

Why Bother?

Can Theatre in Education help promote a University Education?

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Establishment of the Programme

Why Bother? is a twenty minute Theatre in Education programme for year 9 – 11 pupils aimed at encouraging them to apply to University. The performance is a culmination of a joint project between Widening Participation at The University of Worcester who initiated and funded the work and the Drama and Performance Studies Department who developed the creative ideas.

Julie Fisher of the Widening Participation unit saw the potential of a Theatre in Education project to “introduce an awareness of post -16 options and future choices” and to challenge Higher Education stereotypes. The unit employs a pool of current university students as Worcester Outreach Workers who have contributed to residential summer schools and mentoring sessions. Their work has shown Julie that “learners relate more easily to current undergraduate students whose experience of Higher Education is recent and relevant.” For this project Widening Participation aimed to employ four students who were currently studying drama to devise and research the piece and use their own experience to inform the character development. It was important that the four students could respond flexibly to audience interaction as well as being confident and versatile performers. Widening Participation staff and myself as director needed to ensure that these student actors could fulfil the demanding brief and provide a positive role model for Higher Education. It became apparent at the audition that there were significant advantages to employing first and third year students in terms of the different perspectives they gave to the experience of University.

Development of the programme

It was important from the outset to create a balance between communicating relevant information about university and the artistic integrity and impact of the piece. As a director I established the need to create a range of characters who had chosen not to go to University for a variety of reasons and possible catalysts to changing their mind. Within this diversity we wanted to include the student whose parents had not been to university, a particular focus of the Widening Participation unit. The student actors themselves brought experience of worrying as a mature student about integration into full-time education, financial expense after working, the pressures of emotional commitments to partners and being away from home. The persuasive powers of enthusiastic teachers, student ambassadors and connexions advisors were explored as part of the devising process. We also wanted to promote the Widening Participation summer school that provides an opportunity for undecided students (whose parents had not been to university) to explore the possibilities of Higher Education in particular subject areas. For the programme to be relevant to the widest range of pupils it was necessary for the characters to pursue contrasting courses and the student actors to research the demands of these subject areas. Artistically we knew the programme had to make an impact, establish a connection with the characters and provide clear options within a performance framework of twenty minutes. We decided to focus on four characters and trace their uncertainty to a moment of realisation about the possibilities of University.

Improvisations explored the reasons for and against going to university and the possibilities of the way this personal decision making process could be expressed. The use of an Angel and Devil puppet as the voices in the characters' heads became established and provided a strong visual image of each character's struggle with their conscience. The opening pages of Jean–Claude Van Italie's *Interview* provided a model for a fictional University interview. The use of stylised vocal techniques provided a concise way for the aspirations, experience, qualifications and skills of the characters to be shared. The direct address to the audience suggested urgency and a fast pace that demanded attention. The repeated structure of the job interview provided a neat conclusion to the piece where characters gave accounts of what they had achieved at University and the opportunities ahead.

I used the research and experience of student actors and the ideas developed in rehearsal to produce a final script.

Delivery of the programme

The programme was booked into Worcestershire and Herefordshire schools by Julie Fisher who contacted Aim Higher coordinators, Heads of years 9 and 10 and Heads of Drama. They were offered the performance and a question and answer session with the students out of role. This enabled pupils to ask the student actors about their own experience as well as questions arising from the performance in smaller groups. Following their initial booking each school was contacted to make sure the venue, class size and contact on the day was established and a detailed touring schedule created. The four student actors then toured the programme independently and dealt with all other aspects of liaison with schools.

Analysis of Pupils' Questionnaires

The most basic statistical analysis of pupils' questionnaires based on 464 responses in 7 schools provided encouraging evidence to the question of whether Theatre in Education can help promote a university education.

85% of all pupils who responded agreed or strongly agreed that the performance encouraged them to think about going to university as well as 83% who felt they learned something and gained new information about university. A further 82% found the performance quite interesting or very interesting and 78% found it quite enjoyable or very enjoyable. Overall 73% were thinking of going to university, 19% were not thinking of going and 8% were not sure. The statistical evidence did not provide a way to know whether any of these pupils had changed their mind as a result of seeing the programme.

The pupils' comments about what they liked about the performance broadly split into two categories: content and style. Many pupils commented that the programme was encouraging and showed how anyone, any age and any background could go to university by overcoming many different problems:

"I liked how people from different backgrounds were portrayed as being treated equally and it made me think anyone can get in."

Overall they appreciated being shown both sides of the argument and different views and opinions that in turn helped them to make a decision:

"It was informative and so helped me chose what I wanted to do when I am older."

The usefulness of the information about qualifications, the range of different courses and taking a gap year were frequently mentioned. There was also an emphasis on the way the programme provided hope when they got jobs and showed that if you believe in yourself you can change your circumstances:

"If you were bad in school you can make a change in Uni."

Although the questionnaire did not ask pupils specifically about particular presentational aspects, many commented on the way they liked the visual, colourful, creative and innovative elements of the programme. Some were even more specific about the way theatrical devices including choral speaking, minimalist props and use of the step - ladders were used effectively.

There was a very positive response to the angel and devil puppets "*weighing up the options for everyone.*" The use of humour to communicate factual information was also frequently praised and seen by one pupil as:

"Getting the message across by making it enjoyable for us."

