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The Job that Pays the Bills and How Theatre History Class Can Help

By Kathy Privatt

Sometimes disparate things are not really disparate, and sometimes a desired benefit in one area can be supported by new gains in another area. This study is such a case. Ineffective student behaviors and a need for increased job-seeking skills don't automatically call for a combined approach, but I found one. What follows is a case-study with data and next steps, that, while targeting and reflecting my theatre literature and history courses, can be adapted to a variety of courses and situations. I argue that incorporating an explicit focus on transferable career skills, combined with self-reflection as part of formative and summative assessment, aids students in understanding the relevance of their theatre history coursework and improves learning outcomes.

Much as I enjoy a good "character-actor" role, I don't want to be a real-life curmudgeon grouching about "kids these days." As referenced above, I was noticing a disturbing trend of students not completing homework assignments and also missing multiple class sessions in my theatre literature and history classes. I know that many of our students are coming with little theatre background beyond performing in a high school play or musical, so the study of theatre literature and history, much less dramaturgy, is uncharted territory. As academic advisor to many of them, I also know they might not take a history course voluntarily; it's perceived as "book stuff" requiring you to sit and study instead of doing creative work. Students also express their discomfort with their own ability to wrestle with "old" plays and cultures. Their unstated conclusion seems to be that it's easier to be happy with a low grade.

That lack of engagement opposes the achievement of my broadest learning goal: for the theatre artist, theatre history is creative food. That goal is only achieved to the extent that a student has a “rich body of knowledge”¹ to allow them to analyze and apply historical information to a current project; in other words, if a student theatre-maker doesn’t engage in the material in a theatre history class, then the class won’t support their creative work because they haven’t mastered enough to be useful. In a self-perpetuating cycle, the student’s lack of effort/engagement disallows creative application, reinforcing their perceived lack of value from the class.

As I’d begun to quantify the trend of decreased class engagement, I also heard from our career center that alums conducting mock interviews were reporting that our current students were weak in articulating the skills they brought to the table. When I added that report to my familiarity with Nancy Kindelan’s *Artistic Literacy*² as well as other sources detailing what attributes current employers are seeking, I found myself on the slippery slope of “how could they [the students] not realize???”

I decided to try a radical reframing: what if I assume they don’t know? They don’t know what I expect of them, they don’t know what is in the realm of their own ability and responsibility, and they don’t know how all of that is connected to their self-interest in future employment. That reframing led to a new approach, some new learning, and then conclusions and questions for future applications.

When I direct a production on campus, I give the cast and Stage Management team a Great Expectations sheet that clarifies what I “expect” of, and from, them.³ For this class, I decided to create “Expectations That Translate to Career Readiness (and Letters of Recommendation),” a document that would lay out students’ responsibilities in the class and the corresponding skills employers want. I chose

¹ James M. Lang, *Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 15. Lang discusses what cognitive science tells us about knowledge acquisition and utilization.

² Nancy Kindelan, *Artistic Literacy: Theatre Studies and a Contemporary Liberal Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

³ I learned this approach from my mentor and former professor, Jack Parkhurst, now Professor of Theatre at Nebraska Wesleyan.

that title to add transparency to the potentially murky waters of their future job searches. I frequently write recommendations for students, and draw on my experience of their work in class to do so.

My search for updated employer expectations led me to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). The following description of the organization is from their webpage:

“Established in 1956, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) connects more than 8,100 college career services professionals at nearly 2,000 colleges and universities nationwide, more than 3,100 university relations and recruiting professionals, and the business affiliates that serve this community. NACE is the leading source of information on the employment of the college educated, and forecasts hiring and trends in the job market; tracks starting salaries, recruiting and hiring practices, and student attitudes and outcomes; and identifies best practices and benchmarks.”⁴

In other words, NACE is an organization bringing together employers with the people who guide college students toward employability, and their Board reflects that mixture. I confirmed that our career center considers this a valid organization with research-based materials, and, with a bit of irony, discovered that we’re actually a member. Each year, NACE produces a Job Outlook survey. I pulled the top 9 from their *Job Outlook 2018* Survey as a workable and applicable set.⁵

With employer-desired attributes identified, I had plenty to draw on for behaviors I expected. As I mentioned above, I have good reason to suspect that students don’t usually come in the door self-motivated by the course material or the idea of learning about theatre literature and history in our two-course sequence; they’re in these classes because they’re required. My classes are usually a mix of theatre majors and minors, students fulfilling their Fine Arts General Education requirement, and the

⁴ National Association of Colleges and Employers. <https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/>.

