

Teaching the Anxious Actor

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the challenges of teaching theatre to students with anxiety. It includes specific situations educators have faced, patterns of gaps in training or knowledge, and methods with which educators have handled these situations. The data for this article came from an extensive literature review as well as a qualitative research study wherein 11 educators of differing grade range and location were asked about their personal experiences as professional theatre educators. Subjects were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. School, city, and state names were omitted when possible. The data was coded and analyzed, with special note given to patterns in educator experience. The research revealed an almost unanimous gap in training, a wide variety of issues, and some repeated failures in communication between administration and educator. It also revealed a growing pool of practical advice from outside the typical education system. While the challenges explored are told from the educator's perspective, they all originate with student needs and issues. In helping

educators prepare for these challenges, one also helps the students who are suffering.

It is not an exaggeration to say that student anxiety is worse than it's ever been. In fact, a 2017 study found that "five to eight times as many young people today have scores above the cutoff for a likely diagnosis of a clinically significant anxiety [disorder]... than was the case half a century ago" (Parasole, 2017). This statistic was pre-COVID, the problem has only worsened since then (Conceicao et al., 2021). Children as young as three are experiencing anxiety issues, and the prevalence increases with each progressive age group (Perou et al., 2013; American College Health Association, 2015; Merikangas et al., 2010); its presence in the classroom is almost unavoidable. Recognizing that it had been a gap in my own training, I spoke with other theatre educators about their training experiences for teaching students with anxiety and mental illness. Shockingly, 10 of the 11 educators interviewed had received *no* training whatsoever on these topics. One subject who completed a "traditional" education degree received *some* mental health training (though not enough in their opinion), the other 10 theatre-specific educators received none, across the board. Why is this such a glaring oversight? Student anxiety has become more widespread, so why hasn't educator training been updated to fit this "new normal?" Are theatre educators dealing with these issues regularly? How are they handling situations that arise? What resources do they utilize? What problems or challenges are being faced by more than one? Answering these questions could improve my own ability to teach anxious actors, and even help other theatre educators to do the same. This was the focus for this research.

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

This literature review is in two parts: problems and solutions. The "problems" section identifies anxiety, theatre-specific stressors, and challenges related to teaching students with anxiety disorders. The "solutions" section includes a handful of resources that in some way address the problems covered in section one.

In order to have a conversation about anxiety, it's important to first establish a working definition as to what anxiety really is. The clinical definition of anxiety is found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* put out by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). This book provides the basis for mental health practices, insurance reimbursement, drug prescription, public health statistics, government policy, and legal liability for anxiety in the U.S. (Horwitz, 2013). The simple definition for the term 'anxiety' (as listed in the *DSM*) is "anticipation of future threat" (APA, 2015). The *DSM* characterizes Generalized Anxiety Disorder as "a pattern of frequent, persistent excessive anxiety and worry that is out of proportion to the impact of the event or circumstance that is the focus of the worry" and to be considered a disorder, the pattern of worry occurs "more days than not for at least six months." This is just one of the defined anxiety disorders, the others being separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and substance/medication-induced anxiety disorder (APA, 2015).

Panic attacks occur when anxiety is heightened to the point of having physiological responses (panic attacks being separate from panic disorder, which is a pattern of panic attacks unrelated to outside stimulus). The panic attack itself is identified by the occurrence of at least four of the following symptoms: palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate; sweating; trembling or shaking; shortness of breath; feelings of choking; chest pain or discomfort; nausea or abdominal distress; feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or faint; chills or heat sensations; numbing or tingling sensations; feelings of unreality or feeling detached from oneself; fear of losing control; fear of dying (APA, 2015). To illustrate how this feels, here is a description of an anxiety attack as experienced by a New York law student:

