

HOW TO GROW YOUR THEATRE DEPARTMENT

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Activities that help show the value of drama

Here, we offer ideas from existing drama teachers about the things they do in their schools to help show the value of drama. By showing its benefits and how these go beyond the subject itself and spread into other areas of the curriculum, drama teachers can hope to gain more recognition, more timetabled lessons and more support and commitment from SLT and parents to run additional drama activities.

1. Productions and workshops

Drama is a visual art form and is supposed to be watched; providing an audience for students' hard work really helps reward them and shows confidence in their abilities. If you illustrate that you are taking their drama performance seriously enough to provide an audience, they will take it seriously, too.

By promoting drama productions across the school and encouraging parents, staff and students to attend performances, drama is given prestige and recognition, raising the subject's profile. Students who weren't aware of drama opportunities outside of the classroom, or who have been teetering on the fence about whether to attend a club, may choose to join after seeing a live performance created by their peers:

'Showcases can be a great way of putting what students have learnt into practice, and a wonderful evening for others to see what they're missing out on. The formality of an evening performance is exciting for participants but also signals to the audience that this is an important event, much in the way professional theatre works.'

Chris, Head of Drama, London

These productions provide an enjoyable and celebratory event for parents to see a piece of drama that their children have worked on, and promotes a positive view of the school within the community. If members of the public are encouraged to attend, they'll see your school for its colourful, enthusiastic encouragement of young people and build the school's reputation in the wider community.

Assemblies, form time and PSHE can provide excellent opportunities to show snippets of extracurricular drama productions, and to help build interest in these groups. Students are encouraged to take ownership, decide on their own acting and staging decisions, and organise rehearsals; freedoms are afforded to those attending extracurricular groups that aren't always possible to offer during formal lesson time:

'With extracurricular drama groups, the pressures are different to classroom time: there's less focus on getting X, Y and Z done to achieve a grade and more space for experimentation and discovery.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

For those who want to pursue drama beyond school, offering after-school or holiday workshops can be one way to really build on existing skills and show value:

'We run a week of summer drama workshops to give older students a taste of drama-school training and to help prepare them for the routes into performing arts, beyond school.'

Ishani, Head of Drama, Bath

By offering workshops that directly help students with their decisions beyond school, the value of drama cannot be denied. Whether it's offering drama-school preparation, as above, or wider skills to prepare for further education, such as communication, teamwork or presentational skills, drama is an essential component for helping students prepare for their next steps.

2. Theatre trips

For some students, school-run theatre trips are their first (and maybe only) exposure to live theatre. It is an event that brings words on the page to life; drama is supposed to be seen, not read, so theatre trips offer the true experience of what a playwright intended, broadening a student's cultural exposure:

'Theatre is still widely considered the realm of the privileged, so when we took some inner-city students to see a show in the West End, for many of those children, they'd never done something like that before.'

'The expectations of them in a theatre setting were different to at school: with members of the public around, in a professional working theatre and grand setting, it gave students a whole new perspective of what drama is really about.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

Not only does a theatre production open up a young person's creativity and interpretations about what they're witnessing, but going to the theatre teaches them how to behave in a formal, public setting with other people around them, and encourages sustained focus for prolonged periods of time. Exposure to theatre contributes to turning out well-rounded students who have experienced a variety of cultural events:

'We organise termly theatre trips to see productions that range in style, culture and age. We want our students to experience theatre from different backgrounds and of both traditional and more abstract styles to further inspire their own work and encourage them to develop a more critical eye.'

Ishani, Head of Drama, Bath

If students see a story come to life on stage, they will take far more away from that piece than if they'd only read it, and feel inspired to start making similar decisions about their own performances. Theatre is a shared experience to refer back to as a group and can help not only their own drama work, but to make connections in subjects like English, history, languages and the arts as well as contributing to their overall personal development.

Trips are something most people remember from their school days; and they're something other students want to be included in. If you're planning drama trips and opportunities to meet the cast or director, even reluctant students may see the value in drama and be encouraged to get involved.

