Reflections on Teaching Everyone Else's Students

Joe Deer, Wright State University - Main Campus

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Trustees Award for Faculty Excellence.
His accomplishments include creating and

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managing the celebrated musical theater
program, involvement with students and

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audiences of all ages through the Muse
Machine, Human Race, and Victoria Theater,

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serving as founding president of the
National Musical Theater Educators

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Alliance, writing books and articles on
teaching and performing musical theater,

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serving as a guest director,
choreographer, and master teacher, and

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performing on Broadway. His talk is
called reactions on teaching everyone else's students. Joe.

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Alright great so thank you so much for having me here.

Thanks to my colleagues for coming. So yes, I was lucky to be the recipient of two semesters of Professional Development Leave in the 2013-14 academic year and that's a pretty rare gift and I have to say I looked at it as though it was probably the last professional development leave I'll ever have in my career until I retire.

So I thought I should make the most of it. I wanted to talk a lot. the Dean has asked me to sort of share a little about what I did during that time.

So I'll talk about that, but I'll say that I looked at it as an opportunity to do things I haven't done otherwise or to put myself in circumstance that's different than the one that I have here at Wright State University. As an eighteen-year veteran of this university and in my department and I know for all of you who are longstanding teachers as well. We're used to being in a fairly stable environment. We have fairly steady
teaching schedule frequently. Often we'll go year after year teaching many of the same courses if not exactly the same courses. Certainly to new students and for those of us who work in the performing arts of course there's new material always coming in. But we're often in a very stable situation and I thought I wanted to put myself in a much less stable circumstance or at least put myself outside of my comfort zone. So that's a big part of what I did. My work during that year off really fell into five areas. One is created scholarship which for me is directing and choreographing. The other is in publication, meaning writing books and articles and all the attendant stuff that goes with that. Doing workshops and working as a consultant with organizations all over,
outside of Wright State University and around the world lately. I was lucky enough to be invited to London to the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama to direct and choreograph the capstone production for the Master of Arts in musical theater program there and then also I became the director of the Musical Theater Initiative right at the time where that really became a reality, right at the time that my sabbatical began or professional development leave. Let me use the right term.

So I worked on those five things during that time and I'll talk a little bit about what was involved in that. I directed I'm just gonna... I want to skip through some of the minutiae of this and kind of get to the heart of it.

I directed six productions during that year:

Avenue Q for the Human Race Theatre Company, Seussical for the Muse Machine
- and I'll talk a bit about Muse machine in a moment, It's a Wonderful Life, the live radio show, which was an incredible amount of fun for the Victory Theater Association's Broadway series. Then I went to London and directed and choreographed the Baker's Wife, went to West Virginia and did the Fantastics and finally ended up coming back to Dayton to be in for the first time, to end up on stage as an actor in a workshop of a new musical called Molly Sweeney, which was... if you want to talk about stepping out of your comfort zone, that was pretty much terrifying to go back on stage again after about twenty years. So I'm glad I did that. I choreograph three of those productions. I went out and did 77 workshops master classes or presentations for twenty different groups. So I'll tell you...
sitting and doing the math on that this weekend

made me tired to look at that schedule. So I'm glad that part of the year is over

and I published a book, Directing in Musical Theater: An Essential Guide and created the website content that goes with that. For any of you who are publishers of textbooks or considering writing textbooks, I invite you to really good at creating web content, because that's become as big a part of the job as writing the book in essence and I have another book in Press a revision of or a second edition of my first book, Acting and Musical Theater that I wrote with Rocco Dal Vara. So that's in the process of being... We're revising it now and expanding it and so forth and I am now published in Korea and Portugal, so.

That book has been translated into other...
have seen the cover of the Portuguese edition and it looks lovely. I don't speak Portuguese, so I have yet to get a copy of that and I have no idea what the Korean edition looks like that I want to copy of that as well. But the title of this is reflections on teaching everyone else students and that really is the heart of what I did for the year. I loved the experience of working with the Human Race Theater Company which is an artistic home for me and a place that I get to work with some terrific people, often graduates of our programs and occasionally current students and that was the case with both Avenue Q and It's A Wonderful Life.

I had former students, several former students in Avenue Q and a handful of both former and current students in It's A Wonderful Life. So that was that was a
great pleasure. But for the majority of the time I was away from here. I worked

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with everyone else's students and everyone else's students means this. So I

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said I did 77 workshops and masterclasses and so forth,

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21 of those were in Dayton here working for - the Muse Machine contracted

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me to do a series of workshops called So You Think You Can't Dance, which is not a

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title unnecessarily chosen, but that's what they thought was gonna help book

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the workshop, so we did it and I did that with Lula Elsey, who was the

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choreographer for a lot of the Muse Machine shows she's an award-winning

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modern and modern dance choreographer, but primarily an educator from New Orleans.

