IMMERSION LEARNING: Sinking or Swimming with Undergraduates

by Erik Viker and Andrew Rich

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The teaching of theatre design and technology at the graduate level traditionally includes practical experience along with classroom instruction and coursework, but undergraduate students, especially those at smaller schools, are less frequently afforded opportunities to take on leadership roles or see their designs realized on stage. This trend seems counterproductive when we consider how our students are expected to acquire fundamental skills and begin forming professional attitudes during their undergraduate theatre education. Through discussions with colleagues and students, the authors explored the benefits and challenges of making practical application experience more available to our undergraduate students.
Practical activity is common in the classroom. Scenic, lighting, and costume design students create renderings, sketches, and models in class. Students interested in stage management or technical direction create mock prompt books or sample technical diagrams. However, for students to appreciate the complexities of their disciplines they need to work in an active scene shop, participate in live rehearsals, and fully experience the artistic collaboration process leading to a real opening night.

We believe that students learn most effectively when in-class lectures and discussions are followed by practical experiences. In addition, we emulate our colleagues in the sciences by mixing things together and observing what happens. At Susquehanna University, we treat our theatre spaces as design and technology laboratories where artistry and skills are discovered, honed, and tested through collaboration, demonstration, and practice.

The primary practical learning experience at Susquehanna is our annual one-act play festival, during which students demonstrate the competencies they have acquired during classroom exercises. Because the festival features student-directed plays, participants get a sense of working for a fledgling company entirely operated by young professionals, with minimal (but always attentive) faculty supervision. Our one-act festival is a fully funded main stage event featuring five plays arranged in two separate evenings of entertainment presented in repertory over a long weekend. Senior students in the department’s directing course are the festival’s artistic directors. The entire festival is administered by a student production manager selected from students interested in theatre administration. A single scenic environment suitable for all five plays is created by a student designer in consultation with the directors and a student lighting designer creates a lighting rep plot. A student technical director executes the scenic design and prepares stagehands for the production. This past year we appointed one costume designer to each evening, so two students handled costuming for all five plays. A separate stage manager was appointed for each evening, with a house crew serving all plays backstage.

The one-act festival often provides a capstone experience for ongoing opportunities of increasing difficulty and responsibility. At Susquehanna University we follow the leadership training progression that many schools have adopted. In order to become a production stage manager for a mainstage production or the technical director for the one-act play festival, a student must first serve as an assistant stage manager for at least one production under an accomplished student stage manager or work as an assistant technical director under faculty supervision. Student stage managers may progress from less complicated studio productions to supervising large-cast classic plays and complex musical productions, while students interested in theatre technology may serve as assistant technical directors for increasingly more complex productions. The production manager for the one-act play festival, our most responsible student position, coordinates scheduling, budgets, personnel and facilities, under faculty supervision.

Promising young designers who have successfully completed the one-act festival assignment may then be invited to serve as an assistant to the faculty designer for a mainstage production…
STUDENT INSIGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

even students were interviewed about their recent experience with the Susquehanna University one-act play festival. Most of the students interviewed received prior classroom training through an introductory design course. They responded to questions about the value of classroom education for production design and technology, the value of practical immersion learning opportunities and their opinion of faculty involvement in the immersion learning process. Students were also asked to discuss which method of learning they preferred in terms of their experiences with the one-act play festival.

When asked about the value of classroom experiences, students indicated that the classroom was a vital training ground for learning about theories and practices in the business of theatre production. Evan Shuster, a sophomore who served as the 2005 one-act festival technical director, stated, “The drafting skills taught in the Intro to Design course were very helpful in developing my own technical drawings for the festival.” The students responded positively to learning the fundamentals of design and stated that some business and safety practices covered in the classroom proved very useful in practical application. Vanya Foote, a junior who served as the festival production manager, stated that a stage management course offered her “information including issues of fire safety, basic rigging inspections, and book preparation” that proved to be very valuable in her process.

The number one observation about immersion
learning was the value of a collaborative process for productions. Vanya Foote observed that the “human factor” was the most obvious element missing in the classroom situation. She stated that through her production management experiences she learned better ways to communicate with directors, actors, and designers. Foote also said that the festival allowed her to experience other personnel matters such as running production meetings and technical rehearsals and resolving costume and properties issues. Sarah Colburn, a junior who served as a festival costume designer, admitted that working with three separate directors and a faculty design advisor was at times a bit overwhelming. Although she felt it was challenging to meet everyone’s needs, Colburn indicated that this experience was the next logical step in her education and made her examine her own personal career aspirations. Emily Orner, a sophomore stage manager, and Samantha Lemon, freshman master electrician, both explained how collaboration in a student-run environment allowed them to develop interpersonal skills without the intimidation of working directly with faculty members.

