

# Understanding the Nuremberg Trials: An Examination of the Use of Live Theatre as an Educational Tool

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*Abstract*— This study examined what impact a live theatre performance has for university students. Does a play help college students contextualize academic content? Does a play offer benefits students do not gain from textbook readings and class discussions? Survey research conducted at Purdue University suggests exposure to a live performance offers benefits for college students in their ability to understand and critically analyze the historical events they learn within their coursework. Our research indicates live theatre could assist in enhancing traditional education models at the collegiate level and should be explored further as a potential methodology to aid in student success.

*Keywords*—arts impact, theatre, arts benefits

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education scholars maintain a strong and enduring interest in new measures to improve students' learning experience. Visualization techniques gradually gained popularity in the last decade in and outside classrooms because they tend to enhance attention, nourish interest, improve memory, and help integrate story plots into the learning process. Information conveyed by images, sounds, and videos are simpler to understand within a short timeframe, generating more engagement and motivation among students [1-2].

Learning activities in locations outside of the classroom, such as movie theaters and museums, could also result in an improved learning experience when carefully designed and organized. This is especially true with instruction in history. In the book *Teaching History with Film*, Marcus et al. [3] collected data in secondary schools to test the impact of using films to cultivate the students' historical literacy. The result shows that movies could help students learn about historical events and develop a sense of empathy.

Jay P. Greene and his team discovered that a visit to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art enhanced the students' knowledge, cultural consumption, tolerance, empathy, and critical thinking [4]. In a 2015 study using a rigorous experimental design, the researchers tested 670 students in grades 7 through 12 and found that live theatre has similar, and in some instances stronger, positive impacts than solely reading the textbook in improving knowledge of plot and vocabulary, level of tolerance, and ability to read other people's emotions [5]. Nevertheless, the team is concerned that the testing measurements included only state-provided math and

reading tests (as well as the Reading the Mind in the Eyes test), and it encourages future researchers to develop new measures to collect and analyze educational outcomes [5].

Research on the potential positive impact of the arts in educational design continues to be a burgeoning line of inquiry. Like the aforementioned projects, research thus far has almost exclusively focused on students at the K-12 level. This leaves several unanswered questions. First, are these positive findings applicable to college students? Would research at the collegiate level support current theories? As Greene et al. pointed out, the field also suffers from a lack of alternative measurement tools beyond standardized math and reading tests [5]. While these tests are scientifically generated, nationally normed, and carry important weight in the academic success of students, they are not designed to answer some of our particular research questions. How do we assess the personal experience of students in addition to their knowledge about key moments in history or specific events? We are interested in what information we may miss when we simply ask students to take a standardized exam.

Our paper aims to fill in these gaps of knowledge about the impact of the arts through a pilot study using qualitative research methodologies. We build upon on the survey work of Glow and Johanson [6], aimed at understanding the intrinsic impact of performing arts attendance. They have found audience measurements of quality to include knowledge/information transfer or learning, managing risk, authenticity in performer interactions, and collective engagement. We solicited feedback from undergraduate college students about their experience watching a play in a theater. In the survey, we asked them to compare their learning experiences in a classroom, watching a movie, and seeing the play in the theater. Instead of simply providing a "yes-no" Likert-scale style of questioning, survey participants were asked to use short-answer fields to note the difference in their learning experiences and explain how and why they determined those differences. Upon completion of data analysis, surveys were analyzed to determine whether collegiate students gain valuable learning experiences as a result of attending a live performance. Based on the quality measurements of Glow and Johanson [6], their responses were organized into the following categories: previous knowledge, expectations compared to experience (risk management), live performance vs. other modes of learning, information gained, conveyed emotions,

physical proximity, concentration and improved recall, empathy and critical thinking skills.

## II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND MEASUREMENT

Our research was conducted during the winter of 2017 in Introduction to the Modern World (HIST 104), an undergraduate college history class at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. This course covers historical development of the West from the era of the Renaissance to the present day. The curriculum includes discussions about World War II and the Holocaust with aims to teach students how to think critically about historical events and evaluate them from their own perspectives. In consideration of course content covering the Nuremberg Trials held following WWII, we collaborated with the instructor of the course to offer her students an opportunity to attend a live theatre performance as part of a research project to investigate the potential impact of their attendance.

To participate in the research, HIST 104 students were recruited to attend a Purdue production of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, performed by L.A. Theatre Works and presented by Purdue Convocations, the performing arts presenter at Purdue University. The play commemorated the 75th anniversary of World War II. *Judgement at Nuremberg* dramatizes the trials of four German judges accused of crimes against humanity under the Nazi regime. Themes explored include the conflict between the rule of law and human rights, social justice struggles, international politics, and the pitting of ethics and personal responsibility versus public duty.

