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Members of an Actors' Studio class in the School of Theatre Arts perform for the School of Nursing. From left, Brianna North evaluates the inappropriate bedside manner of Julia VanderVeen toward the patient, Sarah Bordson.

Acting Across The Curriculum: Illinois Wesleyan Acting Students Perform All Over Campus

February 19, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - When Nancy Loitz, director of the School of Theatre Arts at Illinois Wesleyan University, offered to have actors from one of her classes develop and perform short programs for any course in the University's curriculum, she expected that only a few faculty would accept the invitation.

But within hours, faculty in disciplines ranging from psychology to sociology to English had responded to what Loitz has dubbed "Acting Across the Curriculum," which is one component of her Actor's Studio course for upper-level theatre majors this semester.

"I immediately had more requests than we could possibly handle," said Loitz. "I could have had a class based entirely on this project."

After sorting through the requests and figuring out scheduling issues, the 16 acting students will appear in 11 different classes this semester, producing improv sketches of bad bedside manners for students in the School of Nursing and staging a scene from the comedy *Abie's Irish Rose* for a history class.

Loitz sees obvious benefits for her students who are responsible for making arrangements with faculty, conducting research independently, and then rehearsing the performances.

"The work is all self-directed, which I believe is excellent preparation for these students once they're out on their own," said Loitz. "I have to trust them that they'll get the work done and for a good job for my faculty colleagues."

In their first "performance" of the semester, three members of the class appeared in the School of Nursing for an exercise in professional development. Through improvisational skits, the actors demonstrated professional nursing skills along with some very unprofessional bedside techniques, which brought chuckles from the nursing students who comprised the audience.

"We had mapped out the general idea of who was going to play which part, but this work was entirely improv and a lot of fun to do," said Julia VanderVeen, one of the "bad nurses." "What I like about this exercise is that it gets us out into the University community."

For their part, faculty members who have invited the actors into their classes see significant benefits as well.

Kathryn O'Gorman, professor of English, has asked for a scene from the African-American playwright Adrienne Kennedy's 1968 play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which students in her American drama course are studying.

"When I've taught this play in the past, I find it's one that is especially difficult for students to visualize," O'Gorman said. "Nancy's class's enacting of even a portion of the physical dimension of the play will, I hope, help students in my class appreciate the different layers of - and reasons for - the chaos Kennedy creates."

For her senior seminar, *Immigrants and Ethnics in the American City, 1880-1930*, Professor of History April Schultz has requested the actors to perform a scene from *Abie's Irish Rose*, a controversial comedy from the 1920s about inter-ethnic romance.

"I want students in my class to imagine what this play would have been like for audiences of that time, and this seemed to be a perfect way to do this," said Schultz.

One of the most challenging assignments comes from a professor whose students will be studying autism.

"My request is for Nancy's students to create a social and sensory world that will give my students a taste of what it might be like to have autism," said Linda Kunce, professor of psychology. "I want my students to experience what it might be like to have the communicative, social, sensory, and cognitive characteristics of autism."

Loitz will continue to evaluate the project as the term progresses and the actors fulfill their assignments. "What is going to be especially challenging for the students is the diversity of these requests - improv, set pieces, different genres," said Loitz. "But moving from one short assignment to another is excellent experience for them, and I hope that we're also offering value to the rest of the campus."