

**Putting Students First: Empowering Teenagers Through Student-Run Theatre**  
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Student-run theatre provides opportunities for teenagers to explore their full artistic abilities and use their imagination to collaborate and create at a critical time of adolescent development. The teenage brain experiences major developmental milestones that highly impact decision-making and identity, especially as teens bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood (Armstrong, 2016). This bridge is fragile and easily influenced in both negative and positive ways. However, “at a time when the adolescent’s brain increasingly craves stimulation from peers, education becomes more teacher-centered, offering less small-group interaction and cooperative learning than elementary classrooms” (Armstrong, 2016, p 29-30). *So how can a facilitator promote student-centered learning and theatre without overstepping boundaries?*

As a facilitator or adult advisor of a student-run theatre group, it is important to empower and simultaneously support students in order to enable them to develop their own artistic viewpoints. It’s also critical to actively listen to the adolescent community and encourage students to practice leadership both in the workshop and in their communities. By allowing students to create and/or run their own productions (such as; plays, skits, musicals, one-acts, and series of vignettes), they will develop the skills to help them better understand how to critically engage in theater, while also improving their confidence and ability to communicate and collaborate with their peers. To quote Alliance Theatre’s associate artistic director Christopher Moses (2021), “if you want to make your theatre a place that is relevant to teens, I think the only way to do that is to invite them into the entire process” (Pierce, 2021).

**Give Teenagers Full Artistic Ownership**

Student-run theatre provides an opportunity for students to be involved in many decision-making processes and to have direct say in each artistic aspect comprising a theatrical production. This “result(s) in an interwoven theatre education that enables students to learn broadly and deeply about theatre from multiple perspectives” (Lazarus, 2012, p 224). Student-driven education and artistry give teenagers the chance to dive into the inner-workings of how a theatrical production operates, and to take ownership of the artistic process, including from material selection, to rehearsals, and the final performance. For example, the Portland Center Stage (PCS) sponsors a teen council that “aim(s) to put control in the hands of the students” and focuses on “putting students in the driver’s seat as leaders, making their own artistic choices and deciding what stories to tell and how” (Pierce, 2021). The PCS Teen Council gives teenagers the opportunity to develop artistry beyond performance, and explore the logistical, technical, and design elements that go into a theatrical production (Pierce, 2021). Moreover, throughout a student-centered process like the PCS teen council engages in, “it’s important to keep in mind that the person fulfilling any role—actor, designer, stage manager—knows what he or she is doing. It doesn’t

mean you don't ask questions or offer advice—students are generally eager to learn—but treat them with the professionalism and respect you expect for yourself. More often than not you will be pleasantly surprised by these young people's knowledge and skill" (Madden, 2018). As the adult facilitator, it is important to operate with trust and actively guide only when necessary. Trusting teenagers to rise to the challenge of putting on a production fosters artistic and intellectual growth, and grow from the experience of a collaborative process. While it may be hard for educators to step back from closely managing the production aspect of teen theater, it is important to remember how powerful it is for teens to learn from self-directed theater work.

### **Empowering the Teenage Perspective; Engage in Material That Speaks to Young Adults**

When facilitating student-run theatre it is always important to start with dialogue in order to give teenagers space to empower their perspectives. As the adult facilitator, it is not your job to interject your personal opinions, but rather to help structure time for teens to discuss the pertinent themes, topics, and values they want to explore through theatre. "Those discussions are followed by play-building exercises and feedback sessions, where students work on their feet to explore ideas that resonate with the group" (Halpern, 2017). Helen White (2017), the director of CAT Youth Theatre explains, "the beginning of the process is very much about 'Who is this group now? What kind of theatre are we excited about?'... 'What is it that's going on in the world? What is it that's going on in your lives at the moment that you want to celebrate or critique?' So we look at how we might put that into our theatre" (Halpern, 2017). As the facilitator, it is productive to help structure time for teenagers to reflect on their own lives and translate their life experiences into the dramatic arts.

### **Balance Process and Product**

In most theatrical productions, the final product is often revered as the most important outcome, instead of the rehearsal process. As an adult facilitator, it is important to not get lost in the spectacle of a final performance. Encouraging a process-driven rehearsal mindset is fruitful in a student-run space, where teenagers can fully take ownership of the rehearsal room. Though students may be eager to create a final product that is impressive to an audience, the actual experience of the student-run process provides the most opportunities for teenagers to grow, collaborate as an ensemble, and gain new skills and values at a critical point of cognitive development. At the start of each production process, educator Ashleigh Worley (2017) starts by reminding her students that "they are here to learn and improve" (Worley, 2017). Worley further clarifies, "I make it clear that to me, their experience is so much more important than the outcome of our production" (Worley, 2017).

In student-run theatre, the facilitator should gently remind students to collaborate and focus on the opportunities to grow as artists, independent from the inevitable power hierarchies that come from adult directors. As the facilitator, it is important to also act as a mediator, when needed, to

guide teenagers through the exploration of diverse opinions and to establish agreed-upon artistic goals before starting the production process. More specifically, before embarking in a student-run production, the facilitator should initiate dialogue surrounding a co-constructed community contract/agreement where teenagers can establish guidelines for how they will work together and create a safe and respectful space for everyone involved. Next, following the community contract, the facilitator should encourage the student-run group to identify artistic goals and clarify skills/student roles, in order to create a cohesive ensemble. Finally, it's helpful to keep the contract and other ensemble agreements in the rehearsal space where students can visually refer to them throughout the process. This aligns to develop appropriate practices while teaching theatre through an authentic project-based learning model that ultimately provides students with key communication skills, confidence, and ownership.

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