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Theater for Young America

December 5, 2007

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My service learning partner was Theater for Young America. I chose to go here because of the presentation that was given to us by the head of Theater for Young America. Before she came to our class to tell us about her possible service learning opportunity, I had no clue what I wanted to do. When she described what she was doing I immediately knew that that is what I wanted to do. Secretly, I have always wanted to do something with theater or acting, and so I thought this would be a nice way to get involved with theater. What I expected from this program was to basically be like a teacher's assistant. Running to get props, copy papers, and little things like that. I thought that I would have a very basic job and really just observe what these kids were learning.

After expecting such a little job, I soon figured out it would be much more than that. I met with the person in charge, and I thought working with her would be quite the treat because she is a pretty exciting person. When I went in for my interview I was told that I would be helping kids become actors. They would be learning acting and improvisational skills. I still thought that was a pretty simple job, assisting the teachers and basically follow their lead.

After I was told what I would be doing I took a little tour of the site. The classes were located at Wonderscope, which is a children's museum with many fun things to do there. The building is an old school; my guess is an elementary school, and it seemed to be a good place to

hold acting classes. I was told that many of the classes would be held in the gym which had a large open area and it also had a nice stage area. It appeared to be the perfect spot for an acting class. So I took the tour of museum and the gym and then I went up to the storage area to find many costumes and props that got me very excited for the first class to start.

The very next day is the day I would start at Theater for Young America. When the first group of kids arrived there were two different age groups. One group consisted of four and five year olds and the other consisted of what looked to be six to eight year olds. The director and I would be teaching the younger kids while my sister, who was also a part of this service learning program, would be helping another teacher, Steve. I had quite the time with the little kids. I had no idea I would be teaching kids so little and I was unprepared. The first day with those little kids, I'll admit, was a little overwhelming just because I am not used to kids of that age.

The first thing I noticed with these four and five year old kids was that they were quite shy. It was their first day and I don't think they knew what to expect just as I didn't know what to expect. We did warm-ups at the beginning of each class. We started out with a vocal warm up and then we went on to a body warm up. The body warm up was a little embarrassing for me and if I wasn't with a bunch of little kids I wouldn't expect me to do what I did anywhere else. To warm up their bodies we had colorful scarves. With the scarves came a CD. On the CD was a song that you had to follow around doing all of these crazy things with the scarf, like jumping around and dancing; like I said, if I was anywhere else, I would have been embarrassed. After working on their bodies we did an imagination exercise with the scarves. Each kid would pretend the scarf was something other than the scarf. It was interesting watching these kids. I noticed that they were uncomfortable thinking about what the scarf could be and on the first day most of the kids just copied the other one's idea about what the scarf was. After all of the warm

ups we would have a poem or a short little story that the kids would get to pick a character to be and follow along with the story. This is how just about every class went.

As time went on and the kids began to feel more comfortable, they began to get a lot wilder and a lot more imaginative. Week after week it seemed that these kids were coming out of their shell and becoming much more outgoing. These youngest kids were definitely the most challenging to work with but it was a good experience regardless.

My second class that I helped out with was with Steve and my sister and another teacher, George, joined our group as well. These kids were around fourth or fifth grade and much easier to work with than the four and five year old children. There were probably about six kids in the younger group, so when I got to this second class I was pretty overwhelmed. There were three times that number, but with two teacher and two assistants it went pretty smoothly. In this second group of kids I learned that I would be participating with a lot of the activities that they would be doing. I was soon involved in skits and games and I basically become another student almost. However, like with the younger kids, my role was more of a lead by example part. Most of these kids were also a little shy and reluctant to participate so with me and my sister becoming a part of the group we made sure that everyone was participating.

I think that with this second group I had the most fun because their imaginations were unbelievable. I was shocked at some of the things they would come up with and I couldn't help but wonder if I acted the same way as they did when I was that young.

The third and final group of my day was the oldest group of the bunch. I believe they were eighth and ninth grade students. This group was definitely more advanced and calmer than the first two groups that I encountered. They were a good group to work with. No one was ever

out of control and they did skits and games very well. In this group I also found myself participating a lot with the students. I could relate to this group a little bit better which was definitely helpful with my participation. They were older so they understood a lot more things than what the younger kids did.

There was one specific encounter in these classes that sticks out in my mind the most. In the first class that I had with the younger kids there was one girl who I can't get out of my mind. She was a twin and her and her brother both attended the class. She was pretty shy in the class but whenever you got her and her brother together they would feed off each other. When they were together they would laugh loudly and were very outgoing, but when separate she was very shy. In one particular class period I noticed that she wasn't really participating in anything the class was doing. She would just stand there and zone out it appeared. After some time she looked at me and I was doing the activity and all of the sudden she started laughing and began to participate. For the rest of the class period she looked at me during every activity and everything I was doing, she would be doing. I thought it was very cool that this girl was looking up to me and repeating me as if I knew everything. At the end of the class she took my hand and began twirling herself as if we were dancing partners. It was the strangest thing but I felt very good about myself after that class.

My experiences this semester at Theater for Young America have had its ups and downs. Occasionally I would become very annoyed with the kids but I understood that they were young and curious and being obnoxious is just kind of how they are. I know for a fact that I was the same way when I was a little kid. However, most days I enjoyed every minute of working with these children. It was an exciting thing to see these kids at work, and to see them look up to me

even though I knew just about as much as they did. For them, this was their first time ever doing anything like this, and for me it was also my very first time doing anything like this.

After completing my 24 hours of service learning with this program I have continued to go every week and help out. There is still one more class, which is the open house for the children's parents that I will be looking forward to next week. I have already told Jane that I am very interested in returning next semester to help out with their second semester of classes. She informed me that she would enjoy having me back. Most of the kids from this semester will be returning next semester and there will more than likely be some new additions to the classes which will make them that much more entertaining.

I have learned a lot about little children while participating in this program. I think what I will take from this experience the most is that you must be patient with young kids. Before working with these young kids, if I would have seen a little child in the store with their mom being a nuisance, I would have thought to myself "Man that is a rotten child and why is their mother not doing anything to control them". After working with these kids I realize that they are a handful and it's not always an easy task to control them. There were multiple times when I found myself almost becoming the teacher and telling a child to please listen and sit down and pay attention. I felt like a parent almost, and it was a little creepy, but it was necessary for the well being of the class. Returning for next semester will be easier now that I know what to expect and hopefully I can bring some encouragement and a positive influence to these wacky kids and their future dreams of acting.