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And we went to 21 different schools throughout Dayton. Everything - these were

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middle and high schools and this was everything from the most inner city

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school like Ponitz Career Center
to schools that are pretty much
rural to suburban schools to private
schools and parochial schools, every kind

of school in the Dayton area and thought
that there was really only one school I
went to where the students were, had
professed an interest in doing theater

or dance or music as their primary goal
in college. That's at Stivers School for
the Arts. Every other student was there
exclusively for the enrichment

experience and it's an interesting thing
to walk into a... that's the opposite of our students.

The students that we teach at Wright
State, that I teach dominantly are students who've
come here, often fought very hard to get
into the program from all over the
country. We will have seen about
500 students this year audition

for about 24 positions in the acting and
musical theater BFAs. I worked with the
other kind of student, the kind of student who is either not been exposed to the Performing Arts, never been exposed to dance,

probably has been encumbered by a lot of insecurities and peer pressure and all the garbage that are high school students get heaped on them and middle school, although the middle school students tend to be a little bit freer, but the big thing I had to do was walk into a, sometimes a gymnasium full of 400 students and get them - yeah it was.. we would do two a day. So in the morning I might have twenty-five students, very lovely well behaved little Catholic school, middle school students and then in the afternoon walk into a gymnasium where there were 400 students and that takes a little bit of work to get them focused on on your side. But the thing that I discovered about those students
is two factors profoundly impacted what kind of experience they had in the workshop. It was a fun workshop, there was nothing formal about it. The whole intention was to get up, get dancing, express yourself, learn a small piece of choreography. So they had a lot of freedom and then they had some choreography they needed to master and the two things are profoundly influenced that were, really that the most important thing was what was the culture of the school as defined by the principal and the teachers. And I got so that I could walk into a school and by meeting the people in the office, we knew what the experience was gonna be like. Not that we were, we want biased toward presuming one thing or another, but we could see very clearly that was there a lightness about the experience of education, was there a kind of the joyous atmosphere in the school or
was it a beleaguered, burdened

experience. And I can tell you that students
pick up on that culture immediately

and when we walked into the schools
where there was a sense of play involved,

the principal, the teachers, the security
guard on campus would come in and do the

workshop with the students and when that
was the case, those students went, I mean

they were just so free and so engaged
and in other schools, we would go in the

teachers would drop off the students and
leave them like they were leaving them

at a daycare center and then they would
go off and probably do things they

absolutely needed to do and needed the time to do, but there

was a profound difference in the schools
and it was not tied to the economic

support that the school had. Not
necessarily, on some occasions was, but it

was not necessarily at all that case. So
that was an interesting experience, a very

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interesting experience. What I discovered
in that process was not only

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does that impact how the students get
their education or experience the arts,

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but that all of those students wanted an
invitation to be free in their work, to

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have some outside the box free
expression. What we think of as kids

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wanting to do, is often the
last thing that they get to do in an

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educational environment. They're often... I
could see the burden of the

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testing, I could see the burden of not
having free time. I'll tell you, we went to a

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school up in Huber Heights. It was a brand
new middle school and an absolutely - well

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middle and high school -

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gorgeous facility and they had about a
third of the class rooms locked, because

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though the school was built, they had not passed a levy to pay for teachers. So we had
students - we are working in a gymnasium and we had students who were only in PE one semester a year, because they couldn't afford teachers to put them in there. So they had facilities, they had the students, but they didn't have the teacher to do it. So this is what our students are encountering.

So the last thing that they had room for, that they had financial support for was arts education and that was the thing that was siphoned away and that was very disappointing to experience. I did a lot of workshops around the country at performing arts high schools. A lot of that was recruitment efforts try to bring students to our program, so the acting and musical theater programs and those students tend to be very focused and they're more like the kind of students that I encountered, these things very focused conservatory oriented students
and that was a lot of fun and a great pleasure to work with them and like some of my colleagues in the summer, I go and do extended teaching residencies. I work down at CCM, at University of Cincinnati CCM in their summer intensive as one of their resident faculty members. I do a week of intensive workshops for them. They're bowling upstairs I think. And those students are exactly the students that I encounter. But the other major teaching experience than I had was going to England. I went to London for five weeks and that was thanks to the support of the Dean's Office and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs here on campus. I was able to go to London for five weeks and work at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, which is one of the great theater programs of the world. I was invited to, as I said to direct and
choreograph the capstone production for the Master of Arts and Music Theatre and

I expected and I would encounter students very much like the kind of

people that I teach here, but it turned out to be quite different actually.