⁵ NACE “The Key Attributes Employers Seek on Students’ Resumes,” last modified November 30, 2017, <https://www.nacweb.org/about-us/press/2017/the-key-attributes-employers-seek-on-students-resumes/>.

occasional history or English major. The courses are sophomore-level, but the typical class has a range of sophomores, juniors, and seniors. In addition, since its inception in 1930, our Department of Theatre Arts mission has been to foster theatre-makers. Thus we offer suggested classes for students primarily interested in performance, design/tech, or theatre literature and history, but we also embrace students whose class choices continue to move across the discipline in a more generalist approach. We do require involvement in six departmental productions, but that also reflects our theatre-maker approach as the participation can be in any facet. The specific class iterations I used for this study were somewhat atypical with a higher than average percentage of theatre majors and minors. These students were more actively choosing the broad theatre-maker approach than previous cohorts, with many devoting significant time to both performance and design/tech. We have not had a student focus on literature and history in over ten years. See Appendix 1 for the breakdown.

I will openly admit I started my Expectations list with the things that were “bugging” me. Then I walked through the various assignments on the syllabus, considering the skills needed to complete them successfully. As shown in figures 1 and 2, I edited the list of Expectations into “do’s,” not “don’ts,” and paired the list of class expectations to attributes employers seek in a table.

Fast forward to the first day of class. I prefaced this hand-out with a bit of my process and some supportive literature, in hopes of increasing buy-in. I started with my discovery that Lawrence University belongs to and values NACE, even using their data and suggestions as the career center works with students.

Figure 1: Theatre Traditions Expectations That Translate to Career Readiness (and Letters of Recommendation)

1. Be here and ready to go with note-taking materials out.
2. Silence cell phones by class time.
3. Assume there is something due for every class period. Use the syllabus and the Moodle page to know what's due when and what to bring with you.
4. Be here every class period, and take notes.
5. Take responsibility for eliminating your own distractions – online or otherwise.
6. If you are uncertain or confused by some material, ask – someone else will also gain understanding by your question. During class, just raise your hand. Outside of class, make a note to ask me in class or e-mail me your question.
7. For excused absences, let me know as soon as you know.
 - a. Complete work due prior to your absence (unless ill).
8. For all absences:
 - a. Get notes from a colleague when you return.
 - b. Schedule a meeting with me if you have questions or would like to review material.
 - i. You set the agenda for that meeting.
9. When we break into groups, clarify the goal and keep yourself and others on task. Let me know when you're done.
10. Plan your Project so completing it is a process.
11. Practice your presentation and time it at least twice, using your collages as a visual outline of your main ideas.
12. Prepare for the exams by reviewing the historical context of each unit and the various ways the plays are examples of theatre and dramatic literature of that time.

Figure 2: National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) Job Outlook 2018 Survey – Top 9 Attributes Employers Seek

Attribute	% of Respondents	Expectations
Problem-solving skills	82.9%	3, 10
Ability to work in a team	82.9%	6, 9
Communication skills (written)	80.3%	10, 12
Leadership	72.6%	8bi, 9, 11
Strong work ethic	68.4%	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Analytical/quantitative skills	67.5%	3, 6, 10, 12
Communication skills (verbal)	67.5%	6, 7, 8, 11
Initiative	67.5%	1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12
Detail-oriented	64.1%	1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9

Then, since we were in a course with a focus on source material, I referenced a study done by Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the AAC&U that, while not as current, mirrored the material in the *Job Outlook 2018 Survey*.⁶ Accessing a more familiar source to the students, I shared a quote from Liz Ryan, contributing writer for *Forbes*. She had started her career as an Opera Singer, and eventually became a Senior Vice President in a Fortune 500 company. She notes that job ads list “very specific types of experience” but employers look for these other qualities in interviews.⁷ Turning to my students’ experiences, I acknowledged that high schools are **very** different in daily expectations, and offered the “Expectations That Translate to Career Readiness (and Letters of Recommendation)” as my desire to be clear about my expectations, as I do in production rehearsals that many of them have experienced, so that we’re all on the same page. I have them read my list aloud, and then ask them to flip the page to the table I created, linking the expectations to the attributes employers seek. I also stress that those attributes mirror what I’m asked to address in letters of recommendation. I suggested that they think about what they do for class as potential interview stories to illustrate the skills wanted. Then I referred to the NACE attributes as various assignments and situations came up.

