Free the Hand. Do not Fear the Drum:

Teaching English as a Second Language through Theatre in Ghana

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One year ago I furiously researched dental assistant training programs and checked how many courses I had already taken to fulfill a Biology major. I called my dad and earnestly explained to him that I was changing my major so I could get a job, earn money, and have a stable job. I deemed my Theatre degree worthless and thought bitterly about why my family had allowed me to pursue this path. I called my dentist about shadowing his staff for a day and prepared to learn the skills necessary to obtain the American dream. On my observation day at the dentist office, I held the suction instrument in my gloved hand and yawned at the monotony of the tedious work. I begrudgingly listened to my inner voice and realized I was desperately trying to escape a life that my talents and passions simply would not let me avoid. I began to reflect on the three arenas of experience where I felt most alive and engaged: theatre performance, service learning, and African culture.

Last month, I had the opportunity to fuse these passions together to teach English as a Second Language through Theatre in Bakpa-Avedo Basic School in Ghana, Africa. Charles Sabah, a middle school teacher at the school, told me that teacher burnout at this school is frightfully high because the basic school is one of the poorest in Sogakope. The exam to enter secondary school is in English, and the majority of students have little exposure to English language; therefore, only about 4 out of 100 students will graduate into the secondary education system. The rest will most likely farm to support their families and remain stuck in the cycle of generational poverty. This situational and systemic cycle of educational inequality is unfair for the intelligent, creative, and talented students I met who dream to become lawyers, musicians, and nurses. Theatre tools became a valuable asset in the classroom not only for the students to make meaning through creative expression but also for teachers to create a powerful classroom community through vulnerability and intentional exuberance. Action-based acting exercises are a powerful vehicle for making connections between vocabulary words and their meanings while vulnerability is a valuable skill for teachers to stay present and take risks. Intentional exuberance plays a crucial role in creating a vibrant classroom community through concentration, enthusiasm, and creative play. Through my experience teaching here, I discovered that the meaning-making, vulnerability, and intentional exuberance of theatre allows students and teachers to create powerful educational experiences.

Wiping sweat from my forehead, I walked into the 8th grade classroom and confidently turned towards a room of fifteen dark-skinned students in pale orange uniforms sitting in rugged wooden desks. I turned away from the expectant 8th graders and caught my breath as I realized I was experiencing the reality of a long-time dream to return to Africa to teach. I excitedly reached for a piece of chalk and began to write the name of my passion on the board. While circling off the final letter “e” in the word “Theatre”, I suddenly realized that the 8th graders may have no clue what the word meant. I turned to face them and asked in a clear exaggeratedly articulate voice, “Do you understand?” They stood blankly at the chalk board and shook their heads. I tried again, “Drama? Acting?” Blank stares ensued. I walked to the center of the room and energized my body while motioning emphatically to my face and body, “Tell a story with your face. And

body." This attempt received a few twinkling eyes, a few light-bulbs going off as the students translated my English sounds paired with physical demonstrations to their native Ewe tongue. In these brief moments in front of the classroom, my theatre tools had already served me well. I had used exuberance to captivate the students' attention, employed physical gestures and tonal inflection to make meaning, and allowed myself to be vulnerable to the beauty of the present moment. If I had not been challenged to improvise with my scene partner and make bold choices in a small black box in Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.A, those skills would not have been in my muscle memory for use in an open-air dirt-floor classroom in Sogakope, Ghana.

I could sense the students were struggling with the language barrier, caught in the frustration of not understanding, similar to my experience playing the role of deaf-blind Helen Keller. As a teacher I empathized with Anne Sullivan's fight to pair the motions of Helen's fingers with the meaning of an object. Pointing to the trunk of a tree beside the open-air classroom structure, my fellow teacher, Avery, encouraged the third graders to explore their sense of touch.

He asked the class, "Is it rough or smooth?"

In unison they responded, "Yes."

The students were highly skilled at pretending they knew what we English-speaking Americans were saying, but these kinds of scenarios proved that the language barrier was a huge stumbling block to their educational process. A couple of days later, the 8th grade class received their graded biology exams from the previous week. My fellow teacher, Hannah saw one of the exams and furiously showed me the vocabulary they were learning. The words were advanced and the definitions used heightened language. Hannah was upset that the students had been using such simplistic language when communicating with us when they obviously knew more. However, she was overlooking the fact that those words meant absolutely nothing to the students. The students could not possibly use the English term "centrifugal force" in a sentence because they had no true meaning attached to it. Stagnation in the development of the students' English vocabulary challenged my fellow teachers and me to use our lessons to make powerful connections between spoken words and their meaning. Acting proved to be an extremely powerful medium to do so.

