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Building Stories: Unleashing the Power of Stories to Expand Learning

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I remember the moment clearly. It was 2006, and I was sitting in an empty theater following the final performance of our department's unique production of *The Diary of Anne Frank (1947)*. We had two 'Anne Franks' in our production: The Jewish girl we know, hiding from Nazis during the Holocaust, and a Rwandan Tutsi girl we did not know, hiding from Hutu Extremists during the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda. As the director, my justification was simple: to include our black and brown students in the story (more than half our students are non-white). The cast and I circled up one last time, wiped our tears and… there I was in the empty theater. That's it?! After such a meaningful educational process, we just stop there? So, I scribbled some learning highlights beyond the stage that I knew would benefit these students for life: *community building, conflict management, and identity exploration*. Little did I know that I was scribbling the pillars for what was to become Buffalo State University's Anne Frank Project (AFP).

Fast forward 18 years; AFP has grown into a social justice program at Buffalo State, using stories as the platform for all we do. Most of our work focuses on Story-Based Learning (SBL), moving the academic content from the students 'brains to their hearts, using their bodies, with stories as the curricular foundation. These stories are created by students in their classrooms using the given lesson as the prompt for the story-building. We use the term story-building (not storytelling) to reflect the building block process required for creating meaningful stories (Drew 2020). We train educators, community organizations, and businesses how to harness the power of stories to *Build Communities, Manage Conflicts, and Explore Identities*. Sound familiar? The socio-emotional and academic success we see in our partner schools is overwhelmingly positive. We weave the SBL through the academic fabric of each classroom and school; this is not 'break time' for the 'feel good stuff'; this is pedagogy that addresses the students 'entire learning process simultaneously.

Let me share two examples. Our relationship with Rwanda has developed far beyond the play as we have taken over 170 students to this remarkable country, whose post-genocide narrative is based on forgiveness, unity, and love. My students process their Rwanda experiences in a story-building course with me where they build their own collective story into a new play. This play tours 20-30 local Buffalo public schools, literally bringing their Rwanda inspirations home. This year's play, currently touring, carries the theme: "Your journey towards forgiveness begins with empathy." Is there a high school student in the U.S. who *doesn't* need to hear that? My students follow each performance facilitating an SBL workshop with the high school audience.

The second example is from a teacher's perspective. AFP offers SBL professional development for local teachers each semester. These two-day trainings are followed by weekly classroom visits, assisting the teachers with the application of SBL. A local middle school teacher was sent to our training by her principal, hoping to foster more student engagement in her classes. This teacher was highly suspicious of our work and confessed, "I don't do this kind of stuff!" After one semester with AFP this teacher shared:

> "When students feel a sense of inclusion and belonging in a classroom, it increases their academic performance and intrinsic motivation. SBL provides a framework for illuminating student voice and fostering classroom connection centered on story. SBL allows the classroom to evolve into a community that demonstrates concern for each other, holds each other accountable and allows students to leave the classroom feeling interconnected with a profound sense of belonging."

I am fortunate to be from the theater where so many building blocks to learning exist in our routines. The process for transferring theater practice into pedagogy is not an easy one; it requires devoted collaborations with students and colleagues, support from supervisors, and the ever-present foundation of my heroes: Augusto Boal (*Theater of the Oppressed 1979*) and Joseph Campbell (*The Hero's Journey 1990*). I am fortunate to have had the time to weave these elements into a practice.

I will conclude the same way we begin our work with our partners: "You matter and your stories matter. We, the Anne Frank Project, are here to help you tell your story, because if you don't, someone else will, and they're going to get it wrong." Tell your story!

References

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Author Biography

Drew Kahn is a Distinguished Service Professor at SUNY Buffalo State where he has taught acting, devised theater (President's Award for Excellence in Teaching/SUNY), and directed productions (Kennedy Center Award) for over 30 years. He taught K-12 populations for 10 years before his work in higher education.

He is the Founding Director of The Anne Frank Project, a multi-layered social justice initiative at SUNY Buffalo State that utilizes the wisdom of Anne Frank as a springboard for the examination of genocide and intolerance through the lens of story and performance.

He presents and teaches internationally on the universal language of theater and the intersection of story, conflict resolution, and community building—most recently in Rwanda, Kenya, Switzerland, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar and Vietnam (Toby Ticktinback Award for Holocaust Education; Community Leader Award, National Federation for Just Communities).

Professor Kahn received his M.F.A. in Classical Acting from Southern Methodist University and his B.A. in Drama from San Diego State University.

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