Other activities can be inspired as a result of theatre trips, too, such as writing an article about a production for the school newsletter, blog or social media channels. Students might create a news broadcast or podcast about their visit which could then be promoted on the school website. This would help add value to the subject and attract attention to its benefits.

3. Cross-curricular opportunities

There are endless opportunities to make links with other subjects through drama, especially those which fall into the core EBacc buckets, such as English:

'For a lot of children, their first introduction to Shakespeare is sitting in an English classroom reading it – that's not how Shakespeare is meant to be accessed. No wonder so many people, even into adulthood, hate Shakespeare. What teenager wants to sit down and read this text from a book? I didn't understand verse when I was 14.'

'But taking a group to see a production of 'Othello' and watch it live was amazing. All of a sudden things made sense to them.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

Finding texts that straddle both Drama and English curriculums can be a great opportunity for joint trips, workshops and collaborations between students. This also means that students who might otherwise not know one another, across sets and age groups, can benefit from working together on a joint activity, broadening interpretations and getting more out of it than if they only interrogated texts within their own classroom. Often popular texts are dramatised to help with students' understanding, so seeking out these productions can be an excellent cross-curricular opportunity:

'I was in the production 'Of Mice and Men' and we had loads of schools come and see it as it's such a widely studied text. One bottom-set class of kids who really struggled with English came in and clearly didn't want to be there.

'By the end, these teenage "bad boys" were in floods of tears. They were so moved by the story because it played out in front of them, they were so close to it – there's no way they could get that kind of emotional connection from just reading it in a classroom.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

Often teachers find themselves so busy that there isn't much time to communicate with other departments to find connections. But drama is the ideal subject to build these bridges: there isn't any subject that couldn't be enhanced by roleplay or improvisation. PE, for example, offers a wonderful opportunity to create a joint awards ceremony for PE and drama stars:

'A close connection with other subject teachers is recommended, in order to keep track of how students are performing in class as well as in the drama room. Sports and Drama are very well linked, so a positive dialogue with the PE department can often be very useful. Sports gets so much focus in many schools that tying these awards in with the drama department can really help raise the profile of performing arts in schools.'

Chris, Head of Drama, London

By elevating the profile of drama to be awarded alongside sports prizes – which are often established and prestigious – schools indicate that these subjects are of equal value, and therefore worthy of equal investment to students, teachers and parents.

4. Celebration of student leadership and independence

Drama presents a great opportunity to develop students' leadership skills by conducting drama games, writing their own material and directing their peers. The format can be easily assimilated, depending on

age, ability and confidence levels. **Giving everyone the opportunity to take the lead** is a vital part of drama:

'We run drama clubs as well as letting students run their own clubs, for example, a scriptwriting club. We encourage students to write and direct their own productions, taking ownership of their performances and creating drama about the things that matter to them.'

Ishani, Head of Drama, Bath

Self expression, leadership and collaboration are all encouraged through drama; valuable skills for life. Imaginative writing and having the independence to work on their own pieces is something there isn't always a lot of time for in other areas of the curriculum. Empowering students with knowledge about e-safety and other relevant topics that affect their daily lives works really effectively when explored through drama; a safe space where students can talk about their worries without feeling so exposed.

'E-safety work and confidence training are so important. We then role-play and put learning in context. I have conversations with students and do role plays – almost doing drama by stealth – then we look at how we can create short stories and bits of writing about their own experiences that they then have the opportunity to share. Before they know it, they've basically written a play.'

Lizi, drama teacher, Leeds

Drama not only teaches emotional independence, but the responsibilities that can be earned through mature and trustworthy behaviour, such as learning how to operate production equipment:

'We encourage students to take a lead on the direction and production of their pieces – they do the lighting, they're in control of the sound system, building scenery from scratch and earning responsibility all the while.'