The first time I was asked to give a presentation in class, I thought I was having a heart attack. I felt as if an iron band had been fastened around my chest and was slowly squeezing the breath out of me. As the band tightened, I became progressively dizzy and found focusing a struggle. My heart rate increased, and as panic and fear set in, my hands began to perspire and my face became flushed. I tried to calm myself, but as my heart refused to slow down, I began to feel even more out of control and self-conscious. Possibly the worst of it though was that when I opened my mouth I found my

vocal cords had been strangled by the iron chest band, and only a shaky whisper emerged. The more I felt like my peers were aware of my anxiety, the more I felt unable to cope. (Brown, 2012)

For a younger perspective, here is the testimonial of a 16 year old's first panic attack:

I was standing in my parent's bedroom, talking to my mother. Suddenly, I felt one of my occasional heart palpitations come on; nothing major, just a sudden awareness of a mildly uncomfortable "flutter." Yet, somehow, this one had caught me off guard. This heart palpitation had startled me enough to get my "fight or flight" response firing on all cylinders. For whatever reason, today my brain decided to tell me, "*something bad is happening to your heart.*" Suddenly, my heart and mind were racing beyond any semblance of control. My breathing soon followed—I felt like a fish out of water, desperately gasping for oxygen yet feeling like somehow there wasn't enough in the room. My nervous system having betrayed me, I quickly walked out of my parents' room and into the living room; perhaps I just needed to move around a bit? Within a few minutes I was lying on the couch, fully convinced that I was going to die. My anxiety had only gotten worse, and at this point *I still had no idea what a panic attack even was*. I was sure that some essential organ in my body must be shutting down for me to be feeling such agony. I begged my parents to call an ambulance for me, because I was *that* sure that I was going to need it. (Ellis, 2021)

There is also currently a "gray area" in anxiety and panic attacks that set in after the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety is stated above as worry that is not proportional to the impact of possible outcomes. Because of this, anxiety about COVID-19 is tricky; if looking at the worst that can happen, loss of life can be seen as proportionate to the worst of anxiety experienced. In 2021, a group from the University of California led by Seth Norrholm noted that the symptoms and criteria of this anxiety most closely matched post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but found that there was a problem in "labeling a significant percentage of the population with PTSD when it is better accounted for as another diagnosis or, even, healthy, appropriately vigilant anxiety or chronic stress." Until the APA identifies specifically what category COVID-19

anxiety falls under, it remains another general source of anxiety of which one must be aware.

One of the issues with handling student anxiety is the diagnosis, or lack thereof. According to a study published in the *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, “anxiety disorders are under-diagnosed, misdiagnosed and inappropriately treated: less than one-in-five patients receive appropriate medications” (Kasper, 2006). This problem is corroborated by Kenneth Merrell (2001) and Rosemarie Parasole (2017). There are quite a few existing resources on handling student anxiety in a core class setting. Unfortunately, core class methods of handling anxiety aren’t all effective in theatre, because of various stressors specific to performing arts. “Stage fright,” while not necessarily a product of (though certainly exacerbated by) anxiety disorders, is an issue incredibly common to theatre spaces with which most educators will have to deal. The first known usage of the term was all the way back in 1876, the current definition being: “nervousness felt at appearing before an audience” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Nicholas Ridout describes the experience as “a bruising physical and psychological encounter with the audience that leads to the actor’s complete failure” (2006).

There are certain situations that can intensify one’s stage fright. One of the most common is simply having lines, which can lead to a fear of forgetting those lines. Carmichael Phillips illustrates this type of experience in an *Acting Magazine* post: “in the heat of the moment, panic can set in, leading to a rush of anxiety and self-doubt. The actor may feel as though they have let down their colleagues and the audience, intensifying their fear and anxiety” (2023). Another situation which can lead to increased stage fright is staged intimacy. In her book *Staging Sex*, Chelsea Pace illustrates why intimacy isn’t like other moments of acting: “actors kiss. Actually kiss. The contact is real. They physically put their bodies on other people’s bodies and share contact that has no obvious separation from reality” (Pace, 2020).