Notably, this production of *Judgment at Nuremberg* was delivered in the style of a live radio-theatre performance. Also known as audio theatre, radio theatre is, in its purest sense, a fully acoustic performance without many traditional theatrical components such as set design or transitional lighting, although this production did use period-appropriate costuming. It otherwise relied upon dialogue, music and sound effects to help the audience understand the story. This particular choice of performance style impacted the learning experience of students in a variety of ways as is discussed in the later analysis.

Students voluntarily participated and received up to 10 extra credit points on their total course grade for watching the performance of *Judgment at Nuremberg* and writing reports based on questions generated by the instructor. Although this mechanism has a self-selection bias, we do not observe any

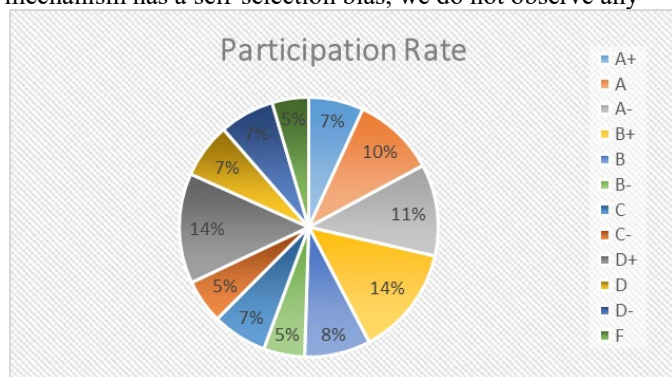


Figure 1. Study participation rates by final course grade

serious bias in our data pool based on the students' final grades. The students distribute evenly in each level of their grades, which means that students performing at a broad spectrum of academic levels, not only the highest- or lowest-performing students, attended the show. In addition, the primary aim of this study is to test a theoretical principle, not to make claims of generalizability beyond a collegiate audience [7].

Out of a class of 84 students, 32 attended *Judgment at Nuremberg* and completed the extra credit report, which addressed the following topics:

1. Previous knowledge of the Nuremberg trials
2. Expectation of the play compared to their viewing experience
3. Differences in how they learned about the Nuremberg trials (classroom, live theatre, movie)
4. Most important takeaways after the performance
5. How would you describe the theatrical experience to a friend or family member?

Students were free to submit the report anytime between October 18 (the first evening of the performance) and December 12 (the end of semester). While four students submitted in mid- to late-November, most students turned in their report in early December, between December 6 and the deadline of December 12. Therefore, most students finished their reports around six to seven weeks after they experienced the performance. This may have influenced their memory in the sense that some minor details were lost as time elapsed. Although submitting a report this far removed from the time of performance was not ideal, their strongest memories would be those recalled after that passage of time.

Student extra-credit responses were in the form of Microsoft Word documents. After reading the full data set multiple times, we generated a series of codes or keywords. Initially using the work of Glow and Johanson.[6], we looked for themes they observed such as authenticity in performer interactions, which we coded as conveying emotions. One file was created for each code / keyword. The coding system was imported into the software NVivo, which supports qualitative and mixed-method research. This enabled us to better understand frequencies, investigate patterns, and visualize the complete data set.

## III. RESULTS

### A. Previous knowledge of the Nuremberg trials

Twenty-nine students out of 32 total, or 90.6% of the group, reported very limited knowledge about the Nuremberg Trials, as they had previously only read about the events in history textbooks during high school and briefly even then. Three students (9.375%) reported additional previous knowledge outside of what they learned in textbooks. Two students (6.25%) had viewed the 1961 film adaptation of the production, and one student learned about the Nuremberg Trials due to interest in the international legal system. Although that student arguably held the most previous knowledge, they noted that they missed many perspectives and misunderstood the significance of the trials.

This result is expected, given that the Nuremberg Trials

are not heavily covered in high-school history courses. Because so few students reported prior knowledge of the Nuremberg Trials, we do not believe prior knowledge played a significant role in their perception of the live performance.

### B. Expectations compared to viewing experience

As previously mentioned, this play was performed in the style of radio theatre. Most students expected a traditional, “Broadway”-style performance inclusive of the form’s more traditional dancing, singing, and music. They also expected set changes. Four students (12.5%) were critical of the performance and thought it was less interesting than they expected. They also were critical of the actors’ intentional use of heavy accents. In addition, two international students (6.25%) told us that it was difficult for them to understand the actors and storyline without the benefit of subtitles.

Although many students were surprised by the play’s true performance style relative to their expectation, 24 students (75%) reported that the play exceeded their expectation. Three students (9.375%) commented that the radio-style drama helped them to concentrate because they felt curious about the style and setting. This result may encourage future researchers to be thoughtful about the choice of theatrical style they choose to present.