I’ve used the “Expectations That Translate to Career Readiness (and Letters of Recommendation)” sheet for two classes now, and I added two intentional self-assessment checks the second time. The first check came after the mid-term. I projected the top nine from the NACE list, gave them index cards which they numbered from one to nine, and then asked them to consider their performance on the midterm and mark the attributes they were using effectively. Then, I invited them to, with kindness toward themselves, note which they hadn’t been using and might want to for future

⁶ Nancy Kindelan, *Artistic Literacy : Theatre Studies and a Contemporary Liberal Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 64.

⁷ Liz Ryan, “12 Qualities Employers Look For When They’re Hiring,” last modified March 2, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/lizryan/2016/03/02/12-qualities-employers-look-for-when-theyre-hiring/#5a3b48ac2c24>

success. Several students were absent that day, and only five wrote anything about what they wanted to start doing. For my next iteration of this class, I will make that “what do I want to work on” more purposeful by asking them to identify what might help and invite meeting with me if they aren’t confident about identifying that attribute. While I hoped that calling their attention to how they were learning would reveal useful data, I found no meaningful correlations between their self-reported attribute usage and their grade in the course. See figure 3.

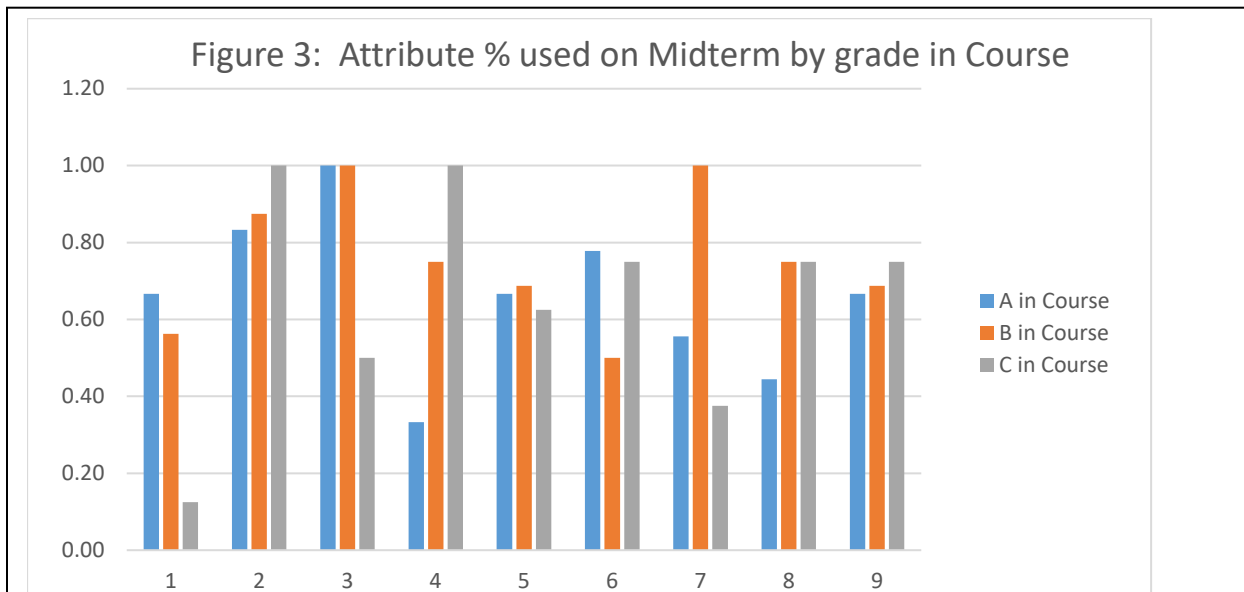
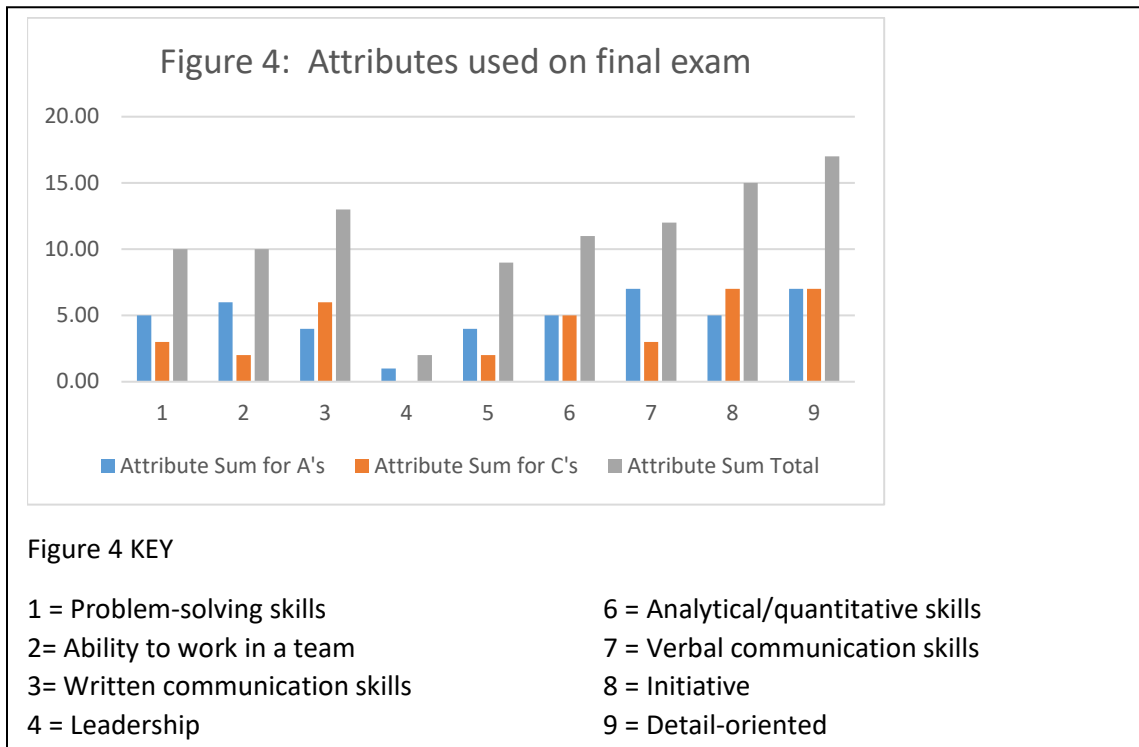


Figure 3 KEY

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 = Problem-solving skills | 6 = Analytical/quantitative skills |
| 2 = Ability to work in a team | 7 = Verbal communication skills |
| 3 = Written communication skills | 8 = Initiative |
| 4 = Leadership | 9 = Detail-oriented |
| 5 = Strong work ethic | |

The second self-assessment check I added was at the end of the final exam. I offered five extra minutes and five extra points toward the 150 point final if they completed the check after they completed the final. I gave them the top nine attributes again, and asked which attributes contributed positively to their preparation for the exam. All but two of the 30 completed it, giving me a useful data pool.