By its very nature, acting strives to make meaning out of life's events. As Richard Boleslavksy eloquently says, "Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth through art. " (24). It is an examination of the human soul and an attempt to understand human pursuits, conflicts, and joys. Actors attempt to share this meaning on stage through tonal inflection, facial expression, and active listening. One particularly effective acting activity utilized these tools by having the students create a setting with their bodies. For example, I would say the word "beach" and instruct the students to create a beach with their bodies. We discussed the elements that make a "beach" a "beach", like a fish, a palm tree, a wave, or a person sun-bathing. The most

effective scene was a setting familiar to all the students: a market. Hesitant at first, after seeing the teachers squat down and pretend to be a yam or a pineapple, the students began to join in the game, assuming the physical manifestation of a mango or a yard of fabric. After following my lead of selling a mango to a student for an outlandish 100 cedis (50 American dollars), a couple students began buying and selling the other produce. Students, who previously exhibited inhibitions in their English language skills, began to speak full sentences enthusiastically and animatedly, saying, "Can I buy a yam?" or "How much is a pineapple?" Allowing the students a safe and free space to create spontaneous conversation removed inhibitions and facilitated conversation that they found meaningful. They had to make meaning out of the word "market" by recalling their own experiences and physicalizing that setting. Perhaps next time they hear the English word, "market," they will recall squatting like a tomato and more quickly remember what the word means. By creating their own setting, choosing a character, and focusing on a specific goal like buying or selling produce for a good price, the students became excited about conversation and in turn were invested in using English to accomplish a goal.

In addition to vocabulary connections, acting also proved to be an effective meaning-making tool for facilitating classroom management. Due to the low number of art supplies we were able to bring on the plane, the art class did not have enough glue bottles for each student to have his or her own. The art teacher Susan and I discovered that the lack of resources and explanation about our expectations for peaceable sharing of supplies resulted in a chaotic rush of hands vying for the precious glue bottles. For the next art lesson, I suggested we try acting out what it looks like to share the bottles and reinforce the demonstration with positive expression and English words they understood like, "Yes!" and "Good!" We also acted out a fight over the bottles and explained that this behavior is unacceptable by using negative facial expressions and simple words, "No!" and "Bad!" After using this action-based demonstration regarding our expectations for classroom behavior, the students nodded in understanding. The class environment was much more calm and orderly, allowing Susan to teach more art technique and cover more conceptual content than she was able to do in the class without the demonstration. Acting out a scenario with universal facial expression proved to be a more effective means of communicating which increased understanding and morale in the students.

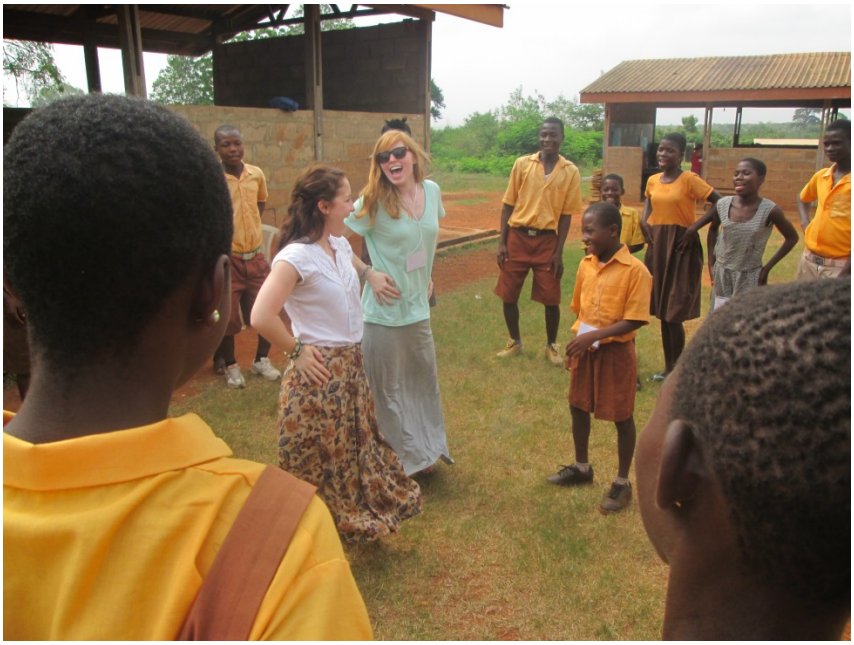
One of the most powerful expressions of meaning-making occurred when the 8th graders performed a skit to reveal the message of the song, "Draw the Circle Wide." This song expresses the joy of including others into a large circle of acceptance so that nobody is left to face situations alone. Hearing the students sing this song on the first day of class inspired me to create an introduction to the song as a storyline for the older students to perform as the Final Ceremony. I took a risk by trying to create a short skit with students who had a limited concept of theatre and stage movement, but felt that physicalizing the message would help them understand the meaning of the lyrics they had been practicing. On the first day, I introduced the characters, the students reluctantly dispersed themselves into groups as I struggled to demonstrate the storyline. By the end of the lesson I felt discouraged watching the students half-

