

CAT IN THE NEWS

CREATIVE ARTS TEAM • The City University of New York

EDUCATION UPDATE ONLINE

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Wolf Trap Institute Teaches through Playacting

By Emily Sherwood, Ph.D.

If you pass by a public school classroom and hear young children eagerly engaged in a plot to escape an evil wizard and fix the alphabet, chances are you've stumbled onto a Wolf Trap program that is teaching basic academic, literacy and life skills to students using interactive drama strategies. The Virginia-based Wolf Trap, renowned for its summer opera company and a world class training program that has graduated such luminaries as Denyce Graves, Nathan Gunn, and Dawn Upshaw, has taken its expertise on the road by working in classrooms across the country to spread the joy of drama, music and movement as keys to effective learning.

By far the largest of Wolf Trap's educational programs is geared to the preschool population. Initiated in 1981 with start-up funding from the Head Start program, the Wolf Trap Institute for Early Learning Through the Arts now operates in about 1000 preschool, kindergarten and first grade classrooms across the country. By integrating drama, movement, puppetry, storytelling and music into the children's everyday curriculum, "we hope to have a major impact on how children learn," says Lynda Zimmerman, Executive Director of Wolf Trap's New York City program, the Creative Arts Team (CAT), which partners with the City University of New York (CUNY). Through interactive drama strategies, CAT's professional actor/teachers engage the students in resolving dilemmas so that ultimately they learn that they have to ability to positively affect themselves and those around them, while learning valuable curricular lessons.

The classroom teacher also plays a key role in the classroom dramas that unfold. "Our goal is to train the teacher to carry on once we're no longer in the classroom," explains Zimmerman. In fact, through a new technology program called the stART smArt Network, Wolf Trap is now creating a model for sustained professional development through distance learning so that teachers can stay connected with their techniques long after their initial work in the classroom with a teaching artist. Wolf Trap artists have also participated in a cultural exchange with kindergarten teachers in Greece as part of its distance learning outreach.

In addition to their work in preschools, CAT offers elementary residencies, junior high and high school literary and violence prevention residencies, high school health and wellness programs, and Shakespeare in the Classroom for Grades 4-12. There's even a program that teaches conflict resolution strategies to women inmates at Riker's Island.

Wolf Trap is thinking big as they move into the next decade. In addition to expanding their programming and distance learning, "we're developing a graduate certification program that will give artists the certification needed to get jobs as an artist-in-residence," says Zimmerman. With their national reputation and strong track record, there's no doubt they'll accomplish that goal too.



Top: CAT Actor-Teacher Steve Elm
Bottom: CAT Actor-Teacher Helen Wheelock