

Community Engagement Incentive Grant
Final Report

Romeo and Juliet: Lessons in Violence Prevention

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Summary of Activity

Thesis of project or need addressed

The intention of *Romeo and Juliet: Lessons in Violence Prevention* is to create a performing arts based curricular response to the ravages of youth and young adult violence and suicide. The target audience for this project is principally high school students with an ancillary audience comprised of young adult college students. It is hoped that this project, based on scholarly insight into issues pertaining to youth violence combined with a universally common story (*Romeo and Juliet*) of youths making critical life choices, and played by actors of a relatively contemporary age of the audience, would lower barriers of resistance to actively engage in discussions regarding positive and negative choices/actions and consequences.

Location of project

The project took place at a variety of locations both on-campus and off. Outreach and workshop efforts took place on the K-State campus, at Topeka and Manhattan High Schools. Additionally, a presentation was made in Wichita at the Kansas Association of Teachers of English conference.

Length of project

The first major phase of the project lasted two years. A second phase, that of implementation, evaluation, revision, and reimplementation is expected to take an additional two years.

What type of action(s) did your project take?

In preparing to provide a video-recorded performance from which selected examples supporting the teachable moments were to be drawn from, a full production of *Romeo and Juliet* was produced in partnership with the university's theatre program within the Department of Communication Studies, Theatre and Dance. This was nearly semester long rehearsal and performance activity. Including the research phase and work with a nationally recognized Shakespearean dramaturge, the performance portion of this activity was nearly a year in length.

The performance effort was followed with outreach workshops utilizing actors from the original production along with theatre, drama therapy faculty and graduate students as facilitator/teachers. These workshops included presentation of conflict or “decision” scenes as written by Shakespeare leading to the well-known tragic outcome, paired with alternative interpretation of those same scenes demonstrating potentially positive outcomes. These outreach efforts were highly interactive and engaged the student audiences in analyzing the original choices/actions of the characters and then suggesting alternative choices for the actors to play in improvised presentations of those same scenes, followed again, by analysis of the impact that the alternatives choices as played by the actors in modern dress, might have had in changing the tragic outcome. Notes were made of student suggestions of alternative ways to play the scenes and this input was incorporated into the next element of the project.

The next aspect was in-studio video recording of “alternative” *Romeo and Juliet* scenes demonstrating positive outcomes that diminished or eliminated the possibilities of youth violence or suicide. This was followed with in-studio recording of the panel of experts commenting on the choices made in the original text, the alternative choices illustrated in the modern interpretive scenes and how those choices were viewed as promoting positive alternative behaviors for the target audience.

Concurrent with the above tasks, was the revision of a 15 year–old curriculum to bring it current with modern theories and applications regarding both the *Romeo and Juliet* text and contemporary thoughts on youth violence and suicide prevention.

Editing of the video incorporating the *Romeo and Juliet* performance scenes with the alternatives, and the expert panel interviews took a number of months to complete.

Our expert panelists reviewed the latest scholarly research on the topics on which they were asked to speak, our director of the Drama Therapy Program researched theories on youth violence, and the play’s director conducted significant research pertaining to the production and the interpretation of Shakespeare’s world as realized through *Romeo and Juliet*. Our nationally recognized scholar/dramaturge was in residence working with the director and the university’s student cast of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The student actors and the graduate student facilitators received training in issues pertaining to the psychology of youth violence and how to respond to student audiences during the outreach activities.

Who were the project partners?

The university partners included faculty in the Family Studies and Human Services Department, Women’s Studies, and the Drama Therapy and traditional theatre program within the Communication Studies, Theatre and Dance Department. Additionally, the KSU Center for Non-Violence served as an on-campus partner.

Community partners included English and Theatre faculty as well as counselors at Topeka and Manhattan High Schools. Each of these partners played an important role in actively engaging in the development of the project. Not only did the high school partners host our outreach activities but they also provided valuable feedback of their own and the perspectives/responses to the work by their students.

What were the impacts of your work?

In addition to a presentation of the initial work of *Romeo and Juliet: Lessons in Violence Prevention*, including the curriculum and the DVD, our project leaders, R. Michael Gros and Sally Bailey were successful in obtaining feedback for final revision of the curriculum and commitment to pilot test the program in a select number of Kansas High Schools.

A comprehensive two-disc DVD and teaching curriculum has been developed and will be utilized in the pilot program during 2010 – 2012 years by high school faculty partners identified at the KATE conference in the fall of 2009.

This package as noted above contains significant portions of the original KSU production of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as modern alternative performances of selected scenes that highlight opportunities for curricular support discussion on youth violence and suicide prevention.

Following the two-year pilot project in phase two, a final outcome will be a revised curriculum and resource site that may well include a project Web site.

Capacity built to continue work?

With the continuing commitment of the KSU Drama Therapy program, a capacity has been built for graduate students to continue to document the impact of this program and to develop additional funding to expand the project beyond the test pilot schools to include all Kansas High Schools, colleges and universities.

The only third party assessment we received was the informal response of those at the KATE conference and our community partners at Topeka and Manhattan High Schools. The majority of the over twenty high school faculty members present for the presentation at the KATE conference found the project to be curricular appropriate, the methodology of utilizing Shakespeare in performance to illustrate not only the literature but the significant issue of youth violence and suicide prevention a unique and engaging, that also believed it will work in a variety of applications at their schools.

At the 2009 KATE conference, we identified 15 Kansas English teachers committed to partner with us, including the administration of pre and post tests to determine the projects impact on student learning regarding the topic of youth violence and suicide prevention.

Self assessment of your project

While this project has taken longer than planned to reach its current stage of development and implementation, the work is serious, scholarly, and useful to the community. New relationships have been made and/or deepened with on-campus and community partners. This project has the potential of changing lives through providing to our youth an increased awareness of the power and responsibility of “choice” and “communication” in responding to the continuing societal challenge of youth violence and suicide. It should be noted that even at this early stage in the project, we have directly engaged over 1,000 high school and university students on the issue of youth violence and suicide prevention through our outreach efforts to Topeka and Manhattan High Schools, and the KSU Women’s Studies classes.

Successes

This project has demonstrated the power of partnering the performing arts in communicating issues of major societal impact. This project has created a tangible tool (the DVD and Curriculum) that will be utilized by high schools around Kansas and potentially throughout the country. This project brought together disparate academic KSU programs to create a program of significance and demonstrated the strength of multi-disciplinary approaches to respond to community needs.

Challenges

The biggest challenge was to have all of our partners commit the same level of energy/time/resources to the project as the principal investigators. There were some in the different partnering departments who actively interfered with the project and there were many, many more, which were the project’s champions!