



Why Theatre Education Matters:
Understanding its Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Benefits
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Thalia R. Goldstein, Ph.D.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Theatre Education Matters: Understanding its Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Benefits (Goldstein, 2024, New York: Teacher's College Press) is a research-backed, accessible, and comprehensive overview of the psychological components in theatre classes for adolescents, with parallels to classes for children and adults. In this first-of-its-kind, nationally representative study of actual acting classes, Goldstein shows how the activities of acting are directly connected to critical 21st Century Skills such as collaboration and communication, and cross-disciplinary abilities such as creativity and emotional intelligence.

The book provides evidence-based analysis of acting classes, a framework for the activities of acting, and explanations of the extensive connections between skills built by acting classes and the neurological, cognitive, and social skills that children and adolescents need to be successful in school and in life.

The book provides research-driven answers to the questions:

- What do students learn when they learn in an acting class?
- What habits of mind and skills are students gaining by taking acting classes?
- How can theatre skills become cognitive, social, and emotional skills that transfer to other contexts?
- What is the point of a theatre education?

To answer these questions, Goldstein and her team studied 40 classes across 5 locations from 2017-2020, filming 56 hours of actual classes as they happen in high schools. In the first section of the book, Goldstein lays out the methods of the study, introduces how acting classes contain various ways of organizing time, space, and activity. The book then moves into the Habits of Mind, defined as mental approaches to the world brought to bear when a student (or really, anyone) needs to solve a problem or complete a task. These skills, behaviors, and tendencies are buildable, learnable, and stable over time, and each can be tied to important cognitive, social, and emotional skills in child and adolescent development critical for academic and social success.

The main section of the book breaks down the **8 Acting Habits of Mind** that occur in all acting classes. Each chapter goes through an individual acting habit of mind using vignettes, scientific studies, and long form classroom examples. The Acting Habits of Mind are linked to different types of acting exercises, including scene study, reflection and critique, warm up, and improv. The final section of the book shows how the 8 Acting Habits of Mind are used together to build emotional intelligence, creativity, and wellbeing. Theatre is discussed as the ultimate “flexible toolkit”, used across many different groups of students, contexts, and classrooms. The book concludes by laying out directions for future research and interventions using acting classes, taking care not to harm, and engaging in inclusive, culturally sensitive, and holistic learning possibilities.

Table 1 lists all 8 Acting Habits of Mind, with short definitions and the main correlated psychological construct in adolescence.

| ACTING HABIT OF MIND | SHORT DEFINITION | PSYCHOLOGICAL SKILLS |
|---|---|---|
| Body Awareness and Control | Understand and control your physicality | Emotion regulation, interoception, proprioception. |
| Release Inhibitions & Be Playful | Perform fully and without self-judgment | Self-trust, self-concept, identity development, positive risk taking. |
| Imagine & Envision | Create and think beyond perception | Counterfactual thinking, creativity, positive mind wandering. |
| Consider Others | Think about others' minds, emotions, and perspectives | Empathy, theory of mind, compassion. |
| Think Collaboratively | Actively and purposefully communicate, work with others | Communication, teamwork, leadership, social connection. |
| Be Flexible | Be open to new ideas and changing ideas | Divergent thinking, lack of rigidity, executive function. |
| Commit to Choices | Make firm, bold, and definitive decisions | Decision making, positive risk taking, impulse control. |
| Reflect & Think Metacognitively | Thoughtfully consider your own and others' actions | Second order cognition, insight, learning to learn. |

While each Acting Habit of Mind can be thought of as its own approach to learning in theater classrooms, taken together, the 8 Acting Habits of Mind are used iteratively in exercises such as scene study, improv games, and while critiquing and reflecting on performances.

The book shows how no other activity or subject area in school works as theatre does—allowing for students to practice, in a safe space, physicalized emotions, perspectives, and roles. This containment, so important in therapeutic practices, when combined with acting mindsets of flexibility, reflection, collaboration, self-trust, and imagination, makes theatre a unique setting and activity for child and adolescent development. Nowhere else in the academic curriculum do all of these elements of social and emotional intelligence and learning come together.

Using not only using a data-driven and systematic approach to show connections between acting classes as a whole and favorable outcomes, but by actually breaking down acting classes into their underlying psychological components, Goldstein shows the integrated mental skills and abilities that can only be found in combinations in the acting classroom. Theatre as an art form and a classroom activity persists across generations and civilizations. Those who believe in and love theatre do so with passion and devotion. Artists, actors, and educators claim theatre can change the world. This book begins to uncover how.

Why Theatre Education Matters can be purchased wherever books are sold, and a companion website with additional materials is available at WhyTheatreEdMatters.com