



In-School Theatre for Students, Teachers and Parents

by Jon Mikkelsen

NTC
Ed Talks





Jon Mikkelsen, Creative Director, The National Theatre for Children oversees theatre, video, digital, print and gaming for NTC's educational programming.



The What

Each school year, The National Theatre for Children presents educational theatre in over

3,000 schools. We have programs designed for all age groups: elementary, middle and high school. NTC's program catalog has hundreds of titles about a variety of important societal issues and life skills, including energy efficiency, financial literacy, health and fitness, safety, water conservation, STEM education, anti-bullying and more.

The How

How can you produce effective and efficient in-school education programs using theatre in schools? It breaks down to three main things:

1. The development of the script
2. The performance
3. The documentation of the results of the show



Why Theatre?

Schools get offered many kinds of programming. If you want to get into schools and earn an opportunity to *really connect* with K-12 students, you must be different. A wise man once said that adults make sense of their world through reality while kids make sense of their world through fantasy. I believe this and I believe that fictional characters help kids and teens model their world in a way that makes sense to them. Our theatrical presentations are filled with characters struggling with the same issues as the audience. They learn about the world through these characters.

And the wonderful thing is, they also love revisiting these characters over and over again. This is advantageous because, as they grow older, bit by bit, the real world comes into focus with the help of fiction, fantasy and fun.



Critical to live theatre are actors. They are real, live, three-dimensional human beings that travel into schools, and should start out as friendly hosts and as real people

Once the show starts, the actors use their unique craft to transform into characters filled with life, knowledge and passion. This is the best way to fully capture the attention and the hearts of students, educators and families.

Unlike any other form of communication, theatre opens up the heart and the mind right here, right now. It can do this because it's a shared experience.

(See: NTC Ed Talk, *Production Innovations: Social Norming*, 2017)



“Adults make sense of their world through reality, kids make sense of their world through fantasy.”

Scripting

Scripts start with identifying four educational concepts that any effective educational theatre show is built around. You'll want to make sure that when the kids walk out of the theatre, gymnasium or cafeteria, they remember at least four key messages. Of course, they are learning a lot more, but if they walk out with just four, the theatre presentation will have done its job.

Finding four educational concepts can be a challenge. Usually there are many more than four key concepts that could be covered in one presentation. When you whittle down to the final educational topics it is imperative that each of them has:

1. Clarity
2. Value
3. Action

CLARITY

Clarity means the educational concept is simple enough so that the target age group understands it, but is also meaningful enough for the variety of age groups present. You will also be training teachers with the presentation, so keep in mind the need for context.

VALUE

Each educational concept included in the script must have educational value. The concepts must tie to local, state or federal education standards. If they don't, you are probably not getting into the school to begin with. In order to be valued by teachers, your programs must align with educational standards. We use standards found in the Next Generation Science Standards, the Common Core Language Arts and Math Standards, the JumpStart Coalition for Financial Literacy Standards, the National Health Education Standards, and of course the state standards in all 50 states. There are a lot of standards to use.

By making sure that the content of your program is aligned with the greatest number of standards across the most subject areas guarantees that your theatre shows are going to be valued by teachers and educators. In other words, it's worth the instructional time. Only then can you ensure acceptance into schools.

(See: NTC Ed Talk, Quality Assurance for School Channel Programs, 2017)



ACTION

All educational concepts need to have a call-to-action. At the end of the script, we give the audience something specific they can do to help themselves, their families and their communities. Whether it's turning off a light when they leave a room to help save energy or becoming an everyday hero in an anti-bullying presentation, it's imperative they feel the power to make a difference.

Once you have clarity, value and action defined for each of your four educational concepts, you should build the story around them.

Theatre Techniques

There are a few techniques to use to make sure that your message connects with students, educators and their families. Incorporate a lot of audience participation. Make sure that you invite volunteers into the story so that they can share in the information and build excitement for the audience by seeing their peers on stage.

Another important consideration is to hire professional adult actors to go into the schools. Their training, talent and enthusiasm will make your shows far more memorable.

When creating an educational theatre presentation, always play up to the audience, not down. By this I mean, don't use condescending language and attitudes. Many adults just naturally use a kids' voice when talking with kids. New teachers learn very quickly to raise their tone and sophistication in school. Any show needs to be fast-paced, funny and sophisticated. Scripts must be age-appropriate for students and also contain teacher jokes for the adults in the audience as well.



“I always tell my actors, forget about whatever you may think you know about children’s theatre and just enjoy doing the show. If you enjoy it, the kids are going to enjoy it.”

In addition to these, there are a number of educational techniques that help make sure your message connects with the students, their teachers and their families. Key among these is repetition. Key among these is repetition. The content messages must be repeated throughout the performance. In fact, continuous repetition is the most cited positive thing that we hear from teachers. They say it's the thing that makes NTC's theatre presentations an overwhelming success. Educators recognize the specific pedagogy in each show and they can identify how to build on the student's enthusiasm back in the classroom.

(See: NTC Ed Talk, Production Innovation: Thinking and Learning Toolkit, 2018).



“We receive over 10,000 teacher evaluations every year. Ninety-nine percent of them say they would like to have the program back.”

Results

It is important to ask teachers to evaluate every one of your programs that go into schools. Only with teacher evaluation and honest feedback can you hone your skills and develop effective and efficient educational theatre in schools.

Many organizations use outside academic institutions and third-party evaluators to help with reporting. Most of these efforts include pre-test, post-test and long-term retention surveys. This ensures that a school channel program is effective and relevant.



NTC is a premium provider of educational programming with operations in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand. We work directly between schools and clients to promote beneficial behaviors and life skills to students in grades K-12 on a local, regional and national level.

Since 1978, we have formed connections and helped develop relationships between thousands of schools and corporations, nonprofits and governmental organizations. Our value is not just in the impact we create; our turnkey services also change the lives and trajectories of students, mobilize parents and entire families with beneficial messages, and cultivate community-wide goodwill for clients.

Our award-winning educational programs are provided free for schools and are customizable to accommodate specific messages and goals for clients. Through formats including live performance, in-class discussion, graphic novels, print curriculum, and digital games and activities, we present topics such as energy conservation, safety, financial literacy, STEM, water and environmental stewardship, and health and social responsibility in ways that engage and empower students. In doing so, we are helping our clients to be forces of change for students, parents and communities.