### C. Increased information

Twenty-two students (68.75%) reported that the live performance presented more information than the textbook or in-class discussion. That information included but was not limited to:

- Background sound
- Voice of the actors
- Shake of the stage when the character walks
- Hidden stories of the German citizens, etc.

The stories offer the students valuable details so that they can immediately delve into the situation.

Among the students who mentioned the increased information presented in the live performance, thirteen (40.625%) of them believed that the live performance presented the story and emotions in a more direct, realistic way while still captivating them. Ten students (30.125%) expressed the feeling that the live performance offers “so much more” than a history class. Two students (6.25%) said the live performance does a better job portraying the actual courtroom than a film.

### D. Conveying Emotions

An overwhelming proportion of students believed that the live performance conveyed stronger emotions or feelings than the textbook alone. Twenty-eight (87.5%) of the students said they could feel the emotional connection with the actors and therefore could continue to focus on learning more about the event. One student reported they found the live performance interesting because “I could see the emotions these people were going through at the trials that cannot be found in reading about the trials. This live performance was much more entertaining and easier to understand than reading a textbook.” Fourteen

(43.75%) of the students felt that they were “personally engaged/involved” in the performance. Five (15.625%) students said they never considered that historical figures could have such strong, passionate emotions because the textbook often fails to mention that type of information. One student noted: “The performance was different because it was far more engaging. There is a definite advantage over other modes of learning because this creates an emotional response to go along with the knowledge you gain.”

Eighteen (56.25%) of the students agreed that, compared to reading a textbook, live theatre is a much more personal experience and gave them “a person to empathize with rather than just a name in a book.” Additionally, six (18.75%) of the students said they felt connected because of the intense, engaging atmosphere cultivated by live theatre. They felt that it is more impressive than a film because they witnessed real people acting live and on stage. The students were easily able to imagine the actors were the real historical figures at the trial. Two students (6.25%, not those who watched the film) thought that a film could neither convey characters’ emotions nor elicit an audience’s feelings as well as a live performance.



Figure 2. Scene from the play Judgment at Nuremberg

### E. Physical Closeness

Sitting in front of the real actors, twenty (62.5%) of the students reported feeling as though they were physically present in the courtroom. One student stated, “I can feel that the actor is breathing next to me.”

This perceived proximity forced them to be more involved, as they feel a “physical” connection to the event. Among them, twenty-six (81.25%) of the students felt like they “went back to the era and to that place,” were one of the decision-makers in the room, and listened carefully to the testimony of the characters. In doing this, students may have experienced the struggle of the judge, which made them think deeply about the meaning of the Nuremberg Trials. To some students, it is “no longer just a historical event in the textbook, but something happened to real people.”

Six students (18.75%) compared the live performance to viewing a film and said that films did not elicit a physical connection. They also made emotional connections with the characters by watching a historical drama film but not as strong



Last and perhaps most compelling: “I learned about how tough it was to assign verdicts to bystanders in Germany post World War 2 (sic), and how this moral quandary still exists in today’s judiciary system.”

#### IV. LIMITATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Our research suggests that live theatre could have a positive academic influence on students at the collegiate level as a tool to learn about historical events. We are nevertheless clearly aware of limitations in our study. The most serious issue is with the representativeness of our sample. Because we chose, for our participation pool, a currently active history class made up of students with either an interest in history and / or mandatory requirement to attend, our sample was not randomly selected. We could not control who selected the class, who went to the performance, or who would eventually finish the report. In addition, we cannot refer to our research as “robust” with only 32 participants. This limits our ability to make broad claims beyond that of our own population at Purdue University. However, even with those limitations, the evenly distributed sample among the GPAs indicated a balanced distribution of participants within the class.

This research was intended to serve as a pilot study in the field. We hope our research findings will encourage other scholars to develop more robust studies at the collegiate level. Our study suggests that students tend to better remember and understand a historic event when exposed to its story via live performance – particularly live theatre. Live performance has the potential to improve skills in critical thinking and offers an opportunity to analyze an event from multiple perspectives. Our research could serve as a stepping stone for cross-disciplinary studies between live theatre and education methodology research, and future studies could extend our findings. For example, additional research could further examine the ability of live theatre to address and teach ethics and morality and expand on current research related to improvements in empathy skills. Future studies could examine differences between various types of live performances. For example: Does a musical have a larger impact than a radio-theatre performance?

As most of the research aimed at understanding the impacts of a live performance is still in its infancy, we believe even small studies such as this one contain merit. Although our research certainly suggests live performances can have a lasting academic impact on college students, much remains to be learned. We plan to continue to understand what students gain as a result of their exposure to the arts and hope that other researchers continue these lines of inquiry as well.

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