

Supporting Students in Rural Regions in the Age of Distance Learning

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EMPOWERED PLAYERS

ABSTRACT

As theatre educators shift to embracing virtual and distance learning strategies, it is important to recognize that not all online spaces are created equal when it comes to ensuring positive outcomes for students. For communities in rural areas, virtual learning might be difficult or practically inaccessible, due to lack of reliable internet or inability to facilitate remote work. Furthermore, virtual spaces may prove to be challenging in the replication of ensemble-oriented work that fosters students' social skills and self-concept. This lack of access and support creates inequitable outcomes for students in rural Fluvanna County, Virginia. Reflecting upon Fluvanna's arts education nonprofit Empowered Players (EP), this article addresses the significant challenges that arts educators in rural areas may face in implementing distance learning. The article highlights important considerations for teaching artists striving to replicate emotionally-supportive environments, and for those working to eliminate barriers to entry into the virtual space. Using my experiences with EP as a case

study, the article seeks to provide possible answers and innovations for teachers searching for equitable and sustainable models for distance-learning / socially-distant theater education.

INTRODUCTION

For Empowered Players, an organization located in rural Virginia, the COVID-19 Stay-at-Home orders and unplanned shifts to virtual learning led to important considerations on how to meet social distancing guidelines, foster safe environments for students, and preserve high-quality arts experiences. As these adaptations were made, significant changes to organizational structure and classroom engagements also presented challenges for students for whom distance learning is either a) not possible or b) does not provide the same level of engagement needed for positive development.

Primarily, for an organization that serves nearly one hundred students of a variety of backgrounds and needs each semester, safety concerns necessitate a move to a distance learning model, but this model must be innovative, engaging, and equitable. Additionally, in rural communities like Fluvanna, one-size-fits-all virtual learning opportunities do not exist, as students have varying levels of access to internet, transportation, and extra-curricular opportunities. Thus, many factors and elements must be considered in order to provide the best experiences to students as possible.

I serve as the Founder, Artistic Director, and chief educator for Empowered Players. For the past six years, I have studied theater education and nonprofit management—examining the impacts of arts in education, youth development, and social justice. I have grown up in the Fluvanna area and continued to teach with EP throughout college and graduate school, now returning to the area as a teaching artist and educator. Using my experiences with Empowered Players as a launchpad for further dialogue, I hope to share my reflections on engagement and emotional support of students.

RURAL AREAS & ARTS

When examining the difference in arts access in rural areas as

compared to more urban cities, the greatest presumed barriers are often geographic location and cost. In a recent survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (2017), roughly 40% of rural arts organizations consider the lack of available broadband internet an obstacle in competing with other arts organizations, compared to just 14% of urban-based companies. Comparatively speaking, urban areas are more likely to have access to home broadband than rural areas (Perrin, 2019). The NEA (2017) also found that 32% of rural arts organizations consider local roads and transportation a barrier to competing, whereas only 10% of urban organizations feel transportation is an obstacle. While rural areas may offer quiet neighborhoods and a slower pace of life, the limited access to internet, cultural hubs, and artistic experiences proves challenging.

In Fluvanna specifically, there is limited industry and a scarcity of available jobs located in the community. As such, residents have an average commute time of 31 minutes (Data USA: Fluvanna County, Virginia). Given this reality, a large number of students' parents commute, and thus may be unable to drive from Fluvanna to other localities after returning home from work. Average per capita income in the county is around \$39,000, thus presenting a hurdle in affording access to paid extracurricular experiences (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts). Demographically, the county is roughly 80% White, 15% Black, and 5% Other (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts).

With regards to internet access, a report by the Center for Innovative Technology (2017) found that roughly 15% of Fluvanna has no access to the internet. 22% of those with internet access depend on inadequate and/or expensive services, and 61% share that their access does not adequately meet their needs (Center for Innovative Technology, 2017).