heartedly act through the short scene. Luckily, the 8th grade teacher, Charles, enjoyed drama and stepped in to help me direct the students. Over the next two days, the students continued to work on the skit until the messy beginnings of the storyline became clearer through facial expressions and clearer physical movements. By the end of the week the students could perform the entire skit without direction. Being able to see these students share a powerful story of inclusion and truly understand the message was the ultimate representation of how theatre is a powerful vehicle for connecting foreign language to meaning.

Making connections between words and their meanings occurred not only in the classroom but also in my own personal observation of African culture. After leaving the rural village of Sogakope where the landscape mirrored the typical stereotype of a poor African village with its mud huts, grass roofs, naked children, and brown drinking water, we traveled to Accra, which is a more urban and developed city in Ghana. When I walked into the Accra Mall and viewed the shiny Apple store logo, high fashion merchandise, and people walking around in designer sunglasses, I became disgusted and confused. I tried to put the word “Africa” into a neat labeled box with simple living, dirt roads, and beautiful poor children. I watched a tall woman with purple sunglasses and thick pink lipstick lean towards her friend and whisper about people walking past. She flipped her long brown hair and scrunched up her face in arrogance and superiority. I realized then that the spirits of self-love, arrogance, and greed are universal and that I had been romanticizing a culture that is just as diverse as my own. The nice word association, “Africa = good” and “America=bad” shattered. This experience challenged my previous schemas and expanded my meaning-making skills.

Openness to disruptions in my world view and the success of the classroom activities sprang from one of the most difficult lessons I learned from my theatre education: the willingness to be vulnerable. When I was learning to play drums from a reggae drummer named Nash in Cape Coast, a creeping sense of fear and openness to failure overtook me. I got tense, nervous, and felt painfully uncomfortable at how difficult this new exercise was for me. Nash chuckled and told me, “Free the hand.” My hand had been so tensed that I was unable to create a powerful sound from the drum. I released my fingers and smiled at the rich sound that burst forth from the drum. As I continued to learn the rhythm, Nash said, “Do not fear the drum.” He showed me that I was timidly hitting the drum instead of boldly releasing my hand towards

the instrument. I laughed when I realized his drum lessons not only reflected the lessons I struggled with the most in theatre (taking risks, making bold choices, and allowing myself to be laughed at), but also mirrored what I'd asked the kids to do in their class. I empathized with their fear, and from that naked place of learning realized how necessary it is for teachers to be vulnerable in order to facilitate learning.



