Re-writing the (Gender-role) Script: The Girl Project’s Artist-Academic-Activist Collaboration

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Watch

- 3:13-7:04: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ls35j0RzaQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ls35j0RzaQ)
How Did We Get There?

- The creative vision of two local arts educators
- A year of retreats, workshops, rehearsals, and community outreach
- The commitment of 18 diverse high school-aged girls, the staff of a non-profit community theatre, a volunteer board of adult women, and 10 guest artists from around the country
- Now preparing for our third year of performances in Lexington and Versailles, KY
Why The Girl Project?

- Social psychology theories about media effects typically position girls as passive, uncritical media consumers.
- Objectification theory links media consumption with mental health problems disproportionately affecting girls and identifies points for intervention.
- Typical interventions include media literacy programs with small effect sizes that didactically instruct passive participants.
- The Girl Project fosters a creative, critical environment in which a community of girls collaboratively re-write the gender script and share their vision of girlhood with their community.
- Facilitates mentoring relationships and positive role modeling to counter media misrepresentations.
Recruiting and Auditions

- Co-founders and co-directors Ellie Clark and Vanessa Becker-Weig visit all high schools in Lexington and Versailles to introduce The Girl Project and distribute information about auditions.
- Auditions involve conversation about why they want to be involved with The Girl Project and their interests.
- 18-20 girls selected based on their expressed level of interest and commitment to consistent participation.
The Retreat and Workshops

The Retreat

- Miss Representation screening and conversation
- Workshops in yoga, dance, creative writing, and women’s history
- First “closed container” session to establish “The Girl Code”

The Workshops

- 9 monthly, four-hour sessions with local and national guest artists to foster girls’ creation of:
  - Poetry/spoken word pieces
  - Movement/dance pieces
  - Creative writing pieces
  - Visual arts pieces
During the summer, girls participate in a two-week writing intensive:

- Review all artistic work created in workshops
- Edit and revise
- Devise script collaboratively with directors

Production
- Rehearsal and staging

Performances
- Two weekends at public venues in Lexington and Versailles
- Talk-back sessions, community workshops, and intergenerational piece
- In-school performances at area high schools and middle schools
The Girl Project: Next Generation (GPNG)

- Pilot in Spring 2015 at Leestown and Woodford County Middle School
- High school-aged participants and alumni of The Girl Project volunteer to serve as mentors and teachers
- Mentors participate in day-long training and curriculum development session
- Mentors lead hour-long after-school workshops
- Closed container and one-on-one mentor-mentee connections
- Final in-school performance
“Being in The Girl Project has changed my life. Having spent time with the girls in my class has bettered me, something I always strive for. I’m less judgmental, more informed, and more confident—not only in things like body image, but in taking charge of my life and striving for what I want to accomplish. Having a support system of girls and women who love me deeply and know things about me that I rarely share is a true gift and something that is hard to come by. It’s been amazing being able to share my experiences with an audience and create art out of opinions to make a change in my community.”

“The Girl Project affected me in so many ways. It taught me I can be both vulnerable and strong and taught me how to share my voice. It also helped me discover what I want to do with my future. The Girl Project made a difference in my life by showing me that most teenaged girls have struggled with things I have struggled with as well. It showed me that I am not alone, and if I ever need anyone I always have a wonderful and tight knit group of young women to count on to lift me up.”
What the GPNG Mentors and Mentees Say

The mentors:

“The best part for me with the mentoring program was forming a bond with younger girls that were going through a lot of the things I was going through in middle school and giving them advice.”

“I learned that being a leader doesn't mean always being the one to do the talking; leadership can mean being there to give advice when it's needed, or simply being someone to look to as a role model. I also learned that you don't have to be outgoing to be a leader, since I am definitely not all that outgoing.”

The mentees:

“I learned that I don’t always have to doubt myself and I am better than I think.”

“I learned that girls have more power than we thought.”

“My favorite part was being able to express myself. I have never been able to do that before.”

“I learned that I’m really hard on myself and comparing myself to others. I also realized I should be easier on myself and be who I am and not be ashamed.”
Community Engagement and Response

- During the past two years, The Girl Project's 36 participants have given 11 public performances and reached more than 800 audience members.

- From audience response survey data collected after every performance:
  - 100% of respondents would recommend attending the performance to their family members and friends.
  - 100% of respondents would recommend participating in The Girl Project to teen girls they know.
  - All of the following quotes are from audience members between ages 10 and 18:
    - "The entire thing was incredible and perfectly sums up what I feel I am fighting in being the gender I am."
    - "It completely opened my eyes and makes me want to take action for girls."
    - "The entire show was completely influential. I could really relate to a few of the topics."
    - "Some of what was talked about is stuff that goes through my head every day and it was nice to know I'm not alone."
What’s New for 2015-2016?

- Service learning projects between workshops
- Curriculum development for dissemination
- College program development
- Expansion of GPNG to five schools
- GPNG performances at elementary schools
- Mother-daughter programming at retreats
Lessons Learned for Performance Arts-based Community Development

- Apply for grants and develop sponsorships
  - Grants from Toyota, the United Way, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women
- Plan for transitions and successions
- Invest in diversity
  - Consider retention plans, transportation, and financial assistance
- Engage parents to ensure family commitment
- Form a volunteer board of community supporters
- Build in time for evaluation, reflection, and adjustments
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