

## **Student Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Access Statement**

### **Personal Connections and Lived Experience**

My first connections to diversity began in being raised in an interracial family environment where we celebrated our collective experience through storytelling and questioning our experiences. This sparked in me the drive to explore storytelling and performance as a means of social engagement and community development. This also allowed me to embrace my queer identity in a way that was supported, as well as make me aware of the misconceptions and prejudices growing up in small town. Having the freedom to choose my faith, I explored Eastern philosophy and chose to live my life following the path of Buddhism. This opened my eyes to storytelling from a Non-Western lens, and I spent much of my undergraduate years researching storytelling modes and methods from other countries. Upon graduating from Illinois State University with my first master's degree, I was hired to be the Director of Theatre at Saint Patrick High School, a Lasallian School. By joining the Lasallian community, I was able to find even more ways to honor and advocate for the dignity of all people as a teacher. My years as a Lasallian teacher have been culturally reflective and evolving for the last fourteen years. Teaching in a school with wide differences in economic and racial diversity has given me the opportunity to learn and employ strategies that give each student the support to succeed in creative ways.

### **Creative Individuality in the Classroom**

Returning to in-person teaching this year meant shifting to a trauma-informed model so that students could find some solid ground on which to re-engage in a traditional school year. Working with our Counseling Department, I developed a series of lesson plans for teachers to build classes by meeting students where they are on their social emotional, as well as their intellectual journey. This process began with honoring student identity with the Identity Wheel activity, connecting the students with each other through partnered interviews, and then we created community guidelines for how they would interact with each other, practice self-care, and care for the classroom. Each day began with a threshold crossing assignment where the class practiced mindfulness like physical and vocal warmups, a visualization led by another student or me, or a mindful EFT (Emotional Freedom Tapping) activity that mimics acupuncture. After the students have been introduced to a few tools to cross the threshold into the classroom, they managed their needs at the start of the class to prepare for class. Each day's content was delivered in ways that allow students to be mobile and immobile. For instance, students who are devising a scene can take on a dramaturgical position as writer and stage manager or the actor/deviser role of physicalizing the scene. This provides value to student's individual creativity. Scaffolding in checkpoints for students based on their authentic choices allows students to keep track of their progress toward learning, applying, and creating with artistic tools, as opposed to placing value judgements on their final products. I emphasize recognized growth over objective standards, and by meeting with students about their goals, this growth is articulated.

*"I don't believe people are looking for the meaning of life as much as they are looking for the experience of being alive."  
Joseph Campbell*

### **EDIA from the Classroom to the Stage**

An example of my work toward empowering students is an anti-bullying production I devised with my students and school community using Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre. A year prior to the production, we were studying theatre for social justice in one of my classes, and I introduced Boal's theories and practice. The students discussed social issues that they wanted to explore, and more than anything, they connected on the topic of bullying, specifically, cyberbullying. We decided to spend more time on this subject and started to gather national bullying statistics, collect local data from our school, as well as interview multiple generations of community members regarding their experiences with bullying. We developed scenes that centered around a bullied student, accounting for variations of bullying from physical to cyber bullying, as well as interactions with family and friends. The students created a proposal for our administration and got approval to develop a full-length Forum Theatre performance the next year. With Forum Theatre's anti-model approach, we created scenes that called for the audience to intervene. The anti-model format has the performers show a scene where oppression occurs without a conclusion and then invites the audience to come on the stage and take one of the performers roles and change the scene. The production was produced for local elementary schools and was invited to perform at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Urbana. The audience involved were able to play bully and bullied, bystander and upstander. This production highlighted a major lesson for our community that listening to each other and standing up for those who need us most is what binds a community together. With a diverse cast, we were able to investigate how the relationship between power and identity can make some students feel invisible in their need for safety and security. Our talkbacks after the production yielded systemic change in our department as we developed an Inclusion Committee to address concerns and lift student voices to create a system for choosing material to work on in class, guest speakers and artists, and casting/ rehearsal room guidelines.

My students remind me that they are the next generation of artists, and that while learning from the past is important, idea generation for the future is how theatre will evolve for the betterment of all. They have also taught me that to be their leader, I need to know when to offer tools to support and when to step out of the way. I feel freer in this model of teaching because I trust that my students, when given the platform to raise their voice, will do so in service.

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