I worked with students from nine different countries: China, Argentina, Chile, Trinidad.

the US, Ireland all through the UK, and Australia. So I think that's nine from all across the country,

all over the world rather, ages about twenty to thirty eight and those

students, some of them did come from conservatory programs very similar to

what we have here at Wright State University and some of those students

came from very different backgrounds. Some of them were vocal performance majors, some of them were
instrumentalists, some of them, one of them had designs on being a journalist

in the arts, another came from a background in religious studies and they

all seem to pass the proficiencies that were required to get into this program.

So if one of my goals was to put myself in unfamiliar situations, this absolutely met the mark for that. There's nothing like walking into a rehearsal room in a foreign country knowing no one. Not the stage manager, not the music director, not a single actor in the room and I was slightly familiar with the person who was the head of the program. So I walked in and that really becomes a test for you in many ways of what you as a teacher and as an artist, what you know and how do you find common ground among nine cultures. Well, what I decided was I was
going to treat it very much like any production that I would do at any theater,

whether it's a professional and academic theater and and really because there was a degree of time pressure which always helps. Too much time allows you to waste time and there I had really four weeks to get this pulled all together with a group I knew nothing about. So we just began right off working. They had learned the music prior my arrival we began right in staging and pretty quickly I think they realized oh this is what we're doing, this is the way this works and while none of them shared much of a common background prior to arrival at that time, they had been together for about eight months when I arrived. So I found that really diving in and just pushing forward with the work that we needed to get done, they very quickly got on the same page with me and I did discover
that I was asking different things of them. I don't know that it was harder

than that what they were used to, but I did ask different things of them and I

treated it much more like a

commercial production in which we really had to work to a deadline and had to get

a product on the stage that was gonna be, in a sense commercially viable, because

for many of them that was the goal. It's an interesting thing to have students -

there was a young lady in that production from Ireland who came to me and said

"Joe, my agent's after having me go to an audition for the Phantom of the Opera".

And I said "oh the Phantom of the Opera?" She goes Yeah you know, the show on the west end here".

So she was asking to get out of rehearsal to go and audition for

the lead for... Christine, the main woman in Phantom of the Opera. So that
was a little different than I have here.  
And that would be a great story if she

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had gotten it, but she's a very talented gal.  
But for the most part these are kids

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who are not yet used to working toward  
commercial expectations, professional

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expectations and I think they grew a lot  
out of that process and what I gathered

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from them is that and this is an interesting  
observation, is that our students

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generally, regardless of their background,  
will rise to meet whatever the highest

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challenge you place before them and that  
we may or I'll say that I know that I have in the past,

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assumed limitations that just don't  
exist or that we can at least work

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toward and passed. So there was a great  
deal of pleasure to be had from that experience.

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While I was there, because I had a  
number of students in that project who

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really were an ensemble roles and did not  
get to work one-on-one with me on sort of
their own development artistically, I did a series of workshops there for the
students not in the principal roles, really focusing on the kind of work that
I do here and the book that I told you about, Acting and Musical Theater, they
use that as their standard text there. So that the fellow who played them the
Baker in the Baker's wife, he came up to me one day and he goes
"Joe, in this chapter you said such and such and such" and i said that sounds good, that sounds right".
I didn't remember writing it. He quoted something very specifically, had
a kind of a tenant that he was attached to very strongly and I thought I
haven't read that chapter for a few years. Maybe a better back to it.
But I did work closely with those, with the other students in that and ended up also going to
Birmingham to the Birmingham School of Acting and did a day-long intensive with
those students, again an international group and I discovered in England that

very often the universities and conservatories have students from all over the world. We don't, I mean I'll say at Wright State, we don't tend to be as international in my program, we tend to be more national or even Midwestern. But that was a great experience.

The other significant thing that I worked on while I was on leave was developing the Musical Theater Initiative at the Dean's suggestion and it was a good one. To develop the Musical Theater Initiative and try to create some kind of a structure for this thing that was really an idea that I happily was green lighted, but it was essentially an idea and so what I did was to set about a handful of things. First to develop a clear mission for the Musical Theater Initiative, which is to explore and celebrate the culture, craft, and history of the musical theater, which means we'll do everything except produce new
musicals, because the Human Race Theater Company here in Dayton already does that extremely well and I don't think Dayton needs two new musical development centers. But to develop that mission and I think it's clear and I think its guided us thus far in it. I recruited a professional and academic Advisory Board of about, I think it's about 20 people now, everything from Broadway producers to very well-known directors and choreographers and music directors, to people who are my colleagues who I teach with here, to the heads of arts organizations in this area and even people like there's a fellow called Thomas Z. Sheppard for those you who collect Broadway casts albums you know his name as the producer of every one of Stephen Sondheim's cast albums and really so many of your albums from the 70's and 80's are produced by
this guy and so he's on our advisory board also. And then I created a series of community partnerships with organizations like the human race theater company, the Muse Machine, Dayton Art Institute, ThinkTV, Cultural Works,

