

## BRINGING LANGUAGE TO LIFE

# quest's theatrebridge enhances learning in class

By Tim McCarty and Linda Delk

In math, students and teachers toss tennis balls. In science, students become rain, hail, sleet, and snow. In language arts, students maneuver their bodies into related positions and hold into a frieze they call “tableau.” The students and teachers are part of TheatreBridge, a four-year model demonstration and dissemination program lead by Quest Visual Theatre, a nonprofit company based in Lanham, Maryland. Activities from TheatreBridge feel like play, but whether the students are in math, science, or language arts, the learning from TheatreBridge is deeply serious.

TheatreBridge builds upon the growing body of research that supports integrating arts and learning in the classroom. Catterall, Chapleau, and Iwanaga’s large scale landmark analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey (NELS ‘88) found “positive academic developments for children engaged in the arts.” Further they noted “comparative gains for arts-involved youngsters generally become more pronounced over time” (Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999, p. 2).

Podlozny’s (2000) meta-analysis of research on the use of classroom drama and verbal skills revealed a positive relationship between the use of drama to act out stories and scores on written tests of story comprehension. Podlozny concluded: “[When students] are actively engaging in the texts they are reading, becoming more physically involved in the process of deciphering meaning from texts, ... it appears that this engagement transfers to some degree to general reading ability” (p. 254).

Page’s (2002) study of arts integration, considered an anchor in the research on use of



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*Photos courtesy of Susan Maginnis*



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drama for academic instruction, concluded that “children are more engaged during dramatizations than when just listening,...and [that] several key ingredients of story understanding are better conveyed through drama: main idea, character identification, and character motivation. These are essential elements of comprehension” (Deasy, 2002, p. 34). Dwyer (2011) affirms this, finding: “[Recent studies] have also demonstrated particular benefits from arts integration for economically disadvantaged students and English learners in the form of reading achievement gains—not surprising given the similarities between effective language instruction techniques and visual arts and theatre skills” (p. 19).

### **Principles, Assumptions, and Effective Teaching**

TheatreBridge applies the principles and strategies of visual theatre to classroom instruction. The essential meaning of visual theatre transpires through what theatre lovers refer to as “a visual vernacular,” (i.e., the language

of how we move and what we see). Performers communicate information, relationships, and emotions primarily through movement, such as traditional mime, various forms of dance, puppetry, mask, sign language, gesture, video, or the circus arts. Visual theatre is not necessarily silent. It may contain spoken words, music, or other sounds. Through engagement in visual theatre, students bring their own ideas and interpretations to a text, idea, or theme.

By applying visual theatre modalities and strategies, TheatreBridge supports visually and kinesthetically based instruction that is culturally appropriate for deaf and hard of hearing students. It creates a learning environment that is more fully accessible to deaf students, consequently laying a foundation for success in school. Visual theatre allows students with limited language skills to develop theatre and communication skills without the barrier that language often presents. In non-theatre classrooms, teachers can use visual theatre process—and the visual vernacular:

- To enhance learning readiness
- To visually interpret ideas and themes that the students are studying
- To allow students to bring their own ideas and interpretations to a text, idea, or theme
- To visually interpret written English that the students are studying
- To develop a bridge between visual understanding and comprehension of English text



**Above:** Students participate in TheatreBridge activities.

lifelong learning, and individual well-being summarized research on the benefits of arts education. The paper states that young children who participated in arts-integrated preschool grew more developmentally in multiple domains, including social relations, creativity, movement, language, and literacy, than did children in programs without an arts focus (Hanna, Patterson, Rollins, & Sherman, 2011, p. 8). Unlike text-based theatre where performers work from a given script, visual theatre is collaborative, open-ended, and exploratory. The

### **Expression, Collaboration, Feedback—and Handling Social Relationships**

A recent white paper on framing a national research agenda for the arts,

## Quest and TheatreBridge—A Look at the Program

TheatreBridge’s goals are to strengthen teachers’ standards-based arts instruction, increase opportunities for deaf and hard of hearing students to engage in arts-integrated instruction and other visual theatre activities, and improve the academic skills of students, particularly in literacy.

