

Getting smart with arts: Acting lessons help students improve other skills

January 24, 2008

Kirk Squires

With an ever-growing focus on the skilled trades as the prime career choice the priority of the education system has shifted to math and the sciences.

But there is another element of the education system that can benefit students of all ages - the arts.

Balbo Elementary is one school that values the arts component. In 2007 the school signed up for the ArtsSmarts program, bringing a professional actor - Geoff Adams, artistic director of the New Curtain Theatre Company - into the classroom.

This is the second year the school has had a professional artist come in to work with students.

"The first year we had a visiting artist program," explains grade five teacher Pam Williams. "That's usually a one visit sort of thing.

"In the ArtsSmarts program we can have a visiting artist in our school for a certain length of time, depending on what our program consists of."

The ArtsSmarts program is a project of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council and the Department of Education.

The Balbo program was called, Drama in the classroom-Drama in the school.

"In the classroom Geoff talked about . . . his role as an artist," says Williams.

"He prepared the children for activities such as how to listen on stage, how to get 'in character'.

"Every child from grade four to eight got an opportunity to work with Geoff and they all enjoyed it."

Education tool

Williams says having a professional actor in the classroom was an introduction to acting but it goes beyond that. The skills used by an actor can benefit students in other subjects.

"I spoke to a grade eight student who said Geoff made them feel more comfortable about speaking in front of a group."

She says when the school applied for the project they talked to teachers about their professional growth plans, which include such things as how to help students speak and listen better.

She adds while the program helped students, it was also a learning experience for teachers.

She says it highlights the fact there is more to the arts than many people may realize.

"In math, for example, we have a concept where you have to communicate how you solved a problem. The children have to be able to communicate in writing and in speaking. It's not new but we are highlighting it more. Language arts skills are really important," she explains.

"Geoff helped us look at it in a different way - from an artist's point of view. How can we help the children listen a little more attentively? How can we help them with their speaking skills? That has to have an effect on everything you do."

Out of the shadows

Traditionally, theatre in the school system was, more often than not, seen as an extracurricular activity.

Adams likes the idea of bringing theatre into the classroom where it can be used as an educational tool to help students develop skills, whether they plan a career in the arts or want to be an engineer.

"Drama and theatre has always had this image attached to it that it is only for certain types of people. "It's a shame because when you see the possibilities that result from theatre, it is not just about being on stage. I wish we had more time to deal with the possibilities of what the future holds for these kids where they can express themselves, where they can direct their future careers," says Adams.

Adams says he would like to see this program expand to include elements of theatre like lighting and set design; skills that can be used both inside and outside of theatre setting.

Adams uses his own experience as an example of how arts can help in other careers. Prior to becoming a professional actor, Adams worked as an architect.

"From my training as an architect this is very similar. We were trained to explore and that is what acting trains you to do, to explore the characters, exploring the different possibilities around the role you are given."

Adams is certain programs like ArtsSmarts can help students become more well rounded.

He suggests the ArtsSmarts program provides a level of interaction that is often missing from much of the entertainment people get today.

"That is one of my goals, to get people back into sitting down in front of a live show and experiencing what it is like to see live theatre, instead of sticking yourself in front of the DVD player or watching something on You Tube.

"When you go to the theatre you are not only interacting with people on stage, it's also your interaction with the people next to you because live theatre tends, more often than not, to provoke discussion. "We have become trapped in technology and I think this ArtsSmarts program is a way to get kids out there and exploring and being creative to see what else is possible."

Oliver twist

Along with going into the classroom Adams also helped the school's drama club with their Christmas production of *Oliver Twist*.

Adams worked with Williams, and Balbo's music teacher Charlene Sawler, to produce the one-night show featuring the talents of the Balbo students.

For grade eight student Ryan Keating and grade six student Mackenzie Dove the ArtsSmarts experience was amazing.

"I have never actually gotten to work with a professional actor before. He has given me some great acting tips," says Keating.

As for the ArtsSmarts program Keating says, "It benefits everyone because really it is helping everyone learn more."

Dove likes the fact the program brings activity and excitement into the learning process.

"You are not sitting in your seat anymore. It is really interesting."

She says it is important to keep the arts as a strong segment in schools because it provides balance.

"It makes you feel confident knowing you are going to get up there and do the best you can do.

"Learning your lines you have to memorize everything. It's just like having a test.

"ArtsSmarts is so much fun," she says.