Another observation made by many students was how design realization was the ideal completion of the classroom experience. Tim Barnes, sophomore lighting designer, stated, “The classroom is not reality,” acknowledging there were problems with the actual execution of the design that he had not anticipated on paper. Barnes said these problems were valuable educational tools. Ashley Stephenson, sophomore festival scenic designer, said that application of classroom skills made her feel much more comfortable during the design process and allowed her to recall and retain the fundamentals she previously acquired. Shuster supported this view of practical challenges as real-life training exercises. He indicated the realities of working with students and actual materials provided on-the-job training moments that were sometimes frustrating but provided a glimpse of the professional world that enriched his education.

The balance of autonomy and supervision necessary for undergraduate practical experience to succeed seemed to depend on good classroom preparation. Students described how first trying to work out production difficulties themselves proved to be a positive experience, because it provided them an opportunity to apply learned skills before falling back on faculty guidance as needed. Several students indicated the experience freed them to develop design and problem-solving skills on their own. However, the students were unanimous in indicating it was a comfort to have a faculty advisor available as both a lifeline for addressing issues they did not yet understand, and as an extra eye to help them improve their skills through constructive criticism. At Susquehanna University, mainstage student production work is often discussed in the classroom, and we augment these conversations with daily post-rehearsal production meetings during technical rehearsal weeks to offer immediate feedback.

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### ONE ACT FESTIVAL 2005

#### PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Vanya Foote, Production Manager

#### Fall Semester:
- **Auditions** – Sunday, December 5th at 7pm
- **1st Production Meeting** – week of December 6th-10th

#### Meetings:
- 1st ASAP

#### Scenery:
- Designs Due – 1.17.05
- OK and Build – ASAP
- Build Ends – 2.9.05
- Load-in Begins – 2.10.05
- Load-in Ends – 2.11.05

#### Costumes:
- Designs Due – 1.17.05
- Fittings Begin – 1.18.05
- OK and Build – ASAP
- Build Ends – 2.14.05

#### Props:
- Preliminary Props List Due – 1.17.05
- Semi-final Props List Due – 1.21.05
- Working Props – 1.24.05
- Build/Search Ends – 2.12.05
- Props Load-in – 2.12.05

#### Lighting:
- Designs Due – 1.24.05
- Light Hang Ends – 2.7.05
- Focus Ends – 2.11.05
- Cue Build – 2.12.05

#### Sound:
- Sound Design Due – 1.24.05
- Sound load-in – 2.11.05

#### Publicity/Programs:
- Poster Design Due – 2.7.05
- Poster to Print Shop – 2.8.05
- Hang Posters By – 2.10.05
- Program Design Due – 2.7.05
- Programs to Print Shop – 2.14.05

#### Technical and Performance Schedule:
- Scene Shift For All – 2.11.05
- 1st Tech (Group A)/1st Tech (Group B) – 2.12.05
- Final Technical Rehearsal (Group A) – 2.13.05
- Final Technical Rehearsal (Group B) – 2.14.05
- Final Dress Rehearsal (Group A) – 2.15.05
- Final Dress Rehearsal (Group B) – 2.16.05
- Performance 1 – 2.17.05
  - 2 – 2.18.05
  - 3 – 2.19.05
  - 4 – 2.20.05
- Props & Costume Strike – 2.20.05
- Set Strike – 2.21.05
In comparing the classroom with the stage, the students supported the idea that the two experiences were symbiotic. They were unanimous in stating that it would be especially difficult to accomplish theatrical design work without any prior training in the classroom. Barnes thought that the two styles of learning complement one another perfectly, and provide a bridge to the realities of the professional theatre world. Shuster described how he believed both experiences were necessary by comparing them to Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple*. “The classroom is much like Felix; it is very tedious in attention to detail and analytical, whereas the production is Oscar, the messy, gross character, who is fun to be around. You need both to make the play funny.”