'The children watching can't believe what the drama students are being trusted with and allowed to do with this expensive equipment! I think it inspires a bit of envy in the audience, which is a great way to expose students to the different sides of drama – it's not all about getting up on stage.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

These skills can all be rewarded with credits or grades through drama examinations, too. This is a way to build their personal statements in preparation for further education or job opportunities. Many qualifications champion independence and leadership, awarding marks for these skills and thus showing even more value in them.

There are so many arguments for making time for drama. Its ability to enhance other subjects and create links between different areas across schools who may otherwise not speak, is a powerful benefit that should be encouraged in every school. If students realise there's a dialogue between drama and other perceived 'more important' subjects, they will soon put more focus on it.

For parents, seeing their children grow in confidence, independence and reliability is a huge advocate for drama, plus the positive effects it can have in enhancing other subjects such as English, means they're more likely to encourage their child to participate. Perhaps most importantly, drama activities expose students to experiences they wouldn't otherwise necessarily have, developing more rounded, open-minded and enquiring young people.

How running graded exams helps raise the profile of drama

Offering graded drama exams in schools brings a wealth of benefits, not only directly to students' skillset, confidence and sense of achievement, but for how your subject is perceived by staff and parents. A cohort of positive drama grades can contribute to the overall success of the school, with results counting towards measures **such as Progress 8.**

Drama exams offer the opportunity for students to widen and enhance their skills in other subjects, too, combining skills from English, engineering, art, technology, IT and beyond. By raising the profile of drama in your school, other subjects will find their skillsets are also brought to the forefront.

With dwindling arts funding and **the number of drama teachers ever decreasing**, those who remain need to be more creative than ever to help raise the profile of their subject in schools. By earning qualifications, building CVs and adding to UCAS applications, students can show they are well-rounded individuals, ready to succeed in their next steps through drama examinations.

1. Parents, staff and teachers take drama more seriously

Exams irrefutably demonstrate progress, highlight achievement and offer opportunities to showcase talent. Offering drama qualifications in your school directly impacts the perception of the subject, boosting its credibility and helping reposition it as a worthwhile subject for students to pursue across all ages.

As well as exams such as GCSE and BTEC, many schools incorporate other drama qualifications into lesson or enrichment time, such as graded drama exams. An option such as **Arts Award** which can be completed through drama, not only looks impressive later on when they start putting their personal

statement together for college and university applications, but encourages the continuance of drama exams as they progress through the school:

'Next academic year, Year 8 students will complete their Bronze Arts Award as part of the drama curriculum. The hope is to raise the profile of drama at the school, and to remind students of the benefits and joys of the subject.'

Ishani, Head of Drama, Bath

Giving students an early taste of drama performance and grading helps encourage respect for the subject across the school and elevates its importance from the start of a student's education in the eyes of parents and staff.

Live performances of exam pieces create an opportunity to invite parents and members of the public into school to watch a showcase. This is an opportunity for students to practise in front of a live audience, as well as to inspire students lower down the school who may be considering opting for GCSE or A-Level Drama:

'It's great to give parents the chance to come in and see their children in a different context, not just for a parents' evening, but to actually see their children perform. In a time when schools are so league-tables driven, it's great to show another side to exams; that schools are investing in their students' happiness as well as their academic achievements.'

'Drama shows that use exam pieces create a lovely environment of celebration and confidence in the students. Parents can watch performances and see the positive impact of drama for themselves, instead of just receiving a piece of paper through the post with grades on it.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

These live showcases also act as an opportunity for SLT and other teachers to see the positive work going on in drama classrooms, which can sometimes feel unfamiliar to those in other subject areas – especially if much of your teaching happens behind closed doors in a blacked-out studio!

Planning an opportunity for professional actors to come in and help prepare students for exams can be a wonderful way to raise the profile of drama in your school. Creating excitement and status around these visits can really highlight the importance of the subject to SLT, parents and other students. During the time-consuming and disciplined rehearsal period, it's a great idea to incentivise commitment from students by rewarding them with feedback from industry professionals outside of the drama department:

'Bringing in industry professionals to run special guest workshops and give feedback to students in the build up to their exam performances really adds gravitas to what the students are preparing.'