A seen in figure 4, the twelve who received a grade in the “A” range on the final, six reported “Ability to work in a team” and seven reported “Verbal communication skills” as significant. In their narrative, these students linked this attribute to studying together and using the team to connect the dots: who/where/what/when and how things trended between eras. Others referred to this group study approach as reflecting Initiative, Work Ethic, being Detail-Oriented, and Written Communication skills that shaped their notes and practice questions. Combined with the eleven who received a grade in the “C” range, the majority of students recognized the need for Detail-Oriented and Initiative attributes. Students receiving a grade in the “A” range noted verbal communication more often than their peers, and reported either team study or talking through ideas by themselves. This finding has potential to guide skill acquisition to enable students to exhibit the attribute. I will share the “group-connect-the-dots” approach, as well as talking through ideas by themselves with future classes, and will alter the pairing chart on the “Expectations That Translate to Career Readiness (and Letters of Recommendation)” sheet to reflect these links. My working hypothesis is that since these students are primarily theatre majors or minors, perhaps they are more “verbally” oriented. Their assessment may also be reflecting the mastery of material as evidenced by being able to “teach” it to a peer. Whether these hypotheses are correct or not, the combination of the study approach and the content I ask them to be responsible for on the exams has them mirroring the sort of group discussion common in early production meetings, with various theatre artists sharing their influences and references as the team considers the director’s approach and design choices. Making that link explicit may also further motivate students to utilize that approach to studying with, again, the added benefit of gaining interview stories to illustrate their communication and analytical skills, as well as their initiative.