In terms of the arts, the local school system only offers theater education at the high school level, limiting the opportunities students have to remain engaged. In Fluvanna, the nearest opportunities for extra-curricular theater education are at least thirty minutes away, where costs of even one-week camps can be exponentially high and sometimes upwards of \$1,000. Thus, even if students and families are able to make the sacrifice to engage in those experiences, sustaining such involvement may prove challenging in the long-term. With the increased commuter time and limited in-county after-school experiences, students are relegated to in-school experiences and other

affordable options for involvement. Therefore, the need for broader community engagement, connection with students, and opportunities for achievement and growth becomes even more paramount.

BENEFITS OF ARTS EDUCATION IN THE COVID-19 AGE

Addressing inequities in access to arts education is key, as numerous studies show that the arts improve the academic, social, and emotional experiences of students. To begin, Catterall (2002) found that for 8th graders who engage with the arts at a high level, they were four times less likely to drop out of school than those who engage at a low level. Things such as test scores and community engagement levels, as well as grades overall, are higher for students who engage with the arts (Ruppert, 2006)—and even so, these measurements highlight only narrow aspects of achievement in non-artistic realms. Additionally, Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga (2000) find that “sustained student involvement in theatre arts (acting in plays and musicals, participating in drama clubs, and taking acting lessons) associates with a variety of developments for youth: gains in reading proficiency, gains in self-concept and motivation, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others” (p. 2). These findings serve as a reminder of the importance of arts education, particularly during unprecedented times when students face increased isolation from peers and new academic challenges.

In today’s day and age, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit southern rural areas hardest, with limited resources available to support individuals in these areas (Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin, 2020). One source (Leatherby, 2020) indicated that as of October 2020, rural areas accounted for the worst COVID outbreaks in the U.S. More specifically to Fluvanna, the county faced at least two significant outbreaks of the coronavirus (Virginia Department of Health, 2020), and cases continue to rise (USA Facts, 2020). Thus, for students who are already facing educational, economic, and health disparities, access to the arts and a community that values them and their development is not only a desire, it is essential. For programs like Empowered Players, Fluvanna’s only extra-curricular theater organization, determining how to provide a safe haven and place to continue growing as artists and individuals is imperative.

OVERVIEW OF EMPOWERED PLAYERS

Empowered Players is a 501(c)3 nonprofit 501(c)(3) designed to impact the community by increasing access to the arts. The organization promotes youth empowerment, is dedicated to community service, and believes the arts have the power to unite. The mission of Empowered Players is “to uplift the human spirit through access to quality arts experiences, youth empowerment, and community service” (ABOUT | Empowered Players).

EP’s goal is to expand access to the arts to bring the associated benefits of academic and personal development to underserved individuals and communities. While creating high-quality artistic content is a goal of the program, the main focus of EP’s work is to facilitate and promote Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD as defined by Benson et al. (2007), primarily involves fostering “youth access to positive experiences, resources and opportunities, and of developmental outcomes useful to both self and society” (p. 895). Thus, our arts camps, classes, performances, and volunteer activities seek to enhance self-concept, increase confidence, and inspire community engagement. This work collectively aims to foster positive developmental outcomes for youth in rural areas, continuing to close gaps in access and enhance more than sheer acting skills.

Now entering its fifth year of operation, EP offers seven programs each semester and during the summer. Around one hundred students participate in a variety of arts offerings including community classes, performance troupes, arts enrichment activities, and mentorship programs. Students’ demographics reflect that of the larger county, with roughly 80% of participants identifying as White, 15% as Black, and 5% as Other. While we do not ask for students’ economic status, I conjecture that the demographics of EP participants reflect the county’s economic statistics.

Derived from the understanding that the arts impact students in a myriad of ways and inspired by a desire to encourage community engagement among students, EP’s work revolves around the importance of bringing the transformative power of the arts to individual students and to the greater community (Ruppert, 2006). By viewing the arts as a vehicle for community connection and increased student outcomes, Empowered Players begins the important work of increasing student and community connection, and bridging the divide between these two groups.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREATING IN-PERSON THEATRICAL SPACES

Given the aforementioned challenges students face in Fluvanna county, providing safe, positive spaces for learning and growing is a hallmark of Empowered Players. All of EP's in-person programs focus on the following aspects:

- a) Beginning each rehearsal with a check-in to promote a sense of community and connection;
- b) Emphasizing the value of process as being equal to, if not more important than, the value of the product;
- c) Each rehearsal, notes for student performers are rooted in positivity and constructive feedback – giving students the chance to take ownership of their performance;
- d) Each student is expected to facilitate a positive classroom environment through their words and actions—remaining engaged participants and uplifting one another.