Another common anxiety in performing arts (including music) is audition anxiety. In a post on Arizona University’s *Arizona Arts*, Taylor Maresca describes what it is about the audition process that can stir up a lot of anxiety:

Actors do it every day. They bare their souls at odd hours of the morning and wait to be judged. Judged on the way they talk, the way they sing, the way they look, and nothing more. No one bats an

eye. This is standard. This is how the theatre industry works. It's daunting and nerve-wracking to say the least. (2022)

An offshoot of audition anxiety also exists around the posting of the cast list. After the high stakes of a one or two minute audition, the actor doesn't get to hear the result right away. With nowhere to focus that energy, oftentimes they will hyperfocus on every minute detail of their audition, as they remember it: "I could have said this better, I should have made bigger choices, what if they hated my dress, did I forget to slate, did I say thank you?" (Forman, 2016). After all that waiting comes the moment of truth, which many times will mean disappointment. "The sad reality is that for every happy child, there are probably at least five or six unhappy children when any cast list goes out. This is simply logistics: no version of *The Little Mermaid* is going to cast eight Ariels" (Naftz, 2021). As actors get older they tend to handle disappointment better, but the more aware they are of possible disappointment, the more likely they are to worry while waiting.

Kenneth Merrell's book *Helping Students Overcome Depression and Anxiety* is a robust resource on handling student anxiety in a core class setting. Some of the methods Merrell covers include systematic desensitization, abbreviated relaxation, modeling, self-control training, and self-reflection (2001). While this resource is helpful, it's also over twenty years old. A new edition came out in 2008, but even then, that's still a fifteen year difference.

The long-time consideration of stage fright means many different approaches have been taken to the issue. Lindsay Price—a 25-year theatre education veteran—provided a useful method in her posting, *Helping Students Deal with Stage Fright* (n.d.), but one can wade through a lot of material on the general subject. One must be careful to avoid the studies done between the 1910s and the 1950s as these decades saw the most psychological research into the topic. After outlining issues related to staging intimacy, Chelsea Pace's book *Staging Sex* covers the "old ways" intimacy was directed, why those methods didn't work, and outlines important concepts for creating safe, consensual staged intimacy. In a perfect world, programs would hire a professional Intimacy Director to come in and stage these scenes. Unfortunately, with school budgets being what they are, this is likely not a realistic solution.

Dr. Sharon Davis Gratto conducted a workshop specifically

addressing audition anxiety and gave participants several methods they reportedly found useful in addressing it (Gratto, 1998). One can find many different approaches to posting the cast list after an audition. With over ten years of theatre and English teaching experience, Janine Buesgen related her own method of notifying students in an attempt to minimize emotional reactions and give the students some privacy to celebrate or grieve (2018).

When handling student anxiety in a K-12 setting, the first resources to look at are Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans. IEPs are a product of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2020). Through this process, children with possible learning disabilities are evaluated for eligibility to be qualified as a “child with disability” as defined by IDEA (U.S. Dept of Education, 2020). Within thirty days of the child being found eligible, school staff are required to set up a meeting with the plan participants (educators, parents, student if appropriate) where all the details of the IEP are set. At this point, the school is responsible to ensure that “each of the child's teachers and service providers has access to the IEP and knows his or her specific responsibilities for carrying out the IEP” (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

“504s” refer to a section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which guarantees certain rights to people with disabilities. Under section 504, students with a recorded physical or mental disability attending any school that receives federal funding are guaranteed certain accommodations based on their mental or physical limitations and/or needs (Office for Civil Rights, 2008). Most of the time these accommodations include such things as extended test times, extra breaks, etc. An evaluation similar to the one used for IEPs decides eligibility of students for these accommodations. In both cases, the education institution is responsible for making sure that the IEP or 504 plans/accommodations are being communicated and carried out. Once a student moves into higher education (college) these accommodations are decided and carried out by the institution’s disability services.