**EDUCATOR INSIGHTS AND PHILOSOPHIES**

dam Zonder, a professional production manager and technical theatre professor at SUNY Albany was asked about some of the issues in this article and kindly provided some observations. He favors a careful progression of opportunities for promising design students, but cautioned us to be conservative. “Programs that just throw students into designing real shows before they are ready do a huge disservice to them as well as to the rest of the people involved with the show,” said Zonder, noting that if students reach a point where the next logical step is to have them create a realized design, their academic program should support the effort. Lighting designer Heath Hansum, at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania, emphasized how students learn problem-solving techniques and interpersonal skills when they are placed in a real production environment with a design team. “They learn the value of collaboration,” said Hansum. “Leadership is more than just knowing the trade, it is establishing a direction and tactfully guiding your team down a path, smoothing rough spots with diplomacy and communication.”

Zonder teaches an introductory technical theatre course requiring three academic credits of class time and one credit of lab time. He said, “Before students can try to build a flat, they need to know about wood and other materials. Classroom work and practical work have to go hand in hand.”

Jenny Slattery, a professional stage manager currently working in academia, agrees. “A classroom can provide an intellectual introduction to the work that stage managers do, but it cannot fully train those interested in careers in stage management. To be a good stage manager you must have the ability to respond quickly and calmly to unexpected and highly stressful situations. You must also manage complex projects involving intense personalities and limited resources. You just can’t teach it out of a book.”

Hansum related a similar philosophy to the “venue as laboratory” approach taken at Susquehanna University. “Theory followed by practical application is important,” noted Hansum, describing how the study of lighting theory is enhanced and made relevant by letting students “actually point the lights at the stage and see how they work.”

Slattery pointed out how others will rarely have time in the professional world to counsel young practitioners. “The academic environment is a place where young stage
managers can fail safely, and this is a very important way to learn.” She added, “Having a supportive advisor and collection of peers to provide feedback on communication style, tone of voice, and problem solving can be invaluable.”

Hansum supported the concept of balancing practical experience with planned guidance and gradual independence for undergraduate practitioners. “I think it’s important for students to get their feet wet gradually,” he said. “Students can accomplish this by serving as an assistant but also by having a show assigned to them that is all their own, with limits and guidance from a faculty member. When they choose the course for the production you really see what they are made of.”

There are challenges and pitfalls to providing design and leadership opportunities for undergraduate students. Some academic programs are committed to graduate student education and cannot afford to assign production opportunities to undergraduates. Other schools may lack the necessary venues or financial support for additional productions. Even where undergraduate leadership and design opportunities are well established, issues unique to mentoring young practitioners will arise. Hansum cited project management and time limitations as major challenges to undergraduate design success. “They have no idea what it takes to bring a show to the stage. We make it look easy because we’ve learned shortcuts and efficiency,” he said. This can be confusing to students because they sense we are saying, do what I say, not what I do. Slattery cautions educators about the emotional impact of practical experience on undergraduates. She states “Stage management requires a tremendous amount of emotional maturity and calm” and encourages us to closely mentor students interested in the profession to ensure readiness for the harsh realities of running a show.

CONCLUSIONS
Theatre production as a discipline may include such diverse elements as the study of scenery construction and theatre operations, historical design research, text interpretation for theatrical design, painting and drawing techniques, lighting technology and programming, the fabrication of costumes and custom furniture, expense coordination, resource and time management and personnel management of actors and technicians. Effective cooperation between professionals is the most important skill we teach in academic technical theatre, followed closely by the sometimes painful but always enlightening experiences of students working it out for themselves.

We have found that whenever possible, providing “graduate school quality” hands-on design and leadership opportunities for undergraduate students helps them clarify career goals, prepare competitively for further formal education, or feel confident about joining the ranks of professional theatre practitioners. Theatre educators who work to promote design and technical theatre as a valuable part of an overall undergraduate liberal arts education, find success when their students learn how to think critically, communicate effectively, and solve problems in every aspect of life.

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Andrew Rich is also an assistant professor of theatre at SU, where he serves as scenographer and teaches lighting and scenic design.

SOURCES
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Lemon, Samantha. Personal interview. 05/07/05.
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You must also manage complex projects involving intense personalities and limited resources. You just can’t teach it out of a book.

Student respondents seem to agree with the educators that they prefer a middle road between too much autonomy and faculty advisors “backseat driving” a project. “Students at the undergraduate level usually aren’t ready to fly solo so it is easy for them to lose control when they get involved in a big project,” noted Hansum. “It is important that they feel supported and that they can get help when they need it.”