Perfect Pairing

Dual-enrollment course sets up students for college and beyond

By Harper Lee

Harley Brunson never thought a theatre course would lead her to the White House. "It was so surreal," the Rock Ridge High School senior says about meeting President Obama and the First Lady last year. "It was like a dream, being on the front lawn and shaking the president's hand." Brunson initially focused on sports growing up, but as a teenager she was diagnosed with a chronic illness that sidelined her athletic career. Wanting to stay involved at school led her to theatre and, ultimately, Anthony Clarke-Johnson’s dual-enrollment theatre course.

The course, a partnership between Virginia’s Rock Ridge High School and Richard Bland College, a two-year junior college associated with the College of William and Mary, allows high school students to enroll simultaneously in two different academic programs and educational institutions. If successful, they ob-
Bonus points

Dual-enrollment theatre courses are helpful to students wanting to take a step toward college and save money, but they've also been good for Rock Ridge's general theatre program. Not only does the class attract young theatre lovers and further engage them in the material, but it also creates a captive audience that underscores what work toward and look forward to.

Enrollment in Cinemo-Johnson's regular theatre classes has skyrocketed. Beginning with just 75 students in his first year at Rock Ridge, he now juggles more than 200 students in his entire program. The dual-enrollment course is an upper-level class, and having students who wouldn't typically take theatre one, two, three, four — they're going to take all the way to the fourth class, so they can take dual enrollment and get those credits, Cinemo-Johnson says.

For theatre programs and theatre educators, a college-level course illustrates the value of programs that could easily be misunderstood as silly or frivolous. "I think what this does is legitimize theatre education in terms of the academic side, because even though there's no AP test at the end of the year, you still have a final exam," Cinemo-Johnson says. "Students still have to meet these standards. And they still have to write. They still have to do script analysis. It also legitimizes theatre in the eyes of those people making policy about education. It says, 'Hey, wait a minute; the theatre arts has this class, which leads to free access to college education. It is a college-level class. And, therefore, we need to take this a lot more seriously.'"

Open singer and Catholic University faculty member Sharon Christopher leads a workshop with dual-enrollment students.

And a college-level theatre class for high schoolers can be a tough sell. "People just say, "Take theatre and that'll help you get college credit,"" Terry says. "They say, "Take AP physics and that'll help you get college credit."" We've had to bend a lot of minds in getting that understanding."

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Breaking new ground, for schools and students

Located in Loudoun County, Rock Ridge High School is only three years old, serving about 1,500 students. The school's dual-enrollment theatre class is the first of its kind in Virginia and one of very few dual-enrollment offerings in the arts, nationally.

Principal John Daukman, a former English and drama teacher, didn't hesitate to support the dual-enrollment theatre idea. Although his school isn't even at capacity, Rock Ridge has two full-time theatre teachers, and a third of the student body is involved in the arts. "The kids are absolutely passionate," Daukman says. "I think the beauty of a dual-enrollment course is that it opens up opportunities for kids who maybe don't see college as their first option or as an option at all. Students are seeing the things that they love and the things that they are passionate about that they can follow throughout their lives.

When considering dual-enrollment theatre, Daukman and Terry knew they already had the perfect resource in Cinemo-Johnson, the school's Thespian troupe director who had an M.A. from New York University in drama therapy, qualifying him to teach at the college level. To get started, Cinemo-Johnson worked with Richard Bland College faculty member Jill Metcalf to establish learning goals and shape the course's curriculum. He ultimately created a triple-threat course in theatre history, literature, and performance, hoping that the class could count for credit in theatre, humanities, or English.

When describes her course as a unique mix of theatre appreciation, theatre history, and dramatic literature.

The results are encouraging... Students have learned how to translate what they've learned in class to the outside world.

Students are learning about all aspects of theatre, putting all the theory into practice," she says. "But then at the high school level, you have things like drama clubs and acting classes, so they can take that information into those situations as well and really get hands-on engagement."

The current course is divided into two parts. The first covers classical theatre up through the mid-20th century. The second picks up where the first leaves off, bringing students all the way up to contemporary theatre. Each half is worth three college credits, and students can take both sections or just the first. The course requires a great deal of reading and script analysis, which is evaluated through writing and discussion, as well as production, performance, application, and design.

Last year's class produced "Smash" and "The Pale Moon." This year's group is tackling "The Very Bad Taste of Edward Blank," a new play from Great Britain. "What I've noticed is that
High standards

Students have to meet specified learning outcomes when they enroll in dual-enrollment courses, as defined by Richard Bland College. For example, they must identify and analyze the themes, motifs, and symbols of a literary work and explain how they interact with each other. Students also engage in a series of projects that involve team work and public speaking.