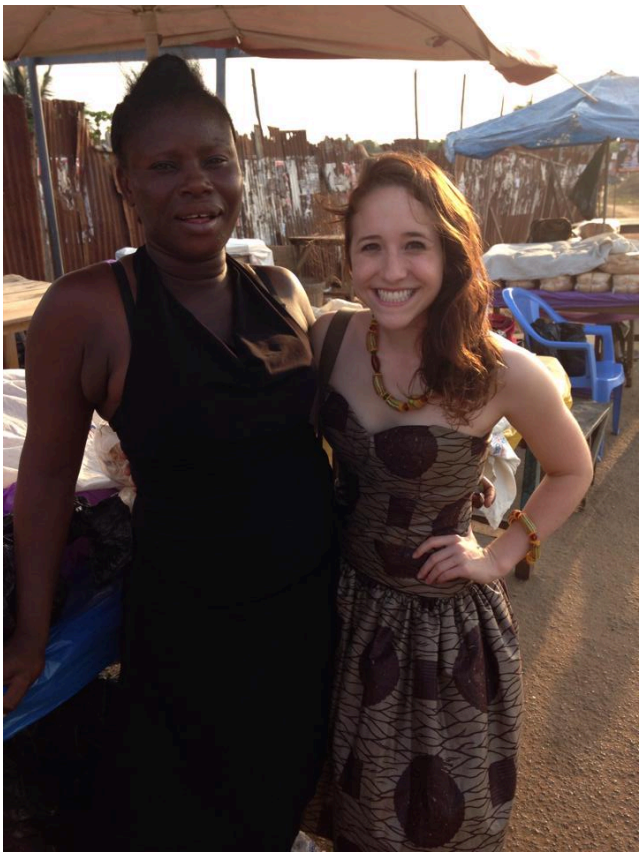
Understanding the power of vulnerability, I stepped out of my comfort zone to engage with the students after their morning assembly. The 7th grade teachers stood at the classroom door and taught the students how to say "Good morning" before they could enter. Once the students entered and sat down, I decided to encourage an atmosphere of excitement and build relationship. I confidently walked up to their desks and enthusiastically asked them, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Once I got a response, I would goofily act out the profession in order to make sure I understood correctly. Most students laughed at me as if I had just tapped danced with a giant seal on my head. I could have given into the temptation to feel discouraged, but I pushed forward and focused on embracing the unknown. Not only did I get to learn a little more about the students' personal goals and personalities, I also established myself as a person who was not afraid to be silly. Some of the most guarded students transformed into my strongest relationships, most notably my new friend Diana. when I first interacted with her, she laughed and giggled with her friends but by the end of the trip we were plotting how I could take refuge in her house so I would not have to return to America. Allowing myself to be vulnerable in many situations brought success in my relationships with the students which established trust and community. When it was time for a theatre lesson, I had already earned their respect and by example shown them that it was okay to take risks.

Being vulnerable not only impacted my experiences in the classroom but also challenged how I viewed the world. After arriving in Ghana, I realized how much I hurry through life and do not allow myself to stay present and in the moment. I am not conditioned, trained, or encouraged to accept interruptions into my daily life. If I am walking across campus to the greenroom and a friend walks out of the library, do I stop and be present with them? Or do I continue on my way?

My inclination, due both to my personality and American culture's obsessiveness with time, would be to smile and wave instead of standing and allowing them space to share their energy. As I talked to Patience about her bookshop, I kept feeling my body pull me away from the conversation in a necessity to move along to my next activity. However, I did not feel that same pull from her. She was grounded and listening to me, connecting with me in the moment. I acknowledged the dissonance arising from the stark difference between my rushed energy and her welcoming presence and began to practice intentional relaxation and communion. While walking through the village of Sogakope, I met a woman named Gifty who was selling bread. Instead of rushing along my way, I stood and listened to her. I embraced her fascination with my white American skin and learned about her bakery. I finally allowed myself to be present with someone. On the day before we left the village, Gifty came to my hotel room and gave me a going-away present. I opened up the box and pulled out a bracelet, necklace, earrings, and a gorgeous brown dress. Amazed I asked her where she got the dress.

"I sewed it for you," she said happily.

I looked in amazement at her as I realized how significant the interaction was for both of us. Allowing myself to be vulnerable and open to the present moment has immense power to give others value and cultivate meaningful relationships.



Gifty

Exuberance, “the quality an actor must possess in order to captivate an audience,” played a crucial role in creating a vibrant classroom community (Cohen 9). In my experience, the building blocks of exuberance are concentration, enthusiasm, and creative play.

Nikki, an alumna of Birmingham-Southern College’s Education Department, said to me after the first day of class, “Now I know you’re not an Education major, but you must have some experience in teaching.”

I smiled, pleased to receive some positive feedback after an exhausting day of improvisation and relationship building. Nikki continued to comment on my interactions with the students during theatre class when I facilitated the “Rain Game,” an exercise in which the students created a thunderstorm by clapping and stomping.

“You engaged the second graders and facilitated their creativity without even speaking,” she said.

I knew what she was talking about: the actor’s power of concentration. I used eye contact, enthusiasm, and facial expressions to capture the students’ attention and encourage them to participate in creative play.