and handful of other organizations here where we've agreed that if there's an opportunity for some sort of collaboration, that we will definitely look for that and what I told all of them and the people on the advisory board is A) I promise I'll never ask you for money and B) I will only call you when I have something I need, as as opposed to burdening you with a lot of obligation to other things. And I'll tell you if your ever trying to put an advisory board together, those are the two magic things to say, because almost everybody says yes.

And then another part of getting the musical Theater Initiative on its feet was to create an identity and logos and
stationery and all the stuff that goes with that and I had a very good experience

working with our marketing folks here on campus. And then creating a strategy for our

first year and some of you were at the Victoria Theater couple of weeks ago

when we had Leslie Uggams here in concert doing her concert, doing a day of workshops with our students, doing interviews - all of which was taped for

think TV - and then presenting some of our students that she had coached on stage

with her. It was a pretty great launch for the Musical Theater Initiative and I

look forward to what that'll hold for us as we go forward and the plan right now is for next year to be a kind of a celebration of Kander and Ebb, John Kander and Fred Ebb, who are the people who wrote Chicago and Cabaret and New York New York, and lots of those things. And John Kander is still very much alive and at it. Mr. Ebb has
passed away unfortunately, but Mr. Kander is very very much still at it and going strong

and employing some of our alumni doing his work, so we want him to keep doing

that and hopefully he'll be able to here to campus and work with our students and be able to sort of share what he does. So that's what I did on my professional development leave. Thank you.

I don't know if there are any questions or anything..? Yeah.

So can you tell us about, what's the mission for the Musical Theater Initiative?

Well so the mission is to explore and celebrate the craft, culture, and history of the musical theater in every way that really presents opportunities for our students here and the community at large.

Is that like for [inaudible] education?

Yeah well so for instance, one of the things we have in the pipeline for the future is to do an international conference, focus on the idea of revivals since most
of the musicals that we all see, both here on campus and regionally and even in New Yorker tours are revivals. What goes into the idea of re-conceiving a musical or not re-conceiving it, but really remounting it and so hopefully we'll be able to bring a lot of folks in from all over the world who deal with that idea and have our students and faculty and artists and educators from all over the country engage in that. Yeah it will be fun I hope. Yes.

So you've had experience all around the world and of course what's happening in Dayton right now is not dissimilar to nationwide and that is the kind of lack of funding or a de-funding of culture. Yeah.

What would you suggest for the Dayton Region? What's the most thing that we can do moving forward to [inaudible] so many people as possible?

Okay, that's a great question and I think this goes well beyond the idea of musical theater. It goes to our conception of what education is and I think that we have for reasons of observing what...
there's a received wisdom that I disagree with, that following pure business skills or

skills that are technological skills and
I'm a fan of STEM education, a big

fan of it, but I think it's a bit like
trying to make a cake by only using

flour and sugar and leavening, but not
putting eggs or milk or butter in it. If we're

trying to make a really wonderful cake,
we have to embed in the education,

creativity, because otherwise I'm a
carpenter who knows how to use all the

saws and all the chisels and everything
in my workshop, but I can't imagine what

kind of cabinet I want to build. And so
for me the most important part of

expanding... So we believe that education
is gonna be the pathway to innovation

and opportunity, but innovation requires
us to be able to be creative and to

imagine the new thing. If our students
aren't trained in imagination; in
imagining themselves and other given circumstances and imagining what it is

like to be in the mind of the person who wrote you know, Beethoven's mind or in the mind of a person who created that exquisite painting or to be able to leap as we do, into the world of a movie or a play or a novel. If our students had not been trained in that, at least as much as they have in technical skills, we will have no innovation, because we will not have imaginers and I think the critical thing we need to do is reintegrate education. And I think that will lead us to I don't know what, but I will say I think that the idea that we had a broken education system was overstated and I think people were hyper reactionary in it, but you can hear what my point of view on that question is. [laughing]

But to me, that's the most important thing we can do, reintegrate education so that arts, humanities, and imagination are embedded deeply in it, even in STEM education. So yeah, there you go.
Anyway, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure to be here.