

Rethinking Education:

Why young people need theatre

Theatre can develop character and nurture qualities
that help youths navigate an increasingly precarious future

By Han Xuemei
Theatre Director & Co-Artistic Director of Drama Box

Education in Singapore today continues to revolve around the deeply-entrenched perception that it is the springboard to a “better life” via a “better job”. Even as policymakers and educators increasingly advocate for a holistic approach to education, the volatile economic realities of today continue to drive parents and youths to prioritise learning experiences that fulfill what they think the future job market demands over learning that feeds curiosity and develops character.

While this career-focused mindset may yield short-term gains, such as acquiring job-related skills or strengthening portfolios, it is insufficient for addressing the long-term challenges of an increasingly uncertain world.

Youths today inherit a future on the verge of collapse — shadowed by climate destruction, human rights violation and technological dystopia. Education must do more than equip them with skills; it must shape their character and nurture the intangible qualities of compassion, tenacity, and courage that will help them mend a fractured world. And we can begin by weaving theatre more deeply into their lives.

1. Compassion

Compassion describes the feeling of concern for the suffering of others, alongside the desire to relieve that suffering. It comes from a deep sense of emotional connection with yourself, others, as well as your surroundings.

At its core, theatre – like all art forms – is grounded in emotional connection. Watching a theatre performance can introduce youths to characters who are different from them and help them empathise with the complexities of the characters’ lives. Performances that invite audience participation extend this emotional connection into action.

In Drama Box’s forum theatre plays for youths, for instance, the audience is invited to replace a character of their choice and perform alternative actions that the character could have taken in moments of struggle. Through this collective role-playing and the facilitated discussions that

follow each intervention, participants learn about themselves and others in meaningful and transformative ways.



Secondary school students role-play in “Trick or Threat!” (2018), a forum theatre play by Drama Box that explores the issue of race and Islamophobia

2. Tenacity

Tenacity is the persistence to keep moving towards a goal despite difficulty; the ability to finish a task, to bring a process to fruition. It may not be as widely discussed as “creativity” or “resilience,” but is an essential quality that is often lacking in youths.

Youths today are born into a world dominated by mobile devices, on-demand streaming platforms and bite-sized, user-controlled content. Educators and parents I work with commonly observe that they have shorter attention spans, more scattered focus, and often struggle to see tasks through to completion.

Participation in theatre can help to address this problem. Firstly, unlike on-demand, user-controlled content, theatre cultivates patience and focus wherein the audience has to journey with the story in real time — they can neither rewind to recapture a moment that had been missed, nor skip ten seconds ahead.

Secondly, theatre also trains one's ability to listen intently and remain present. Improvisation activities, in which participants create a scene spontaneously, demand full attention and alertness to what is happening around them.



Youth participants improvising during Camp-O, an annual youth arts camp by Drama Box

3. Courage

The final – and perhaps most important – quality that theatre cultivates is courage: the ability to act in spite of fear. As French-American author Anaïs Nin puts it, “life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

Yet many of the youths I encounter speak of their fears of making mistakes and being judged. As a result, they often suppress their individuality, choosing instead to stay within “tried and tested” paths, hesitant to venture into the unfamiliar.

Theatre fosters environments that challenge youths to take risks while holding space for their discomfort and vulnerabilities. There is typically no simple right or wrong answers, and participants are encouraged to try without fear of making mistakes. At Camp-O, participants were encouraged to overcome self-consciousness about their bodies through a gamified movement activity. An 18 year-old participant reflected on the experience, “the instructor said that ‘you don’t have to care about other people, they are doing their own thing, you should be doing your own thing too. That’s a very important life lesson, because it’s your life, you should

be able to make your own path in life, rather than changing yourself because of what other people say.”



Youth participants exploring movement during Camp-O, an annual youth arts camp by Drama Box

The future has always been uncertain, determined by the actions of humankind in response to challenges of their time. How the world looks tomorrow will reflect the character of our youths. Education must do more than impart skills – it must cultivate compassion, tenacity, and courage. By weaving theatre and the arts more deeply into young people’s lives, we can equip them to embrace uncertainty, take risks, and step boldly into a world that desperately needs their ideas and action.