In 2015, the course's inaugural year, 28 Rock Ridge students enrolled. The following year, 26 credits were earned. The results are encouraging, with 21 of 28 students receiving a superior rating for their work in individual events at Virginia's 2016 state Thespian festival, helping students to develop a strong understanding of theater as a fine art.

A diversity of students with a variety of skills

Because Richard Bland College grants-associate degrees in general education credits, Rock Ridge students can take advantage of a wide range of classes. Moreover, the dual-enrollment program provides students the opportunity to take courses in subjects that are not available at their high school. This enables students to earn college credits while still in high school, allowing them to move more quickly to college-level coursework.

Education credits already under their belt — at no cost. While developing the dual-enrollment program, Rock Ridge and Richard Bland prioritized making their offerings completely free to students. To do this, the college is using money received from the state to offset the cost of tuition. The hope is to be able to offer this, as it grows, anywhere in the country, Girvin-Johnson says.

At the Educational Theatre Association's 2015 National Convention, Girvin-Johnson led workshops on how teachers can plan dual-enrollment programs in their schools. He cited a growing body of research on dual enrollment that shows how these courses increase the likelihood that low-income or first-generation college students will earn a college degree — critical at a time when most jobs and career paths require a BA. "We're getting college credit and having experiences they wouldn't have otherwise had," Terry says. "That's something that's invaluable. And then the kids that we're reaching... it's our most diverse class of our AP and dual-enrollment classes."

Theater is especially well-suited to preparing students for life after high school, in college, and beyond. "There are so many components of theater education," Girvin-Johnson says, "from acting around the design table (talking) about production, to executing those designs, to managing budgets, and teaching them how to create resumes." He also enriched his dual-enrollment course with master classes in stage fighting, voice, and movement taught by college faculty in and around Virginia. These classes go a long way to develop college options, college work, and even the professional world. During her visit to Rock Ridge, open sing at Catholic University of America faculty member Shannon Starey talked to students about how many people it takes to make theater work, including those whom students may not have considered, such as makeup artists and art directors. And that's the point of the dual-enrollment programs to open students' eyes to different possibilities.

Tomorrow, the world

Both Girvin-Johnson and Terry hope that dual-enrollment theater catches on nationwide. "We had to start a national conversation with theatre teachers and help provide that language and see what support we can start to gain from other states, because there's got to be other states on board that would love to offer this opportunity," Girvin-Johnson says. For him, it's great to give kids a break on college tuition, but the real value of theater education is about transforming young lives, creating future leaders, parents, artists, and professionals.

Senior Hunter Holland would certainly agree. The former athlete now cultivates interests in costume design and acting, hoping to major in theater after graduation. "It's an environment where I can do whatever I want and be whatever I want, and still be happy and healthy," she says. Before taking the dual-enrollment theatre class, Holland had tried a number of other dual-enrollment and AP classes. At first, she didn't see how a theater class could fit into an academic model. Wouldn't it just revolve around performance? "It was kind of eye-opening to learn that you actually have to do desk research and type papers and do research," she says. "But there's also been the performance aspect."

If theater offers a well-rounded education, then the dual-enrollment model is classroom theatre education at its most rigorous — a valuable bridge to college for a wide variety of students.

Extra credit

Dual-enrollment students from Rock Ridge and Richard Bland are combining their courses to create a new production. In fact, the rock-ridge theater students will use the NCCTI (National Community Theatre Institute) to schedule their course work in between regular school hours. The NCCTI is a career and technical education (CTE) exam for secondary and post-secondary students. Rock Ridge and Richard Bland each earned CTE certification that they can include on resumes, college applications, and college requirements. NCCTI requirements can be taken in both schools as theatre as well. Girvin-Johnson says that the dual-enrollment model prepared his students to succeed in both exams. Last year, 12 dual-enrollment theater students took the NCCTI. This year, his entire class is taking the exam.

Canadian high school Washington Collegiate Institute, which had heard about Rock Ridge's production of formosa and the品论. Students from both schools conducted Skype discussions on the challenges of performing in a theater and how they might work together in the future. Their partnership and the course's innovative format caught the attention of the White House, and First Lady Michelle Obama invited the students to participate in a special ceremony in the Rose Garden honoring educational partnerships between American and Canadian schools. If theater offers a well-rounded education, then the dual-enrollment model is classroom theatre education at its most rigorous — a valuable bridge to college for a wide variety of students. "It's kind of eye-opening to learn that you actually have to do desk research and type papers and do research," she says. "But there's also been the performance aspect."

That performance aspect led to a collaboration of sorts last year with Canadian high school Washington Collegiate Institute, which had heard about Rock Ridge's production of formosa and the品论. Students from both schools conducted Skype discussions on the challenges of performing in a theater and how they might work together in the future. Their partnership and the course's innovative format caught the attention of the White House, and First Lady Michelle Obama invited the students to participate in a special ceremony in the Rose Garden honoring educational partnerships between American and Canadian schools.