Late in this process, Christine Breihan’s work at Loyola Marymount was suggested to me. Breihan’s thesis outlines her experience running an undergraduate production with the intention of creating a “trauma-informed and consent-based approach to directing” (Breihan, 2022). Breihan utilized a number of different workshops and seminars while developing her methods, illustrating the importance of self-education

and training. Two educators from Arizona State University created their own unique strategy by establishing what they referred to as a “Theatre of Radical Compassion (TRC)” which was intended to counteract “hierarchical structures in theatre” and colonized “pedagogical, rehearsal, and performance spaces” (Buttry & Friedgen, 2022). Both of these methods have achieved levels of success, however, it seems unlikely that these kinds of approaches will be included in traditional theatre educator training programs anytime soon (considering most if not all educators report receiving no training on mental illness whatsoever) so the educator must decide for themselves to pursue this extra training, if time and cost allow. This idea of “self-education” is vital to make sure students don’t suffer as a result of insufficient training.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, interviews were conducted with 11 theatre educators who were asked questions about training, challenges, and personal experiences related to student anxiety. The subjects ranged in age from 22 to 45 years old. Six of the subjects were male-identifying, four of the subjects were female-identifying and one subject identified as non-binary. Seven subjects self-identified as having anxiety while four subjects self-identified as not having anxiety. Five subjects taught in Massachusetts, two taught in Washington State, one taught in Minnesota, one in Texas, one in Montana, and one in New Jersey. The collective years of teaching experience for the whole group was 108 years. The breakdown of experience in teaching different grade ranges (most subjects having experience in more than one of the defined ranges) was:

- K-5: 4 educators
- 6-8: 6 educators
- 9-12: 5 educators
- Undergraduate: 4 educators
- Graduate: 2 educators

Each interview subject was assigned a pseudonym and institutional details were omitted (when possible) to protect subject anonymity. The pseudonyms used are: Allan, Andrew, Anna, Beth, Ethan, Hank, Jeremy, Jillian, Ramona, Rick, Selma.

FINDINGS

The most prevalent challenge for handling student anxiety among all the subjects was simply a lack of training: “I haven’t been trained at all” (Jillian), “I’ve actually not really had any training...trial by fire” (Hank), “no specific training” (Anna), “I’ve never—like none of my accommodations classes have ever—that’s never been on a list of things you look at...neither anxiety nor depression” (Ethan), “nothing has been specific, like, ‘here’s what you do with...children with anxiety” (Allan). Of the eleven subjects, only one had received any training on teaching students with anxiety and even then, they felt it was insufficient. There was not a single interview subject who felt adequately prepared for teaching students with anxiety. Even educators with more than 15 years of experience expressed not feeling “particularly equipped” (Selma).

The next big challenge had to do with information sharing. The way in which subjects had been notified about students with diagnosed anxiety disorders fell under two categories; official documentation of which they were notified, or a complete lack of information and notification. Educators in the K-12 grade range mostly were notified of the existence of IEPs and/or 504s, so they knew of learning challenges and in some cases, the strategies being utilized to meet them. However, this was not always the case, as an unfortunate pattern arose. The first instance in which this lack of notification appeared was during Beth’s interview: “I’m not notified as a teaching artist in public schools. That’s information I have to seek out...I don’t have access to anybody’s IEP.” This didn’t seem like it should happen based on information from the U.S. Department of Education, but it’s a situation that arose more than once. “I got... under-the-table information, but I could not...view, like, an IEP” was Allan’s reply when the topic was brought up. It came up again in Ramona’s interview later on: “I am...not allowed to see IEPs...so they say, I don’t know...I am not notified by anyone other than the student, usually.” These three cases all occurred at different elementary schools in Massachusetts. Upon researching laws and regulations regarding IEPs and 504s for that state, the problem seemed to come down to the wording of the regulations. Visiting teaching artists would “have access only to the student record information that is required for them to perform their duties” (Mass. Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018, 2022). There is no information given on *what* is considered need-to-know, or by whom the distinction is made. The challenge this presents

was made clear when Beth illustrated a situation she'd faced where it was revealed to her that a student she'd been struggling to get to participate in scenes or activities was, in fact, selectively mute. This information was in the student's IEP and 504. Imagine putting in the time and effort to set up a learning plan for a student to help them succeed, and then not making it available to visiting teachers. Not only does this hinder the educator's attempt to include and educate everyone, but it puts the student in a position where their needs may not be met or even considered.

