Chapter 6
Collaborative Musical Theatre:
A Nearly All-Encompassing Teaching Tool

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ABSTRACT

The author describes her process of utilizing collaborative musical theatre as a teaching tool in three settings. These include an elementary school in the Bronx, New York, which adheres to the theory of Multiple Intelligences; undergraduate and graduate music education courses at Lehman College, City University of New York; and in a College/Community Collaborative Musical Theatre Project at Lehman College. The chapter depicts how the collaborative process closely resembles the goals of the Multiple Intelligences theory by the way it stimulates, encourages and nurtures the many capacities and ways of expression of the participants: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Mathematical/Logical, Spatial, Kinesthetic, Linguistic, Musical and Naturalistic, and therefore, serves as an effective, all-encompassing teaching tool.

COLLABORATIVE MUSICAL THEATRE AND THE MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES AT P.S. 37

In 1993, I began my work at P.S. 37, the first multiple intelligences school in New York City. The principal of this brand-new school, Carolyn Gear, considered it her mandate to create a robust, multiple intelligences environment. Ms. Gear was in-
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spired by Dr. Howard Gardner’s theory delineating eight ways of knowing\(^1\). Gardner (1993) writes, “‘Multiple’ to stress an unknown number of separate human capacities, ranging from musical intelligence to the intelligence involved in understanding oneself; ‘intelligences’ to underscore that these capacities were as fundamental as those historically captured with the IQ test”. Thus, Principal Gear set about hiring an art specialist, a drama teacher, a librarian who was also an accomplished dancer, a physical education teacher, a science teacher, a computer technology instructor, and myself, a highly trained music specialist\(^2\). Our mission was to engage our 600 students with lessons targeting all their capacities and ways of understanding. Ideally, each lesson taught would employ a wide variety of strategies to engage the intelligences of our learners, and stimulate those capacities not yet activated. For example, in the music room, when teaching the patterns of a major scale, I would arrange the chairs to replicate the distances between the whole and half step intervals of the scale. Upon recognizing these patterns, students would march and sing, dramatize, and illustrate these major and minor intervals, and in the process, discover parallels in the world which reflect the concepts of major and minor and whole and half. Thus, I would utilize spatial, mathematical, kinesthetic and linguistic strategies to teach a musical concept. To teach dynamics, I might greet the children in a full, moderate or whispered voice, and invite them to come up to the front of the room and address their peers in various degrees of loudness as well, to find “noisy” and “pastel” hues in examples of fine art, and to discover their practical applications in group dynamics and interpersonal relationships.

Teaching through the multiple intelligences was challenging work. It required the practitioner to stretch, and often, step outside her own comfort zone to explore an intelligence with which she might not feel quite at home. Hanafin (2014) found this to be true when conducting research into the Irish educational system’s use of the Multiple Intelligences theory\(^3\). “If teachers teach consistently or exclusively through intelligence areas where only some students are strong, then many students may struggle to learn in ways which suit neither their learning styles nor intelligence profiles…They began to see that, in their classrooms, dominant teaching styles evolved from these comfort zones.” In the Irish project as well as at P.S.37, it was essential that professional development be offered to the faculty so that they would not only be well exposed to the various intelligences and concurrent strategies, but that they would begin to feel comfortable applying them.

In the music classroom, it was exciting to come up with creative and multi-layered methods to teach any given concept. For rhythmic notation, I hit upon the idea of placing four chairs in front of the room: one for each quarter note of a 4/4 measure. The children were told we would be having a dinner party, and four students volunteered to come up and sit on the chairs. As I used a feather or baton to point to each child, the class clapped and intoned, “Ta Ta Ta Ta” representing the
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