Conceptually, the rationale behind the rehearsal structure ties back to the PYD approach. Program goals focus on making each student feel welcomed in the space, encouraging them to make strong connections with each other in the rehearsal, and helping students understand they have a community that accepts and supports them. EP seeks to use a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit-based model (Lopez & Louis, 2009) to help foster positive student connections. Inviting students to share their strengths and abilities promotes a positive culture in which students feel valued and from which deeper connections can form. Further, theater programs like EP utilize role theory, or the phenomenon where students can use acting out roles and parts as a way to practice social interaction, enhancing relatedness more concretely (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). This type of creative exploration helps our students develop empathy and grow in interpersonal skills and fosters positive, safe, and collaborative working spaces.

Since our programs value the importance of creating, we focus on providing what Mary Ann Hunter (2008) describes as a multidimensional safe space. These are understood as environments where students feel emotionally supported and free to explore and take

creative risks, all of which are tasks essential to emotional development and growth. We ascribe to the ideology that instead of simply being safe spaces, our environments must be intentional in fostering students' creative exploration, collaboration, and team-building in ways that enhance student experiences. As Hunter (2008) notes and I agree, these spaces provide a physical safe haven for students in arts education, but can also increase connection, push boundaries, and grant students the freedom to explore and take risks.

CHALLENGES TO DISTANCE LEARNING

As we made the shift to virtual learning, EP immediately recognized there would be challenges faced by both directors and students in the virtual world. While these obstacles are in no way unique to rural areas, many problems are exacerbated by the county's geographic position and limited economic and technological resources. As this adjustment to virtual learning was made, we explored various program options for the different ages and grades we serve. For our high-school acting troupe (9th-12th Grade) comprised of sixteen students, we selected a show specifically designed to be performed on Zoom for free to a larger audience. Rehearsals were two hours each and held on Zoom periodically, consisting of character work, 'staging,' and cast-bonding opportunities. While directors strived to eliminate as many limitations as possible, the difficulties of the rehearsal process and performance persisted.

The first barrier encountered was lack of internet access. As we cast the show and began rehearsals, a student needed to drop out of the production entirely, as their internet access proved unreliable and they did not have the capability of attending a virtual rehearsal. Even for those who were able to attend virtual rehearsals, given the lack of broadband and students' unstable internet connections, over half of our students were often kicked offline, experienced garbled audio/visual, or frequently had to reboot their computers. Wanting to provide as seamless an experience as possible, we were faced with the question of whether or not we should look into investing in individual hotspots or other technical supports for our students. Yet as an organization with limited financial support, we faced the challenging decision of which supports we could provide and how we could continue to offer high-quality instruction given limitations.

A second and crucial barrier to our students' learning was the inability to physically and emotionally separate home life and theater life. Five out of sixteen students in our troupe listed this as a concern in their engagement. Studies have shown that after-school spaces allow for students to enhance their creativity in a space separate from a school context, and allow for strengthened relationships and self-expression (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Thus, students need interactions that are not just within their school context or one specific setting – and after-school programs provide one such outlet.

This understanding leads to the question: what happens when these settings collide, or even clash? While working on a production during stay-at-home orders, a student voiced that she had difficulty turning home off since there was no actual theater or rehearsal space in which she could feel separated from the daily engagements of home. Our student's experience further demonstrates the importance of having a supportive in-person creative space that is not connected to the student's home life or living situation. Students in our out-of-school programs are able to separate school, home, and workplace environments during our time together. Yet, given distance learning, all of these environments become inseparable.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS UNABLE TO FULLY SHIFT ONLINE

As distance learning continues to be a requirement for safety, providing equitable opportunities for students becomes paramount. Thus, three important considerations emerge:

- 1) How can theater programs offer offline and online versions that are similar, if not essentially equivalent?
- 2) Given potential internet challenges, what are solutions to bridge the gap between those who have access and those who do not?
- 3) In what ways can online programs provide a safe haven for students to create and grow together?

