into my research question of intrinsic motivation and the core value of self-assessment and personal responsibility.

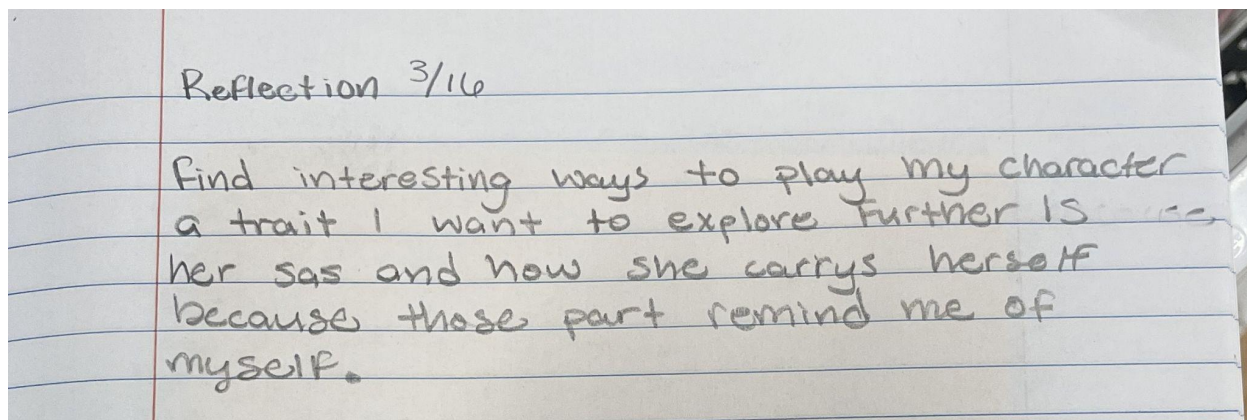
The method I used is a modification of a technique used by my clinical teacher. Each student has an assigned notebook that remains in the classroom at all times. Students pick it up at the beginning of class and drop it back off at the end of class. In that notebook, students are free to add whatever they would like, whether it's doodles, their personal notes, or questions they have for me. It also serves as a central location for all graphic organizers. At the end of every class period, students are instructed to leave one note of something interesting from the day and then answer one to three additional reflection questions based on the content of that day. It is a more formative assessment-based approach to Carl Rogers' (1969) concept of student self-evaluation. Rogers argued that students would engage in critical thinking by assessing their own work, and that it would give them a sense of personal responsibility and increase their intrinsic motivation in response.

At the beginning of the semester, I asked students to write in their notebooks: how nervous they were, and something they hoped to gain by taking the class. Over half of the students voiced that they were very nervous about being embarrassed and would like to grow in self-confidence. With this information, I was able to inform all of them that they had so much in common with one another when discussing communal expectations. I informed them that so many of them wished to become more confident, that they were not alone in being nervous, and that they could support each other on this journey. I told them of this without singling out anyone and spoke to the group generally.

When I require that students write down complete thoughts, it ensures that they come to direct conclusions. For example, when I require my students to write how they feel about a rubric that they created, it serves as part one of a check-in on their confidence and emotional well-being. It also requires them to record a concrete opinion that they have to think through in order to give. During the rehearsal process for their vocal pieces, I gave them the reflection questions: What trait about your character do you want to explore further, and what similarities can you find between you and your character? This reflection exercise required them to emotionally engage with the character that they were performing and personalize the character to themselves (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Student Written Reflection 3



This method provided me with data points to assess my students' levels of intrinsic motivation and personal responsibility, while doubling as a form of self-assessment. I consistently asked my students how they felt about what I, as a teacher, was doing or how they, as students, were performing. I received data points about my students' interests and made informed changes to my methods from this data throughout the semester.

Chapter 5. Discussion

This research has illuminated the applicability of HLT to how I structure my teaching style and to my personal core values as an educator. In this final chapter, I will discuss the implications of each of my themes and my answers to my research questions. I will go on to explain the limitations of my research and my closing statements.

