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Innovative Theater Class Bridges Divide Between Newark and RU-N Students

By Lawrence Lerner

Apr 23, 2018

Professor Ian Watson has long been interested in the transformative power of the arts and, in particular, that of theater. As Chair of Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N)'s Department of Arts, Culture and Media and Coordinator of the Theater Program, he has traveled abroad on research trips, connecting with academics and practitioners in Europe, Africa and other locales to see how they use the arts to build identity and community.

In 2015, inspired by Chancellor Nancy Cantor's vision of publicly engaged humanities, Watson had an idea: to develop a class that puts socioeconomically disadvantaged kids from Newark in class with RU-N students and enables them to nurture common bonds through story telling.

"My thought was, how do we create common ground for these kids to work together?" says Watson. "The common denominator is our personal stories. Whether you're President of the United States or a homeless person, our stories are equally valuable. They're the point at which we're all equal, and sharing them can build community."

The result is a groundbreaking course called the My Story Project, now in its fourth year.

To get the class off the ground, Watson partnered with a local nonprofit called YouthBuild, which helped academically challenged and underemployed young adults develop educational and workforce skills. In 2017, when YouthBuild was shuttered, Watson began recruiting students from Newark's East Side High School.

He also brought in a world-renowned theater activist-educator, Krzysztof Czyżewski, who founded the Borderland Foundation, an international NGO based in Poland that has been using arts-based strategies as a tool for addressing issues of socio-cultural conflict in Europe and elsewhere for more than 25 years.

Watson teaches the first part of the class, using theater techniques to get the kids comfortable, then assigning each a partner with whom they'll share their personal story revolving around three key questions: Who am I? How did I get here? and What do I want to be? Watson talks to the students about narrative and story structure as well, priming them for Czyżewski, who arrives for a four-week stint mid-semester.

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Using methods he's honed with his foundation, Czyżewski then has the students develop their personal stories further, delving deeply into not only happy but also painful issues that invariably surface. The Newark kids often share memories of racism and exclusion, subpar schooling, broken families, homelessness, unemployment and incarceration, while the RU-N students talk about some of those, along with depression, suicidal thoughts, immigration status and family disruption, and work and family pressures.

Each group taps these memories and shares their stories often for the first time, coming away surprised and saddened by what they hear.

They also become empathic and extremely supportive, in part because Czyżewski has them absorb, and then share, not their own, but their partner's, story with the entire class, helping the kids walk in the other person's shoes and connect deeply with the larger group, while also sharing themselves and getting in touch with their own past and present.

"The process takes time, but there is an incredible level of empathy, intimacy and trust by the time we're done," says Czyżewski. "They encourage each other not to hide pain so it doesn't become destructive, and they learn how to be sensitive when someone makes themselves vulnerable through sharing. They are there for each other and, in doing so, build self-respect as they realize their story is valuable and unique."

The final step entails helping the students develop their stories into performative pieces, with personal items used as props. The idea, according to Watson and Czyżewski, is to get the students outside themselves so they learn how to translate their experiences into legible and compelling stories that are accessible to any audience they may encounter.

Throughout the process, Watson and Czyżewski are tapping into the Borderlands concept that forms the centerpiece of their work: how to build bridges across divides of neighborhood, class, race, gender, religion, immigration status, education level, family makeup, and so forth, to create a better world.

“Using theater and the arts to help make a difference in these kids’ lives is immensely rewarding, says Watson. “Our students get a tremendous amount out of the experience, as do the Newark students and kids. And some of those Newark students end up attending a community college or enroll here at RU-N. Everyone’s the richer for it.”

Above Photo: Guest Lecturer Krzysztof Czyżewski (left) and Professor Ian Watson



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