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

While we cannot wholly solve internet disparities or fully remove students from their home environments for our classes, there are a few structures and exercises we identified to help eliminate disparities. These solutions are particularly salient for programs in rural areas, and/or programs that focus on socioemotional development and process-making in their educational offerings.

Technological Supports

As has been established throughout this article, students experience incredible inequities in internet access and reliability. If the primary mode of educational offerings is through synchronous Zoom sessions or other virtual meetings, then as many students as possible must be granted access to connect in this way. We found that if students' rooms were positioned far away from their router or modem, their connection would frequently cut out. Thus, explaining this solution to parents, particularly those who may be able to offer students spaces closer to the router, is important. Additionally, a low-cost solution to internet issues may also include providing students with an Ethernet cable to connect their computers directly to routers – enhancing their signal and reducing the likelihood of stressful disconnections. These solutions enhanced the internet connection for three of our students in the troupe, and led to increased engagement.

While certainly more expensive, there are also mobile hotspots that can be purchased to provide students with access to the internet without having an internet service provider (Price, 2020). Given the expense of these devices (oftentimes ~\$200+), we were unable to provide these resources to students in the high school troupe's performance in that we had not set aside resources in our budget for such purchases. However, heading into the following semester, we set aside roughly \$2,000 in our budget to provide such technological supports. Currently, we are working with three families to determine how to best provide technological support given internet limitations, and will be most certainly be utilizing the hotspot option.

Moreover, given that Zoom takes up significant internet bandwidth that students may not be able to sustain, EP provided virtual opportunities that were asynchronous. These experiences included pre-recorded classes and 'Create-a-Day Challenges.' Challenges

always included three steps: an explanation of an activity like an improv game or craft exercise; a follow-up step encouraging students to try it and add in their own creative modifications and variations; and concrete ways for students to share their work and connect with each other or family and friends remotely. Periodically, challenges were emailed to participants and posted on our website and social media platforms. While still requiring some internet connection, these opportunities are more easily accessible and can keep students of all ages engaged. We had roughly thirty students engage in our asynchronous activities, and this does not account for those who engaged with the content through our social media platform.

Analog Alternatives

Many times, students may not have any access to the internet, or are unable to connect virtually. These instances are harder to navigate as solutions do not seem as readily available. In these moments, we have considered a few alternatives. First, we suggest that postal mailing of resources like worksheets, challenges, materials, and plays may prove beneficial. While these options do not offer students person-to-person connection, they do allow for creative expression and encourage engagement. Along these lines, we have mailed and personally delivered hard-copy scripts to all our elementary school students along with personal notes that encourage them and remind them of the EP community.

Additionally, socially-distanced outdoor rehearsals and performances with masked audience members and participants may prove acceptable. Recently, the NEA (2020) published a guide for arts organizations looking to reopen that offers many suggestions for how to safely engage with audiences and students in the socially-distant world. For Empowered Players, our primary location is a small performing arts center in the county with limited outdoor space around it. Thus, in-person experiences prove to be more challenging. As we continue navigating the COVID-19 era, we are thinking creatively about partnering with organizations like Parks and Recreation and other local groups to provide safe, in-person opportunities.

Another option includes sending students flash drives with videos and resources on them that do not require internet connection to download. Pre-recorded plays are also an alternative, with students

recording themselves reading lines from a performance that can be compiled into a larger piece. This can apply to acting and singing performances, as well. For instance, during a virtual summer camp and given students' technical challenges, students were asked to record themselves singing before the final showcase performance to ensure student performances could still be saved should they be dropped due to lost internet connection. These strategies can help ensure that no student misses out on opportunities due to an inability to maintain strong internet connection.