An additional data points offers further direction for the next time I teach these classes.

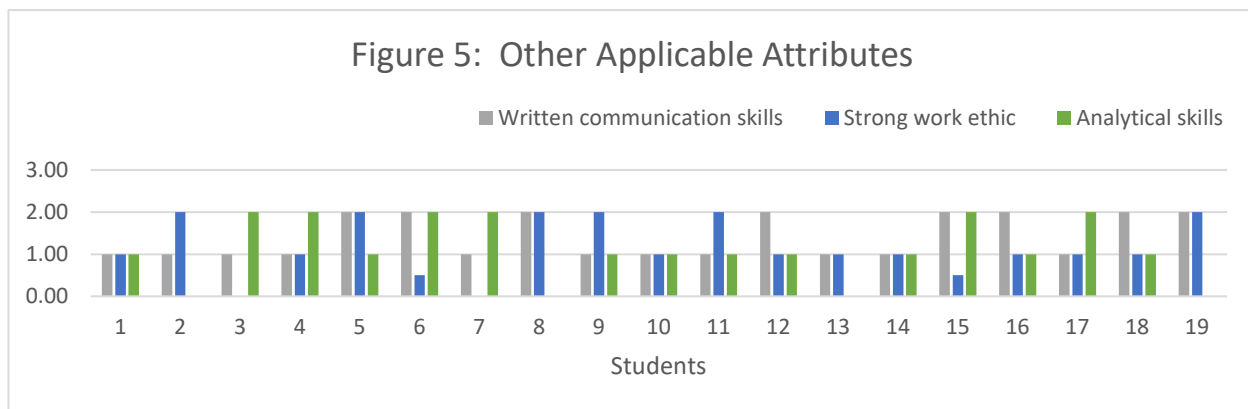
Students receiving “C’s” on the final exam reported that Written Communication Skills contributed positively to their preparation slightly more often than “A’s” did. The exam is short answer/essay, but I don’t require a particular format, and use lists, phrases rather than full sentences, and section divisions as examples of choices they might make to focus on the content they’re communicating rather than how that content appears on the page. So what are students referring to when they list Written Communication Skills? Is it as concrete as a “written” test requiring writing skills? Is it reflecting confidence or anxiety about abilities? Would a statement from me about the test not measuring ability to write “well” – paired with the successful strategy of meeting with others or talking yourself through course content – help address test anxiety? What might I learn if I add a Likert scale for anxiety about the exam?

This study started as a “they just need to know that they should be doing these things,” and some of the data suggests that as accurate, but the data also reveals places where students who are less

successful in class may be able to build general skills as well as their theatre-specific proficiencies. That possibility made me curious about other aspects of the class, such as the Dramaturgy Project each student completes. I present the Project as needing Problem-Solving Skills and Initiative to make it a PROCESS, not a last-minute mess. While grading the Projects, I use a rubric that corresponds to the steps in the assignment: research assigned areas, use research to develop an approach, use aspects of the approach to choose collage images. Unlike term projects in other disciplines, this assignment - if students complete it as a process – mirrors the research-to-creative-choices-presented-in-visual-form of a theatrical production, and, more specifically, a common sequence used by directors and designers. (A full report of that project is in *Performing Arts as High Impact Practice*, edited by Michelle Hayford and Susan Kattwinkel⁸). Collating the data I had gathered, nineteen students completed both the Mid-Term and Final Check-In. Six of the nineteen strongly chose using “Problem Solving” and “Initiative” (meaning they chose those two attributes for at least three of the four possible answers as shown in Appendix 2). I hypothesized that students who did well on the project would rate these highly. However, two of the six didn’t get an “A” on the project, so only four earned “A’s” on the project AND chose those two attributes after the midterm and final. For the other attributes that might impact success with the Project, eight students consistently reported Written Communication Skills, and six consistently reported Strong Work Ethic and Analytical Skills (although not the same six) as shown in figure 5. While the exam self-assessments may reflect students’ skills that aided the Dramaturgy Project, the results suggest to me that students are differentiating what skills they use when, which supports the original goals of this project. These results also make me curious about how they would report attributes used during their work on the project, and I hope that gathering data specific to the Project will yield