Chris, Head of Drama, London

Drama exams can also offer students the opportunity to try new production skills and work 'behind the scenes'. This enables every student to find their strengths and take their exams in a direction that interests them, not necessarily performance. For some students, this is a huge boost to their confidence, since they have a love of the dramatic process but not necessarily being on stage – for SLT and parents, it's important they understand the successful directions these pathways can lead:

'One of my students was taking part in the school drama group but still struggled with confidence. But by being encouraged to take part in drama exams, he found himself in charge of cues for the lighting, actors' movements, and prop logistics – something just clicked for him and he found his place.'

'He's now gone on to do a degree in Creative Technology to pursue the stage management side of drama. Had he not been exposed to these skills through graded exams, and only continued in a less formal setting, he may well not have come across the role that helped drive his future decisions.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

2. Celebrating the achievements of students

Implementing formal drama exams gives students a recognised qualification to celebrate their achievements, and ensures their own perception of drama as a worthy pursuit. Drama exams offer opportunities for prize-giving and award ceremonies, where parents and teachers can be invited to attend and honour students:

'We host a Young Actor Of The Year competition where we encourage students to write their own monologues, taking ownership of their own writing and performance.'

Ishani, Head of Drama, Bath

Where students have written and performed their own content as part of an exam, award ceremonies are a wonderful opportunity to showcase this talent. By creating your own internal awards, as well as the more formal exam qualifications, schools show the value of drama as something to be celebrated. An element of competition is often popular with young people, too, encouraging them to take part and compete against peers in a friendly and encouraging environment.

Many students take part in drama exams through extracurricular school clubs as additional commitments to their academic subjects. This requires determination and organisation which should be celebrated, and can open opportunities to students which may not otherwise be available.

Something which is encouraged, rather uniquely, through drama exams is the concept of collaboration. While students receive an individual grade, personal to their own efforts, many drama exams also offer a group grade, meaning students have to work as a team:

'Students are encouraged to work together in order to achieve their joint goals. A lot of subjects don't require students to do this or get a grade based on their combined actions within a unit: graded drama exams require collaboration, good listening, and compromise – really adult skills, which should be celebrated.'

Chris, Head of Drama, London

These independent, mature skills could also form the basis of in-school awards evenings, creating prizes for teamwork, reliability and problem solving. The hope is that students will transfer these fantastic skills to their wider school life, becoming more generous learners who want to listen to and help those around them.

3. Preparation for college, university and beyond

There's no denying that the more exams you sit, the more confident and competent you become at handling these high-pressured situations. Completing drama exams at a young age gives practice in both written and practical situations, which can be transferred to other subject exams later on.

For those who want to pursue a future career in drama, having professional help to prepare for exams and auditions can be hugely beneficial.

'Our secondary school got a professional actor to come in and help prepare A-Level students for their drama-school exams and get their performance pieces ready for their auditions.'

'Speaking to a working actor who knew about the audition process for drama school – and had survived it themselves! – really gave the students confidence. They were able to ask anything so the whole prospect became a lot less daunting for them, and they went off to auditions with their heads held a little higher.'

Adam, actor and drama teacher, Liverpool

Not only can students hoping to pursue a drama career benefit from training in advance of university interviews; the practical skills learnt from drama exams build confidence for interviews in other academic areas, too. How to conduct oneself professionally in these scenarios is a skill that can be learnt through drama; there are few other subjects that offer similar preparation in this way:

'We've done a lot on interview techniques with our older classes ready for their UCAS applications and university interviews. Even simple things like how to walk into a room, and focus on all of those microsignals you don't realise you're giving off.'

'Role playing a version of yourself that you need to slightly hide behind when you're feeling nervous has worked especially well with some really shy young people.'