Encouraging Student Autonomy

We strive to encourage students' ability to have autonomy and control over their engagement. As such, we offer a Teen Arts Board (TAB) for our older high school students who help shape the arts landscape of Fluvanna. This board of six students plans events, opportunities, and experiences for both Empowered Players and the county more broadly. Since the pandemic, the TAB has been focused on proposing creative solutions to the shift to remote learning and social distancing. They implemented a “#VocalLocal Artist Spotlight” series, where they interview local artists and discuss their work to feature on social media. They created a Virtual Halloween Costume Contest for students & families to submit photos of their costumes, and to connect with each other in a community-wide livestreamed event. Additionally, they're focusing on in-person events that can be done safely, such as drive-in movies and outdoor concerts. By allowing them to devise these plans and ideas themselves, while also providing them with institutional support, we are encouraging their creativity and sense of autonomy—sparking their motivation and ability to feel connected (Deci & Ryan, 2000). We are also expanding our concept of what might be possible, and gaining a sense of what students need during this time.

FACILITATING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCING SOFT SKILLS

In understanding ways to facilitate positive environments and promote the development of soft skills in the classroom, key differences in online versus in-person learning impact student engagement. These obstacles include: lag-time and students speaking over each other or

being unable to hear or see; difficulty enforcing that students are paying attention and not engaging in other virtual activities; inability to read body language and lack of connection through sharing physical proximity; and decreased trust due to lack of shared space.

However, as social connectivity is key with Empowered Players programming, our virtual programs have tried to replicate our in-person model utilizing strengths-based approaches and social support. Every session begins with a ‘check-in’ with students and teachers to ensure that we are all trusting each other and recognizing our needs. These check-ins encourage students to share what their day has been like and may consist of: “Rose, Bud, Thorn” (something good, something blooming, and something not-so-great) or “Physically, Mentally, Spiritually” (being broadly defined as how connected you feel) discussions. Regardless of the specificity of the question, these check-ins help establish what students are carrying, and let students understand that all in the room are invested in their well-being. After checking in, we engage in an ensemble-based activity, challenging students to build connections and relationships. When this warm-up is complete, we then explain the goal of the lesson or rehearsal, allowing time for questions and reflections.

In terms of material, our content has shifted with the move to virtual learning. Current content includes more reflective, more expressive, and more question/answer-based activities. We strive to find ways to incorporate students’ feelings into their work. This focus is accomplished through playwriting, improvisation, character development, and other similar activities. By allowing room for students to express new burdens, thoughts, or challenges they face, we are giving them a creative outlet through which they can channel these new experiences in healthy and productive ways.

At the end of each rehearsal, we conclude by asking students what concepts they have learned, main takeaways they have gained, and one thing they enjoyed about the session. By wrapping up with a focus on what the students enjoyed and what they felt they accomplished together, we are asking them to connect with each other, and also to focus on what they did well and where they felt strong, encouraging them to identify as problem-solvers.

Rather than focusing, as we might have in an in-person rehearsal, on more product-oriented goals (specific acting notes, staging, technical elements, set changes, etc.), our shift to distance-learning

has enabled us to emphasize process-oriented goals more heavily. We allow more time for students to connect with each other in the rehearsal room, more time for character reflection and student creativity than blocking, and more classes geared towards self-expression and collaboration than those focused more strictly on performance preparation. These changes have led to students feeling more engaged, expressing heightened interest in remaining in our programs, and sensing increased self-concept.

CONCLUSION

While there are many positives to distance-learning, there are certainly a number of potential challenges theater educators--particularly in rural areas--face during this time. From lack of consistent access to the internet to difficulty maintaining a positive classroom culture, these hurdles should not be overlooked. Rather, by utilizing creative and supportive strategies to maintain strong engagement with students, arts educators will be able to provide for as equitable an experience as possible. The COVID-19 era is certainly daunting, difficult, and serious. However, this should not deter theater educators from brainstorming creative solutions to offering theater education in virtual spaces. By utilizing a creative framework and committing to fostering a collaborative and expressive space, teachers will be in a prime position to help students succeed and thrive, both on- and off-line.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Harris, J. (2020). Supporting students in rural regions in the age of distance learning. *ArtsPraxis*, 7 (2a), 13-27.

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