⁸ Michelle Hayford and Susan Kattwinkel, *Performing Arts as High Impact Practice* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

conclusions to offer future students as a guide to success and to helping them articulate how they've demonstrated employer-desired attributes.



Attempting to further banish the “old curmudgeon” from my future, I also quantified the number of students doing their class preparation assignments on time. I wasn’t imagining the shift: only four out of 30 did all assignments on time. With frustration threatening to morph into despair, I met with Kate Zoromski, Associate Dean of Academic Success from our Center for Academic Success.⁹ From her ongoing work with our students who struggle for a whole host of reasons, she advised me to be as concretely clear as possible about my expectations regarding assignments and to require completion of all assignments. I did so with no credit for late assignments, but no credit for any if all were not completed. Only one student didn’t complete them all, and I have anecdotal evidence to strongly suggest that this was a conscious choice. Since I design assignments to both prepare the students for class discussion AND to build knowledge of each era and its texts, “completed” is valid and important to the course learning objectives. For example, when students read *Lysistrata*, I ask them to identify the elements of a Greek Old Comedy. “Completed” also allows linkage to the skills and attributes when I meet with students who want to improve their course grade or prepare for interviews.

One last bit of data collection has encouraged me to keep pursuing this pairing of seemingly disparate things. I met with the Interim Dean of the Center for Career, Life and Community Engagement

⁹ Kate Zoromski, Associate Deans of Academic Success, meeting with the author. July 23, 2018.

about my work, and how the Center approaches storytelling for those “tell me about a time” questions in interviews.¹⁰ They use the STAR method, teaching students to describe the Situation, the Task they were given, the Action they took, and the Results they achieved. They teach that approach as part of a four-part series to prepare for internship and job interviews, and were offering that series in the term following my class. As seen in Appendix 3, I sent an email in week two of that next term, using the STAR method to describe how we used the NACE attributes in class AND inviting them to learn it as part of that four-part series. I received one thank you for the information, and learned that two signed up and attended the series. I realize that this is a correlation, not causation, but hopefully the students received it as one more clear cue about what I want and why they might want it too.

Fundamentally, if linking employers’ desired attributes to successful student behaviors is a valid strategy, then what I’m promoting is learning transfer. As Joanne Lobato writes in “Perspectives on the Transfer of Learning: History, Issues, and Challenges for Future Research,” current literature on learning transfer confirms educators’ ongoing desire to “provide learning experiences that are useful beyond the specific conditions of the initial learning” and reveals the ongoing explorations into what is transferred, how it is transferred, and the role of the individual circumstances in transfer.¹¹ This case study relates to investigations into the mechanisms by which transfer occurs, and in particular, the work of Randi Engle who posits that “transfer is more likely to occur when learning contexts are framed as part of a larger ongoing intellectual conversation in which students are actively involved.”¹² That’s what I’m attempting: asking students to look at their theatre history course homework as evidence of skills they can articulate to a potential employer, because doing so is evidence that they can, in fact, transfer that

¹⁰ Interim Dean of the Center for Career, Life and Community Engagement, meeting with the author. December 20, 2018.

¹¹ Joanne Lobato, “Perspectives on the Transfer of Learning: History, Issues, and Challenges for Future Research,” *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 15, no. 4 (2006): 431. JSTOR.