Pupils also liked the fact that the characters were believable and the plot was "*very realistic as if they were just having a normal conversation.*"

The most negative statistical feedback was from John Masefield High School and Hereford Academy. In both schools a relatively low proportion of questionnaires were received back which may account for some discrepancies. At John Masefield only 67% of the 30 students who responded agreed or agreed strongly that the performance encouraged them to think about going to University and only 60% felt they learnt something or found it enjoyable. At Hereford Academy the lowest percentage of 58% of pupils considering going to university was matched by the lowest percentage of 61% who felt the performance had encouraged them to think about going. The other striking aspect of the comments about the performances from pupils at these two schools was the lack of understanding of drama conventions as some found it "*hard to understand broken up words*" that was not a problem for pupils from other schools. The performance venue also had a significant effect on the pupil's enjoyment of the programme. Although the agreed performance space at Hereford Academy was a Drama Studio the programme was in fact watched by pupils in a Sports Hall with very poor acoustics. Feedback from teachers was understandably that the performance was difficult to hear and at John Masefield that is was difficult to see. One final factor based only on anecdotal evidence was that pupils from Herefordshire schools were not seeing The University of Worcester as a natural progression route into Higher Education.

Informal Feedback from Experiences of Student Actors

The four student actors showed great commitment to the project and felt overall they were part of a successful team that significantly raised the awareness and helped promote Higher Education.

There were a number of practical considerations that student actors considered influenced the effective delivery of the programme. Although initially targeted at Year 9 -10 pupils actually Year 10 – 11 pupils were more engaged with the material and asked more pertinent questions. Drama Studios and classrooms provided the most appropriate environment and large gyms and sports halls proved to be very unsuitable. Timetabling was also a significant factor and PSME lessons gave greater flexibility for the development of the ideas than the time constraints of morning and afternoon assemblies. The optimum group size for question and answer sessions was deemed to be about ninety pupils that allowed them to be split easily into four groups to speak to the four actors.

Artistic considerations were intrinsically linked to the practical ones. The scenes involving the angel and devil puppets with strong and visual comedy elements worked particularly well. Simplicity of the step-ladders as a way of creating transitions between scenes also worked well and provided a readily transportable set. Pupils sometimes found the multi-rolling confusing and when the characters spoke together in the more complex choral sections some pupils treated it as an opportunity to talk

themselves. For the size of some performance venues it would have been more appropriate to have more exaggerated characters as the more naturalistic style was rather lost.

Recommendations for future development of the programme

Julie Fisher felt that some of the misunderstandings that had occurred after the programme was booked in schools with changes of venue and staff not knowing the context and purpose of the project could have been avoided by making personal phone contact. A link person within the touring group could then have phoned ahead to finalise arrangements and be made aware of any last minute changes or staff absence.

There were two particularly significant comments from pupils' questionnaires that needed careful consideration for future projects. One pupil suggested the programme was "*more based on choices for girls.*" It was very easy to see how an all female cast could have given this impression. We had wanted a balance of males and females in the cast to reflect the makeup of the audience but were thwarted as no male candidates applied for the jobs. This might have been avoided with more time to promote the project, particularly with students undertaking the Theatre and Education course. Another pupil noted "*they didn't mention the rise in fees*" which has obviously attracted a good deal of media coverage and is now an even more significant factor in deciding whether or not to go to university. At the time of devising the programme there was a lot of uncertainty about the level of fees universities including The University of Worcester would charge and we were worried about providing misleading information. Factual information about student loans should certainly be provided in future projects.

Recommendations from teachers focussed on the need for more structured follow-up work. This could take the form of a teacher's pack including character profiles or a more structured workshop to fit in a lesson. If teachers had a more detailed breakdown of what the session involved they could prepare pupils before they saw the performance. It might prove more engaging for pupils to have an in-role hot seating of characters to ask the questions not answered in the performance. Student actors felt the question and answer sessions were much more successful when a teacher or one of them acted as facilitator to support the process.

Other possibilities suggested by Julie for future development of the programme included a separate performance devised with different actors aimed at a younger year group. A performance could be staged in schools to which pupils and parents were invited to encourage dialogue within families about Higher Education. There is no doubt that more schools could benefit from the programme if more dates were made available at other times of year.

Did the project meet its aims?

The Widening Participation Unit viewed *Why Bother?* as a pilot project and are keen to develop a similar programme next year if funding allows. The success of the work this year could be partly measured in terms of the numbers of pupils involved in the project and the keenness of schools to book the programme. The programme was sold out in the first week it was offered to schools and extra dates were added to try and accommodate the demand. Overall nineteen schools took part with an audience of over two thousand pupils. The fact that the four student actors toured independently and took care of the liaison when they arrived in schools gave them a real experience of working in a Theatre in Education Company. For the third year students this provided a development of the Theatre and Education module I had led as part of their degree course. Their paid contract as Worcester Outreach Workers

can be used to help gain an Equity card, a precious commodity in the employability of Performing Arts graduates. Apart from this the demands of the teachers and pupils and the need to adapt to a range of venues provided an invaluable learning experience that is impossible to replicate within the confines of the degree course itself. The real impact of the project and the decisions pupils make to go to University is very hard to measure accurately and would require exploration of attitudes before and significantly after they had viewed the programme and consideration of many other influencing factors. Evidence from the tour of *Why Bother?* does suggest that Theatre in Education can help to promote a university education and an analysis and application of the recommendations of pupils, teachers and actors involved in the project could help to further this aim.