Lizi, drama teacher, Leeds

Drama graded exams give extra weighting to the subject, setting drama on an equal level with other subjects within your school. Not only do they give confidence to students when sitting further exams – live performance, in particular, takes courage and preparation – but it teaches wider skills that will be required in future high-pressure scenarios, such as job, college and university interviews.

Many universities like to see extracurricular pursuits as part of a personal statement, demonstrating a well-rounded and ambitious young person with a wide range of interests. Taking drama exams is a great way for students to show they have more to them than purely academic achievements, particularly for those aspiring to apply for some of the most prestigious universities. Showing a creative and practical side, helps students who might otherwise blend in with many other applicants to stand out, giving them the tools they need to put their best foot forward, once they leave your school gates.

How Arts Award can help to show the value of drama

Drama is a key part of the curriculum at The King's School, Worcester. Head of Drama, Shara Parry, whose team includes two full time drama teachers and a dance teacher, explains 'This is something that sets us apart from a lot of other independent schools where it is offered as an extra-curricular subject only. We have compulsory drama for Years 7 and 8, and we have a healthy uptake of drama at GCSE. In 2018, 19 pupils took it with 84% gaining grades 7-9 and 100% gaining grades 6-9. We also offer A-level Drama and Theatre.'

In addition to the timetabled sessions, pupils at The King's School are offered the chance to **work towards an Arts Award** at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels as part of the school's enrichment offer, with a range of arts subjects contributing:

'Pupils have been successful in achieving five Gold, 20 Silver and 42 Bronze externally accredited Arts Awards, for outstanding work towards creative challenges...This success is strongly supported by the commitment of the school leadership and of governors to music, art, DT, drama and sport as well as by that of individual members of staff.'

Independent Schools Inspectorate report, 2017

The vast majority of students who sign up to Arts Award are not studying for drama at GCSE or A-level, a fact that Shara feels reflects the openness and breadth of Arts Award itself. 'I love the way Arts Award allows students to follow their own arts pathway, and present work in a way that reflects their unique interest and style of exploration.' says Shara.

This is also reflected in the Independent Schools Inspectorate's comments: 'Pupils feel that the arts are a natural and central part of their school lives, and pupils said that even when not studying art themselves, they nevertheless enjoyed participating in the creative challenges posed by the Arts Award.'

Arts Award at King's encompasses drama, dance, music and art, and there is at least one trained Arts Award adviser in each department. Working together has helped boost all the departments' profiles as it means there are pupils taking an arts qualification outside the traditional GCSE/A Level cohorts, so the audience contact is widened.

'Without an audience you don't have art, so if you want to raise profiles you need to engage more people as audiences. Drama's profile has definitely raised: we tend to be the most prolific department in generating audience events.' says Shara.

Arts Award has helped Shara demonstrate the value of her subject in a number of ways, not only by enabling her to clearly show the progress of students who haven't opted for drama at Key Stages 4 and 5. It provides a focus and a framework for enrichment activities with tangible outcomes that can be used to shine a light on the work of the department.

At Gold level, for instance, one of the units students must complete is about formulating a view on an arts issue. 'It's about drawing together research and formulating judgements on the basis of experience an evaluation. Pupils must then share their view on this, but the way they do this is open to them to decide.' Shara explains.

'Pupils demonstrate a clear awareness that the decisions they make affect their future success, exemplified by the Arts Award pupils who showed a mature ability to make informed decisions confidently in choosing their areas of focus and challenge.'