Two key assumptions underlying TheatreBridge are that standards-based theatre arts instruction engages students more directly in learning theatre process and production skills and that use of visual theatre strategies in instruction enhances literacy learning. TheatreBridge begins with engaging teacher interest in arts-integrated instruction, providing teachers with the professional development and ongoing assistance to effectively integrate visual strategies into their instruction.

TheatreBridge’s Teacher/Artist Institute is a one-week training for teachers, classroom aides, and teaching artists. Participants are provided with training in visual theatre and arts integration. They work in teams to develop mini lesson plans that they teach to their peers at their home institutions. In addition to developing arts-integrated lesson plans based on state standards, TheatreBridge teachers learn to use a rubric to assess, monitor, and target students’ developing theatre skills.

The staff of Quest serves as mentors throughout the school year for participants. Mentors and teachers brainstorm ideas for visual theatre integration strategies. The mentors also serve as a sounding board for the teachers and master teach upon request.

Participants meet every six weeks to review their progress and meet twice a year for half-day trainings in visual theatre. In addition to improving instruction, this process supports the development of classroom-tested, high quality, standards-based lesson plans that are shared with other teachers through Quest’s website.

Elementary students attend a one-week day camp at their school. Each year the camp has a different theme. Last year, students read stories about pirates in a room chock full of pirate sets and props. The students explored vocabulary and narrative, created scenes from a pirate storybook, and produced a pirate-themed movie. The instructors, educators from the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD), Columbia campus, guided the students in creating a “pirate culture,” complete with their own Constitution for governing group behavior and expectations. The teachers engaged students in exercises to learn use of movement and physical expression, focus, group cooperation, characterization, and imagination. These skills were then applied to enacting a story from a book they had read about good and bad pirates. The emphasis was on comprehension of the narrative and using it as the stimulus for creating visual theatre. The instructors also used a story about pirates to work with the students to create a movie using a model pirate ship and small pirate figures. The students used a digital camera to arrange and photograph the tiny pirate figures and model ship, frame by frame in a storyboard,

actor's body becomes the primary means of communication with the audience. In visual theatre, composing a piece starts with a context and the question, "What if...?" Students explore this question using problem solving and creative processes executed through the medium of physical expression. The physical interpretation of a story or text requires students to analyze the printed English, determine its important points, and then through the use of their bodies share their visual interpretation with their peers. This—translation, physical interpretation, performance—requires clarity, precision, commitment, appropriate timing, and focus.

Visual theatre composition also depends on active listening and observing, clear communication, and appropriate responding. Students watching a visual interpretation presented by their classmates must

actively observe and then provide concrete and constructive feedback. Students receiving the feedback may only listen and not comment on their peers' remarks. This process encourages the students to pay careful attention. If the students respond during feedback, they are preparing their defense while the critique is happening and, therefore, they are not fully listening or, if the feedback is through signs or lipreading, they are not fully observing. Remaining attentive during the feedback process helps students accept criticism. After receiving the feedback, the performing students may choose to ignore it or incorporate it into their presentations during their next draft. TheatreBridge views self-evaluation and peer critique as essential to developing the students' collaborative skills. This collaborative approach is also a vital part of the students' overall learning process.

### **Enhancing Understanding— A Strategy of Tableau**

Creating "tableaus," that is having students essentially form positions in which their bodies illustrate an idea or event drawn from a text, is one of the activities that the Maryland School for the Deaf (MSD) teachers and students have effectively incorporated into their classes. Tableaus, emphasizing position, motion, expression, and collaboration have been woven into a myriad of lesson plans in various subjects that form MSD's core curriculum. For example, in a second grade MSD science class, students learn about nature's life cycles and specifically study the life cycle of a frog. Using toys, puppets, and flashcards, the teacher introduces the students to vocabulary, such as *frog*, *tadpole*, and *eggs*. The students and teacher each have an opportunity to manipulate the objects and discuss what

portraying scenes from the story. The week concluded with a showcase in which the students presented their pirate play and showed their completed movie to family and school staff members.

Middle school students attend a two-week residential institute held at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. "All About Me" was last year's institute theme. Students created their own "self" dance based on visual interpretations of things that were important to them. The students presented a showcase performance for their families and other Gallaudet summer program students.

