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[See table of contents](#)

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Master of All Domains? Constructively Aligning Theatre and Learning

JAMES MCKINNON

In “How Do You Know They are Learning?” Thomas Reeves highlights a problem endemic in university education—one to which drama and theatre studies offers potential solutions. Reeves argues that although educational scholarship recognizes multiple learning domains, post-secondary instruction and assessment overwhelmingly focus on only one of them: the cognitive domain. The neglected learning domains include the affective (the domain of aesthetics, values, feeling, and caring), the psychomotor (the domain of perceptual skills and physical ability), and the conative (the domain of willpower and volition). Reeves laments that university courses typically privilege the cognitive, the domain of “knowing,” and even then they often emphasize low-end cognitive skills, such as remembering and understanding. The others, though equally important to lifelong success, are seldom engaged and rarely assessed.

It should be obvious how the study and practice of theatre apply to these problems. Clearly, theatre involves the psychomotor domain, which includes reflective and fundamental movement, perceptual skills, skilled movement, and non-discursive communication (Harrow). Just as clearly, theatre involves and develops the affective domain, which includes one’s capacity to receive, respond to, and express emotions; and the ability to develop, express, and prioritize values and beliefs. The least-known domain, the conative, is also highly pertinent to theatre studies: it refers to one’s capacity for *action*, or “the act of striving to perform at the highest levels” (Reeves 297). Theatre can excel here; to practice performing in public is to practice making significant decisions.

While it is easy to see how theatre engages multiple learning domains, it is not always easy to exploit this potential, in part because of what Claire Carolan calls the “hidden curriculum.” A hidden curriculum emerges whenever forces in the learning environment lead students to learn unintended lessons. For example, one unintended lesson we learn from a model of education that privileges cognitive achievement is that it is the only thing that “counts” as learning. Even in theatre programs, teachers and students have often internalized this idea, and courses and assessments frequently reflect our anxiety to prove the legitimacy of the discipline in an environment that privileges cognitive achievement. My students frequently complain of ridicule from friends and family who cannot reconcile theatre with their narrow conception of learning; yet they also complain—just as correctly, in my view—when theatre classes, reflecting the same anxiety about the legitimacy of theatre, put them through the same rota of cognitive-oriented lectures, essays, and tests as their other courses. As Shelley Scott points out, distinguishing (or dividing) cognitive-oriented “academic” learning from practice-led activities can produce another unintended lesson: that cognitive knowledge (“book learning”) is incommensurate with and irrelevant to “training” in psychomotor and affective technique.

As both Carolan and Scott point out, when universities fret over how to align their programs with employability skills, we may discover that what the university wants is what

theatre studies programs already do well: creativity or invention, collaboration, communication, and so on. But often these skills remain in the hidden curriculum because the official curriculum is preoccupied with a narrower band of skills. This is inefficient and unfair because when learners are not explicitly aware of what they are learning, they may not be able to articulate what they have learned, nor will they be able to take responsibility for continuing to learn after their formal education is over. We need to expose the hidden curriculum, to make sure that what we ask students to do aligns with what we want them to learn. In the scholarship of teaching and learning, this is known as constructive alignment (Biggs and Tang).

Here is an example of misalignment, and how to fix it. In my program, where Theatre contributes to a liberal arts-oriented BA, we offer a second-year Classic Theatre Workshop course, in which sixty students work on three plays representing different historical genres. The whole group meets weekly in a lecture environment, and is divided into four workshop groups which rehearse excerpts from the three selected plays. Three times a term, the whole class performs together, each group contributing to a sixty-minute version of each of the three plays. The course was conceived, years ago, as a practice-based approach to theatre history (there was once a “theory” stream for English majors, which has died out).

Based on what we observe and what students tell us, it is clear that Classic Theatre Workshop provides a great platform for developing affective, conative, and psychomotor capacities. Students gain confidence and proxemic awareness on stage, broaden their range of stagecraft skills and institutional know-how, and develop basic professional skills—reliability, congeniality, resilience, and grace under pressure. But when I first encountered the course, in 2011, its delivery and assessment emphasized only cognitive learning: almost all the in-class time was devoted to lectures, and assessment centred on measuring how well students could retain knowledge from these lectures and explain it in terms of the performances they had just finished. The most profound learning, and the part of the course that the students most valued, and invested most of their time and energy in, was barely acknowledged. The essays were perceived as a dull chore by all involved, and resulted in skewed outcomes, rewarding those who were already good at writing essays or knew a lot about Shakespeare, and punishing outstanding creative contributors who did not have great essay writing skills. Few students would say Classic Theatre Workshop helped them become better essay writers, because all the contact time focused on transmitting theatre history knowledge and rehearsing plays, not improving writing skills. The grades bore little correlation to what students had actually learned or their skill as creative collaborators, and this in turn undermined their faith in the curriculum and their own ability and aggravated their already problematic tendency to focus on pleasing instructors instead of learning.

To correct these problems, we have created explicit alignment between what the students do, what they are graded on, and what we want them to learn. The course learning objectives acknowledge the broad range of learning domains engaged through collaborating on a performance, and students now use writing not to demonstrate knowledge retention, but to reflect on how their contributions to the creative process represent progress toward both course learning objectives and personal goals. This process challenges their assumptions about grades corresponding to number of lines memorized, because the students are invited both to focus on things that are important to them and to reflect on the positive impact of

their contributions. (*How much* work you do matters less than the *outcomes*.) Students also get feedback on their progress towards all these goals, rather than just corrections on their essays. The learning that the course has always facilitated, but which was previously unacknowledged, has become explicit and valued. The hidden curriculum has been uncovered.

As a discipline, theatre is almost uniquely blessed with the capacity to engage multiple learning domains in myriad ways, with relative ease. So much so that when educators in other disciplines want to expand beyond the cognitive domain, they often draw upon theatrical techniques, like role-playing. The challenge for theatre educators, and students, is to make the most of these opportunities. Drama, theatre, and performance do not necessarily need to be authorized and legitimized by essays, tests, and other forms of individual, cognitive-oriented assessment. What they need is assessment strategies that allow students to recognize and articulate the deeper and broader learning that theatre allows them to experience and pursue—learning which may be unique for each learner.

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