Incorporating student choice benefits both my students and me as a teacher. Students can stake a claim on the work they do, which supports personal responsibility, increases intrinsic motivation, and lets them choose modes that play to their learning styles. I get the benefit of flexibility, as I do not have to preemptively create a concrete plan and can instead consistently build upon my students to cater to what they need from me at any moment. This increases our sense of community in the classroom. It allows students to pursue their interests and gives me opportunities to model research and thought processes for every student who approaches the process differently. Student choice creates differentiation by default, as opposed to seeking out means of differentiation while creating a plan. My students prioritized group work and communication during their learning, as communal growth allowed them all to feel more comfortable. My students have grown in their inner confidence, and it is evident in the boldness of their choices. They understand that they have a direct say in the creation of their work as actors and as individuals.

The connections I made with my students and that my students made with each other deeply contributed to the effectiveness of my classroom space. I attribute much of my success to the way I established expectations at the beginning of the semester. By opening the expectations up to have student input, I communicated to them that I valued their opinion and that I wanted to invite them into the space to make it their own. I prioritized tone setting in the first week of class

through community building. I have found this method to be so effective that it will be the approach I take with me into my future classrooms.

SEL practices are a current requirement for all classrooms, but teaching the whole child blends academic and SEL teaching together to create a more holistic approach to education. The theatre classroom advantageously lends itself to this situation. To teach acting directly involves teaching SEL skills such as empathy, compassion, and perspective-taking. In order to portray a character, students need to be able to articulate how that character feels and responds to the situations that they are in. Students must also learn communication skills in terms of tone, body language, and subtextual social cues. This makes implementing the core values of HLT a simpler task than in other subjects.

Self-reflection served me and my students in positive ways. Specifically, using the method of in-classroom notebooks that remain in class prevents them from getting lost and allows me to reference them when I need to. It allowed me to check in with them in a way that was personal and make adjustments outside of just the moment in the classroom. I value self-reflection as a means of communication and as a means of record-keeping. I have had the chance to reference their reflections they did previously in the semester, and ask them to provide me with a new answer based on what they have learned. I have found that requiring my students to reflect on the actions that they can take spurs them to take personal responsibility over their work.

Limitations

The limitations of my research involve the brevity of scope and sample size. This research was conducted in a class of 16 students for two weeks and a total of six class periods. The results of this may vary greatly for classes of larger enrollment or longer timeframes. The

implications of having a small class size, I had a great opportunity to engage on a personal level with all of my students. This privilege may not be possible in a class size of 25 or more. A two-week research period is a confining scope that does not allow me to consider variation in student behavior based on time of year or the prolonged effects of these methods.

This research was conducted within a theatre arts classroom, which, as an elective, has a higher chance of students entering the classroom with previously inspired intrinsic motivation. While there are some students who are enrolled in the class who do not wish to take the course, most students arrive with at least a mild interest in the subject, if not a strong one. This could potentially have led to misrepresented results.

Many of the students within the class also had prior relationships with one another from other activities, such as choir and band. The pre-established trust of these students may have directly impacted their comfort level in participating. Much like the previous limitation, my results could be misrepresented such that the high level of student comfort comes from their relationship with each other and not from rapport building on my part.

By utilizing student self-reflection as both a data source and a student learning requirement, students may have at any point written responses that were what they believed I would like to hear, not a reflection of their own thoughts. This could imply faulty data that does not represent the genuine experience of my students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I began my research into the applicability of HLT by conducting a two-week intensive qualitative study on the outcome of my teaching towards my students. I gathered data points from student-written reflections, summative results, growth in student confidence, and high student engagement. I have concluded that I was successful because

I engaged with my students emotionally and encouraged their growth as whole people by connecting with them about what they wanted. I helped them become more confident by scaffolding confidence-building. I pulled from Rogers (1969) and gave them academic choice and unconditional positive regard. I highlighted the effectiveness of HLT in the emotional content area of theater. I focused my research on the relationship aspect and the pre-summative engagement with my students versus the product they created from my summative. I gave personal anecdotes, which many of the previous research studies I reviewed failed to incorporate. My students have grown as people as well as performers. My methods of creating a strong connection with students and allowing them academic autonomy in criteria and content material yielded the results of a direct increase in student intrinsic motivation.

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