What arts education can do:
Coming together through differences

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What arts education can
Coming together through

The Nokomis Regional High Honors History class of which
I am part participated in a program called “Building
Community Through the Arts” (BCTA) this past March.
The program pairs a professional drama educator with a high
school class for two weeks in order to help build community
connections by combining academic content with issues in the
students’ lives. Cathy Flourde joined Jason
O’Reilly’s sophomore class to help us create a play
based on some of the themes from Nathaniel
Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter. We performed the
play and participated in group discussions with
students from other Penobscot and Piscataquis
county high schools at a conference at the
University of Maine in March.

When Mr. O’Reilly first told our class that we were
going to create a play based on themes from The
Scarlet Letter, we were definitely
confused. For starters,
very few of us had
acting experience and
most of us had no idea
how we could take
themes from this book
written nearly two
centuries ago and relate it to our lives today.

Despite our constant fears about the impossibility
of the task at hand, Mr. O’Reilly assured us that
this could be accomplished and joked that nobody
had died doing BCTA in years past. Part of the
difficulty of narrowing our focus on a theme was
the class dynamics. We seemed to bicker with one
another constantly and getting a collaborative task
completed was near impossible. You could see how
we socially divided our class was just by peeking
into Mr. O’Reilly’s room on any given day. After a
couple of days of “ice breaker” activities with Ms.
Flourde, we began to gel as a group and a theme
of social acceptance and peer rejection took root.

While doing one of these activities, we serendipitously created
a powerful scene where a gay character stood alone and my
classmates and I assumed roles and said what we thought
other kids would say to this character.

From this scene, we worked backwards and divided the class
into four social groups: “Wayne’s World,” the gay character
and his two girl friends who can’t understand why people
do

ferences

don’t like Wayne; “The Popular Girls,” a host of well-liked but somewhat arrogant girls who fear Wayne’s influence on their status; “The Jocks,” a homophobic group of athletic boys, including one character who is tormented because he is secretly gay; and, “The Bystanders,” the somewhat-neutral, mature students who care more about their next test and less about the social world at the school.

These four groups then created scenes in which they developed characters, focusing on how each of these characters would view the gay student and what they might say to him. After a few classes with Ms. Plourde, we had created a play that mirrored what we thought represented a typical picture at any given high school, including Nokomis.

In March at the University of Maine conference, we performed the play three times for other BCTA classes. Each of these performances was followed by group discussions in which we talked with the audience about how we created this play and how students view gay students. One of the interesting things that came up in these discussions was how students in the audience saw discrimination against gay students in their own schools.

Almost all of the students in the audience could see similar social groups in their own schools; many even said they hear the discriminatory words from our play — gay, fag, queer, etc. — thrown around all the time in their own hallways. Also, many of the boys in the audience seemed uncomfortable talking about a fictional gay character and some even denied that there were any gay students in their own schools. We were surprised!

Looking back at this experience brings to light some interesting reflections.

First, we seemed to be satisfied with the final collaborative product — even though performing for other students was embarrassing, especially given the topic and the language of our play. Second, we have become more aware of how powerful our words are, especially discriminatory words like...
gay and fag. Third, some of us in Mr. O'Reilly's class had personal transformations. One student commented after BCTA was completed that despite his homophobia he was less fearful of gay students and more understanding of how discrimination impacted people. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, our class dynamics have changed. We seem to bicker less, interact more fully, and respect one another more.

Creating this play was totally different than working in the classroom — we were put in a situation where we had to cooperate in order to create a finished piece and collaboration was vital to our success. We learned that despite the fact that we are all different — in class and in life — we are all part of the same community and building a strong community is important to us.

Every time we went onstage, our differences were set aside and we produced a powerful play. All of us getting along became the theme of our play.
The Nokomis Regional High Honors History class I am part participated in a program called “Building Community Through the Arts” (BCTA) this past school year. The program pairs a professional drama educator with a school class for two weeks in order to help build connections by combining academic content with issues in students’ lives. Cathy Plourde joined John O’Reilly’s sophomore class to help us create a play based on some of the themes from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. We performed the play and participated in group discussions with students from other Penobscot and Piscataquis county high schools at a conference at the University of Maine in March.

When Mr. O’Reilly first told our class that we were going to create a play based on themes from *The Scarlet Letter*, we were definitely confused. For starters, very few of us had acting experience and most of us had no idea how we could take themes from this book written nearly two centuries ago and relate it to our lives today.

Despite our constant fears about the immense task at hand, Mr. O’Reilly assured us that this could be accomplished and joked that he had died doing BCTA in years past. Part of the difficulty of narrowing our focus on an ill-defined class dynamics. We seemed to bicker with each other constantly and getting a collaboration completed was near impossible. You could tell we socially divided our class was just beginning to gel into Mr. O’Reilly’s room on any given day. A couple of days of “ice breaker” activities with Plourde, we began to gel as a group after the business of social acceptance and peer rejection.

While doing one of these activities, we serendipitously stumbled upon a powerful scene where a gay character stood alone amongst the other classmates and I assumed roles and said what we thought other kids would say to this character.

From this scene, we worked backwards and divide the class into four social groups: “Wayne’s World,” the gay boy and his two girl friends who can’t understand why