I smiled back at her and said, “Theatre taught me how to do that.”

Richard Boleslavksy’s first lesson of acting clearly explains the power of concentration by discussing an actor who opens a production by listening to the sound of a departing imaginary car:

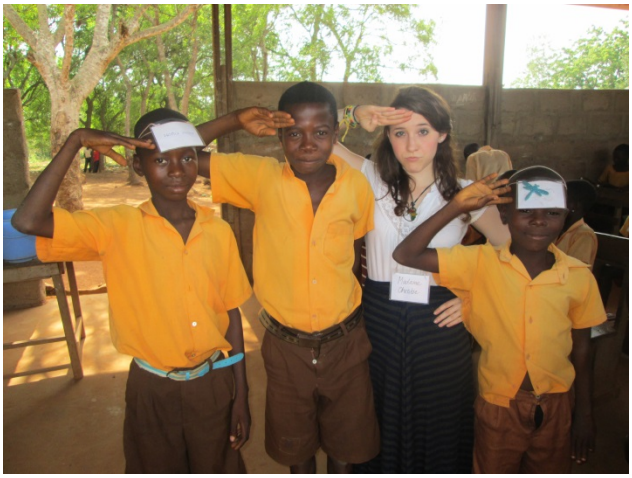
> You must do it in such a way that the thousand people in the theatre who at that moment are each concentrating on some particular object- one on the stock exchange, …one on a dinner or the pretty girl in the next chair- in such a way that they know and feel immediately that their concentration is less important than yours, though you are concentrating only on the sound of a departing imaginary car. (26)

No matter how trivial, dry, or unexciting the Rain Game could have seemed, I had to captivate them and make them believe that the game was the most valuable thing they could be doing in that present moment. I believe all teachers must practice this intensity of concentration that pulls the students’ focus from their own personal worries to the excitement of the classroom lesson.

My infamous theatre warm-up illustrates the other two components of exuberance, enthusiasm, and creative play. The first day at Bakpa-Avedo, I was playing with some kindergarteners and they started saluting. I laughed at them, yelled “Policeman!” and energetically saluted back at them. I watched as this simple gesture captured their attention and focused their energy towards a specific goal of paying attention to what I would do next. I used this gesture during the theatre warm-up to capture the students’ attention and to encourage bold

facial expression. Building on the students' amusement with the "Policeman!" mimicry, I continued to introduce new motions while verbalizing them in English. For example, I would reach my arms up and shout, "Up!" then reach down and declare, "Down!" as the students mirrored my motions and repeated the words. This energetic activity became an effective vocabulary activity as I performed a gesture and then hesitated to say the English word, prompting the students to make the association themselves. I also intentionally paired gestures with incorrect words and gauged understanding by seeing if the students would correct my mistakes. I continued to expand the vocabulary to include animals, emotions, and professions. This exercise helped them understand the meaning of the foreign sounds coming from their mouths through the use of enthusiastic and imaginative expression. To my surprise, "Policeman!" quickly became my nickname. As I walked to classes, students from other grades would shout, "Policeman!" and enjoy the thrill of our mutual salutations. For me the ridiculous gesture represented something more than a goofy theatre game; it represented the success of enthusiastically integrating fun into the classroom.

"Up!"



Policeman!

Chicken!

The “I want that book” exercise reveals the powerful blend of the three elements: meaning-making, vulnerability, and intentional exuberance which I found most crucial in the classroom. While working with a circle of 8th grade students on goals and tactics, I sensed they were in their own worlds. They were hot, tired, thirsty, and the boys simply want to flirt with Madame Katie. I saw the task before me and remembered Boleslavksy’s challenge: “…it is the actor’s own fault if he allows the public to interfere with his creation.” (27). My concentration had to be more powerful than theirs, and I had to creatively demand their attention. I walked to the middle of the circle, held a book high in the air, and yelled, “WHOA!!!!” All eyes were on me. I had startled them into looking at me and had won my initial goal of capturing their attention. I began walking towards the students, my eyes enlarged, my arms and chest expanding with energy.

“What is this?” I bellowed wildly in utter amazement and confusion at the book in my hand.

The students’ eyes twinkled as they slipped into my world, the world of complete fascination with the small object in my fist.

I repeated my question, “What is this?!?”

One bright aspiring lawyer chimed in, “A book!”

