

# Drama-based teaching on the rise

More educators using technique to engage students and boost understanding

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From primary schools to universities, more educators have been using drama to engage students and deepen their understanding of various issues and subjects, including non-arts ones like mathematics, psychology or even business management.

Drama educators say there is more awareness of arts-based pedagogy in recent years, thanks to initiatives like the National Arts Council's (NAC) Teaching Through the Arts Programme (TTAP) and more outreach efforts by theatre practitioners who work with schools and communities.

First piloted in 2012, TTAP, which aims to cultivate the learning of non-arts concepts through artistic means, has since been implemented in 15 schools here. The NAC hopes to work with two or three new schools every year.

Such collaborations between the NAC and schools require strong school-wide support, from the principal to the heads of departments and teachers.

The council matches a selected school to an arts educator, who works with teachers to devise lesson plans on subjects selected by schools. They may also conduct lessons together.



Mayflower Primary School maths teacher Jessie Ching discussing the design process behind circular props made by her pupils. Experts believe that through drama, knowledge is no longer something students simply memorise but something they understand through feeling as well, which helps them remember it better.  
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Mr Kenneth Kwok, director of arts and youth and strategic planning at NAC, said drama activities can help students to visualise abstract concepts. Through physical

movement, for example, students can see for themselves the effects of inertia or friction. It can also deepen learning when the students make an emotional connection

with what they are studying. "Drama is also about emotions. This is especially important when, for example, one is studying history or human geography - what are the

consequences to people's lives when something happens to a community, whether it be a natural disaster or a new government policy? "Knowledge is no longer something they simply memorise but something they understand through feeling as well, which helps them remember it better."

There are differences between studying drama as a subject, which is focused on the art form itself, and applying drama to teach other subjects or issues, said Dr Prudence Ellen Wales, an assistant professor at the National Institute of Education's Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group.

"You learn about the art form in drama as a subject and 'through' the art form when drama is applied for other education purposes," she said.

Tertiary students have also been working on theatre-related projects with groups and communities that aim to enhance their understanding of social issues or build their personal life skills.

Ms Elvira Holmberg, president of the Singapore Drama Educators Association, said there has been a "clear shift" in the field of applied theatre - referring to the use of drama practice in an educational, community or therapeutic context - in

Singapore in the last seven years. "Young people are quite interested in working with communities now, and (applied theatre) has caught on because of greater exposure to what is possible out there," she said.

Singapore Polytechnic has been running a diploma course dedicated to teaching students how to engage communities through theatre since 2008. The three-year Applied Theatre and Psychology course has drawn consistent interest with a projected intake of 45 students for this year.

"In traditional theatre, there is little direct engagement with the audience. But with applied drama, we break down the fourth wall to create a dialogue," said Ms June Wee, the course chair.

For the final-year project, students have to integrate both disciplines by conducting research into an area of psychology, and use that research to design a drama programme for a specific group in the community.

"We believe that having a good grounding in psychology facilitates a better understanding of the beneficiaries involved," said Ms Wee.

A majority of students who have graduated enter the social service or education sector, working with theatre organisations as drama facilitators, added Ms Wee. Some also choose to pursue further training in the early childhood or disability and special needs sector.

At Singapore Management University (SMU), a Postmodern Theatre Studies course was introduced under the SMU-X collection of classes, which emphasises experiential learning, for the first time last year. There are plans to further develop the course.

Students who took the module - 90 per cent of whom have no theatre experience - had to deliver a professional theatre production, and attend a public seminar on theatre pioneer Kuo Pao Kun's plays at writing organisation Centre 42.

They are graded not only based on how well they executed their roles in the production (either as part of the artistic or management team), but also for their contributions to a team journal documenting the work-in-progress and a personal report that details life skills and life lessons that they have learnt through the production.

SMU associate professor Margaret Chan said: "Theatre is about sub-text: what are the underlying forces that lead to behaviour. This is a critical skill of management, to look beyond the surface in order to deal with the true forces that inform a situation."

"Because theatre is art, we do our best refusing mediocrity. We make commitments, accept responsibilities, and deliver - always."

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