Independent Schools Inspectorate report, 2017

Drawing on a recent increase in Gold Arts Award participants wanting to present their opinions via journalistic articles, Shara now publishes an annual magazine which brings together all these pieces. The publication offers clear evidence of research and thought-development and has a wide circulation both within the school and more widely through City arts hubs. [It is also available to read online.](#)

Student-led arts events at Gold level enable students to take the reins of events that are traditionally on the school calendar anyway - but Shara feels that this can sometimes lead to the student's efforts going un-noticed or being taken for granted. The most successful projects are those in which the students create something unique, leading to new traditions and annual events on the school calendar, as Shara explains:

A great example of this in action at King's Worcester is our Lower Fourth (Year 7) Shakespeare Fest. Three years ago, two Gold students banded together. They convinced the Head of Year to let them run a Shakespeare project for the whole of Year 7. They abridged 6 Shakespeare plays and wrote new mini-scripts, allocated a play to each tutor group, liaised with tutors to run workshops and rehearsals with all the groups, coordinated it into one celebratory performance, invited all the Year 7 parents and hosted the whole event! It's now a staple on the Year 7 calendar and subsequent Gold Arts Award students have picked up the reins to manage it each year. Things like that definitely raise the profile of drama! It's not something which would have been possible just under the banner of extra-curricular drama - it needed the umbrella of the Arts Award qualification to give the idea validity and urgency and the momentum to actually get it to fruition.'

The students are passionate about the work they submit for the Arts Award. Aspects of the potential material such as speaking and teaching are great for confidence building. At Bronze level, they may be teaching anything from drama warm-up games to origami. By the time they reach Gold level, they are producing whole arts events, with plenty of scope for the development of leadership skills. This autonomy and confidence-building makes it easy for parents to see the value of pupils' participation.

'The arts in general (not just in our school) face misconception and underestimation. But once we explain what we actually do, most people are receptive, and Arts Award is a supportive resource: helping us to demonstrate the value of arts-based learning to parents and governors. This is particularly true of less-

receptive groups, traditionally adults without an arts background themselves - whether fellow teachers, parents or governors. When their only experience is of the end product – i.e. looking at the picture or coming to see the show, it's easy to forget that generating two hours' worth of content took over 50-60 hours of rehearsal, and part of that rehearsal involves gaining knowledge and understanding of other subject areas.

'Arts Award is a great way to redress those prejudices because when they become aware that these young people are publishing magazines, going out on work experience, managing whole school events, they suddenly realise that there may be more to the arts...!'

Students at King's Worcester have found some impressive work experience opportunities, including one who refused to take no for an answer until he got an opportunity to shadow a West End musical director. He made such a good impression, he was invited back for further West End music theatre experience during the summer holidays.

Closer to home, King's Worcester Arts Award students will often volunteer to help at local arts festivals to gain that experience demanded by the course of working alongside arts professionals. 'They definitely fly the flag for the school and the department by doing so', explains Shara. 'In return, the school/department gets offered more opportunities and placements so it's a positive, self-propelling cycle.

'The whole experience of building an Arts Award portfolio (providing evidence of students' creative journeys for assessment) is fun, a way to demonstrate passion and life experience that the students already have. It is a way of demonstrating value for the passions: theatre, visual arts, and live music, not only from a performance point of view, but as a discerning viewer as well, and translating these into UCAS points – up to 16 for a Gold level Arts Award, equivalent to a grade B at AS Level. In our school, they gain this at the end of Year 12 so they start making their UCAS applications at the start of Year 13 already having some UCAS points. Given that many schools no longer offer AS Level qualification post the Ofqual reforms, most students don't have any UCAS points at all when they are making their university applications. They are completely reliant on predicted grades and waiting for the August results – our Gold Arts Award pupils already have some tangible evidence to offer.

'In the future, we have plans to run group production qualifications with Trinity (The Plays in Production qualifications). These are a great way to reward work that is already going on rather than artificially creating out-of-context examination material. The focus is on creating something for a real audience –the bonus is allowing students to be rewarded for this with a nationally recognised qualification.

'There is nothing else really out there that is comparable to the suite of Arts Award qualifications. There are lots of qualifications out there from a variety of exam boards that measure performance standard, but Arts Award is unique in its focus on participation and commitment as an all-round theatre practitioner. I also believe that the skills required to compile the portfolio of evidence (whatever format that takes) are valuable in their own right.'