There was another issue that covered a wide array of circumstances: triggers, stressors, and unpredictable panic events. None of these specific situations were experienced by more than one educator. The unfortunate nature of triggers is that oftentimes educators don't become aware of them until the triggering event occurs. One instance of this occurred when the cartoon character Peppa Pig was used to encourage a student to participate (Peppa being their favorite cartoon character). Unbeknownst to the educator, Peppa Pig was a trigger for another student in their class.

In another situation, a community college educator had students who came from a high school where they experienced an act of mass violence. This necessitated a level of care surrounding any scenes with violence, especially involving firearms. They also made sure to stay on top of active shooter drills and made sure the affected students were aware ahead of time and given the option to not be present. That same educator was teaching chokes in a stage combat class with a different group when a student had a psychotic break and unlocked repressed memories of past trauma. Another educator talked about an actor informing them at the beginning of rehearsal that they had someone who needed to be allowed into the rehearsal because the actor was currently on suicide watch. Fortunately none of the students mentioned above suffered permanent harm during these situations.

The subjects also had many great pieces of practical advice. "Classroom culture" was mentioned multiple times, Ethan going so far as to say "classroom culture is one of the single greatest things that we can think about." Subjects spoke of creating a supportive environment where there was no stigma around anxiety, and giving students an easy way to remove themselves if they were experiencing panic events. This supportive environment was also utilized in acting exercises to minimize performance anxiety (or stage fright). Jeremy expressed a movement

away from “judging” the acting of students and putting more value on their experiences in the moment:

I've gotten away from constructive feedback. It's mostly “that was wonderful. What are your thoughts?” So, we're not building a culture of me knowing more than anybody; we're not building a culture of being—having correct answers. We're building a culture of “what were your experiences, what data did you get about yourself?”

This is easier done in a college setting than a K-12 environment where technical instruction is vital.

The subjects were split on the best way to handle the posting of the cast list. In the K-8 grade ranges, it was consistent that everyone would be cast in some capacity. From high school and up, it varied. Two subjects preferred personal communication through either email or phone call. Two subjects posted cast lists on Friday afternoon to give people time to process it over the weekend. Selma considered posting to the theatre Facebook page but said that “the stuff that lives on social media seems like it can spiral. It can actually get bigger if other people comment ...and it also never goes away.” Ethan also had a negative experience posting to Facebook, saying his group had “some issues with...toxicity around posting a cast list online and then people like...like texting their friends, texting other people or posting wrong things, it was weird and gross.” This particular piece of theatre culture seems to be gradually transforming, so there's no real iron-set perfect way to do it at this time. Each of the educators interviewed voiced a desire for training in this subject.

CONCLUSION

Selma put it best when she said that a lot of the job had become “attending to the mental health needs of students, and...having to weed through some of that before we're even able to get to the work.” This is not an isolated situation; all theatre educators are being left in charge of student mental health, to some extent. Through this study, the overarching theme was that educators have not been sufficiently trained for issues around student anxiety. The educators who handle it best have had to self-educate at their own cost (of both money and time), or draw on personal experience. This study is the beginning of a larger

conversation that will necessitate further research. Factors that should be addressed in the future include cultural norms related to ethnicity, financial standing of student population, curriculum of master's programs, state and district regulations, and the input of mental health professionals outside of the education sphere. Anxiety disorders are not going to disappear from the classroom, in fact, the evidence suggests their presence will continue to increase (Osorio, 2022). If mental health issues are going to continue to be entrusted to theatre educators, it's time for formal training to be provided.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Logghe, D. L. (2023). Teaching the anxious actor. *ArtsPraxis*, 10 (2), pp. 50-65.

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