My eyes enlarged again, “Yes!!”

I dropped the book in the center of the circle to begin the activity. I had successfully shifted their concentration from their own personal worries to my own: discovering the name and meaning of the object in my hand. I was then able to proceed with my lesson, having captured their interest and even stirred up some laughter.

Next I declared, “I want that book!” and had the students repeat it. Their monotonous voices showed their lack of enthusiasm and understanding. This monotonous tone had been frustrating my fellow teachers all week as we discovered that the students always responded to the question, “How are you?” with the dry mechanical phrase they had memorized: “I am fine.” I was determined to pull them into the world of creative expression and encourage them to attach meaning to the English words they knew instead of falling into the mimicry and recitation of false education.

“No!” I shook my head vigorously at them and challenged, “You do not want that book.”

I repeated the word, “want” and gestured outward from my heart to the book, using strong tonal inflection to audibly illustrate the longing associated with desire. I gauged the circle of students for understanding and knew I was making progress as the students smiled and shook their heads. As Brouilette states, “The meaning of many verbs, adjectives, and adverbs can easily be dramatized and made memorable by improvisational theatre activities. This enables all students not just to learn new words but to practice meaning construction skills.” (29). Instead of merely reciting the words, we, as teachers, desired for the students to attach personal meaning to the language.

Having attempted to attach deeper meaning to the word “want,” I told them to say, “I want that book.” One at a time. Starting to my left, each student proceeded to repeat the words. Some spoke timidly while others yelled ferociously in pursuit of the book. The 8th grade teacher, Charles, joined in to take a stab at verbalizing his desire to obtain the book. One student, Selorm, was very skilled at English language and articulated the energy and passion I was hoping to reveal through the exercise. I chose him to come to the center. Emmanuel, a shy and introverted boy, came alive when it was his turn to vie for the book. I was impressed by the life that flashed in his eyes so I chose him as Selorm’s opponent. Using just the sentence, “I want that book,” Selorm and Emmanuel began to verbally fight for the book. In order to encourage them, I picked up the book and pulled it towards one of the boys, forcing the other to see his desired goal slipping away and his need to work harder to win the goal. The boys used softer tactics of pleading and more forceful tactics to pursue the goal. The energy in the room pulsed as the on-looking students cheered and laughed, captivated by the magnetic desire to win the book.

As I stretched the book towards Emmanuel, my co-teacher, Susan, came up behind Selorm and said, “We want that book.” Her improvisation created a new level for the exercise as students began to take sides, heighten the creative energy, and learn how to accurately use the pronoun “we” in a sentence. I looked around the room as the students’ faces glowed with excitement and connection to their fellow players. Even Agnes, a painfully shy girl who rarely smiled or opened her mouth to speak, transformed into a lively spirit as she engaged in the fight to win the coveted book. The activity began to transcend the goal of English language meaning-making and enter the realm of communion with a fellow actor. I sensed that the students not only understood that the word “want” was associated with deep longing and desire but also that “… people commune with each other not just by means of words and gestures but mainly through the invisible radiation of will, vibrations which flow back and forth between two souls.” (Stanislavsky 31). This exercise allowed the students to practice vulnerability by breaking out of their comfort zones, experience meaning-making to accurately form sentences, and use intentional exuberance to powerfully connect to others.

Before going on this journey, I felt completely unprepared. I was sure I needed a strict lesson plan, lots of detailed activities, visual aids, and engaging scripts. I did not realize that the best preparation I could have for the trip was the three-and-half-years of theatre training I’d already completed. I felt uneasy gazing at the mountain of materials my fellow teachers were bringing to aid the education process: crayons, paint, glue, maps, poster board, beach balls. I looked at my empty materials list and panicked. However, when we got to the school we opened up the supply closet and saw all of the teaching aids from two years ago. They had not been touched. I realized then that the theatre tools I was sharing cannot get lost, trampled, or stolen like a book, glue bottle, or globe. The meaning-making, vulnerability, and intentional exuberance of theatre contribute to the development of the human spirit, an internal education that endures. I learned to trust my instincts and stay true to my inner voice as I discovered that my acting tools have power far beyond the stage. Thanks to the BSC faculty’s willingness to let me explore my passions, my January experience in Ghana convinced me that I made the right decision to ditch the dentist career and apply my acting skills in other arenas to help alleviate the cycle of poverty.

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