¹² Randi A. Engle, “Framing Interactions to Foster Generative Learning: A Situative Explanation of Transfer in a Community of Learners Classroom,” *The Journal of the Learning Sciences* 15, no. 4 (2006): 451. JSTOR.

attribute to a different context. Engle notes, not surprisingly, that the “more related” the class and the new context are, the more likely students will transfer learning.¹³ Thus, as I move forward, the more I can point to connections between theatre history and creative choices, and have students draw connections between their own work and creative outcomes, the more likely their interview stories will improve. Engle also suggests that temporally connecting the learning and the transfer application supports the sense of connectedness.¹⁴ Consequently, talking about the training at the career center and offering the opportunity to participate in the training soon after the class ends matters. I am intentionally framing course content to enhance their potential learning transfer . . . even to a job that pays the bills while they pursue work as theatre artists.

¹³ Ibid., 456.

¹⁴ Ibid., 456.

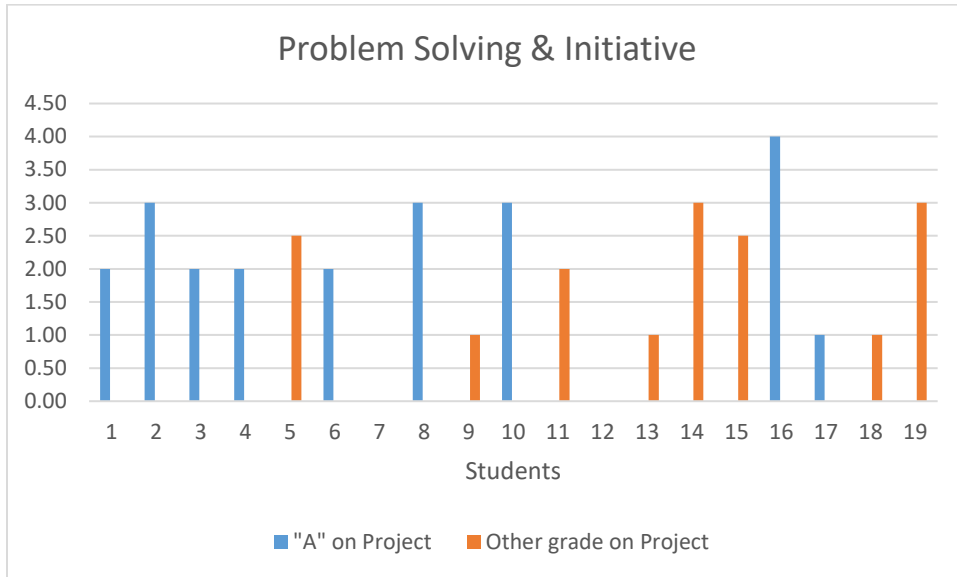
Appendix 1

Class Distribution and Focus Area

1st Class - 30 students		
Focus Area		
1 Freshman	Performance	12
13 Sophomores	Design	9
9 Juniors	Generalist	4
7 Seniors		
Majors	25	
Minors	2	
2nd Class - 31 students		
8 Sophomores	Performance	10
8 Juniors	Design	3
15 Seniors	Generalist	14
Majors	27	
Minors	3	

Note: Because we are a liberal arts institution, students aren't required to declare a major until their junior year, so this chart reflects "intentions" rather than an official count.

Appendix 2



Appendix 3

All-class email

You all may remember that last term, I started Trads I by expressing my desire to be clear about my expectations from you AND my discovery that those expectations lined up with attributes employers are seeking. I wanted you to see those connections so you could be successful in class, as well as be able to use class experiences (your current work) to interview for jobs (your future work). We went through the top 9 attributes, linking them to class activities; and then revisited them as self-assessments at mid-term and the final. By the final, you were identifying ways you'd used those attributes to impact your performance on that exam.

What you've just read is an example of the STAR technique you can learn for interviewing. In fact, the Career, Life, and Community Engagement Office has a series of job/internship workshops available to you, and I highly recommend you prioritize attending them. They are known as JIST workshops, and they're starting in a couple of weeks:

1/22 - Job Search and Lawrence Link

1/24 – Resume and Cover Letter Writing

1/29 – Interviewing

1/31 – Making Professional Connections / LinkedIn

Use this link to get to Lawrence Link, where you can find more info and register (not required, but appreciated): <https://www.lawrence.edu/students/career/students>

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