Teachers and administrators repeatedly noted that those students who participated in TheatreBridge's summer programs showed a greater degree of confidence, risk taking, and skill in communication than those students who did not attend the program. They also noted that their students were able to focus more in class.

TheatreBridge extends engagement in theatre arts activities beyond the classroom. Students have increased opportunities to engage in after-school theatre arts and out-of-school family engagements in the arts. Increased engagement, both in and out of school, in arts-related activities has positive effects on students' communication, social interaction, self-confidence, and motivation to learn, contributing to increased academic achievement (Burnaford, Brown, Doherty, & McLaughlin, 2007, p. 102).

TheatreBridge provides funding for in-school and off-site performances and experiences that are culturally appropriate for and accessible to deaf and hard of hearing students and their families. The engagements provide parents with a greater understanding of the connection between visual theatre and their children's academic and social growth. This year and in 2014 Quest will present QuestFest, a two-week international visual theatre festival produced in partnership with Gallaudet University, Joe's Movement Emporium, the Baltimore Theatre Project, and Creative Alliance. QuestFest involves students, teachers, parents, and artists in performances, residencies, and workshops.

TheatreBridge is a partnership between Quest, MSD, and Gallaudet University. The United States Department of Education's Arts in Education program provides most of its funding. In the spring, Thomas Claggett Elementary School, a mainstream program in Prince George's County, Maryland, will join the TheatreBridge team.

If you would like more information about TheatreBridge, contact Quest at [info@quest4arts.org](mailto:info@quest4arts.org). If you would like more information about arts integration and research focusing on arts education, an excellent resource is the website for the Arts Education Partnership ([www.aep-arts.org](http://www.aep-arts.org)). The site includes a number of publications, and most are available in free, downloadable formats.

they know about each vocabulary word. Then the class moves to a different section of the room where the teacher shows a brief animated film of the frog's life cycle. The students discuss the film, and the teacher assists the students in using the vocabulary they have just learned. Finally, the teacher projects a series of pictures depicting the frog's life cycle, and the students create a tableau for each picture.

The teacher takes a photo of each tableau, reflecting the students' interpretation of each picture. The teachers and students will use these photos in a number of ways throughout the unit. Sometimes the teacher projects the picture and the students explain what is happening. Sometimes the teacher and students create sentences to caption their photos. This important process enables the students to develop a deeper understanding of the information about a frog's life cycle because of the active way learning takes place.

Teachers have been pleased with the result. "My students love doing the theatre activities," said MSD elementary school teacher Shannon Negussie. "Linking theatre games to the curriculum helps the students learn and retain information."

"TheatreBridge has given me a renewed enthusiasm for teaching," agreed middle school language arts teacher Susan Maginnis. "I come to school every day full of ideas for using the theatre games to support my lesson plans. I'm also using the games to develop my students' communication and interpersonal skills." By the end of the program, TheatreBridge will provide training to nearly all of MSD's instructional staff.

Tableaus can be used to create images found in literature, science, social studies, and other subjects. They freeze the action and allow the student and the viewer to look at the detail of what is being communicated. A good tableau requires the student to clearly understand what he or she is trying to communicate. The student must synthesize the essence of a

topic's central idea and then translate it into a tableau or a series of tableaus. As students continue to work on the tableau technique, they develop a greater sense of their entire body, and they are able to create clearly defined images with their bodies. An actor, while moving on stage, has a sense of what he or she looks like from an audience's point of view. A good multi-person tableau has either a central focal point or a central theme. When audiences look at tableaus, they should be able to decipher—or read—the image. The precision of the images requires a commitment to the goal. For both theatre and other content areas, student creators of tableaus require an ability to synthesize that information and to create images that connote the topic or goal. Assessment by audience members also

requires these higher level skills.

Other teachers have used tableaus to depict such things as George Washington crossing the Delaware River, types of weather, addition, and subtraction. One class created a storybook of Thanksgiving that included tableaus that the students created showing traditional Thanksgiving scenes. Teachers can share such storybooks with parents by posting the story online, making a CD, or printing out the story and binding it.

Tableaus are just one of the effective strategies embraced by teachers who use visual theatre in their classrooms. All of the strategies enable students to develop self-confidence while they improve their knowledge of literacy, math, science, or any of the core subjects within their curriculum.

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