

Positive psychosocial experiences of a physical theater class among college students

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About 50% of young adults (18-24 years old) experience anxiety and depression, compared to 32% of all adults (CBHPS, 2023). These rising mental health problems may link to lingering covid-19 pandemic issues, such as social isolation and lockdowns, screen addiction, decreased academic progress, economic instability, and poor lifestyle choices. Based on phronesis (practical wisdom), the purpose of this interdisciplinary, phronetic, qualitative, and temporal study was to examine the psychosocial experiences of a semester-long physical theater class among eight college students (4 males, 4 females). The class met twice per week, 1.5 hours/time and its content included physically demanding, playful, embodied, individual and group-based exercises (e.g., aerial dance, calisthenics, and other activities to improve bodily expression). Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted twice (beginning and end of the semester) to qualitatively collect the study's data. Sample interview questions included exercise levels, mental health and physical health, and individual and social aspects in performativity. Two themes emerged from the qualitative/phronetic data analysis. In the first theme, psychological experiences, study participants mentioned that their mental health improved (e.g., decreased depression, anxiety, body tension). Based on the second theme, positive social experiences, the students discussed how they effectively worked together to learn from each other and enjoy the experience. Only during the first set of the interviews did some participants express occasional feelings of nervousness when performing before others. However, they shared ways to overcome those feelings, such as being open to freely expressing themselves and exercising the actor's reset. Practitioners in Kinesiology and performing arts should emphasize physically demanding, safe, bodily, creative, playful, and group-based exercises for increased psychosocial health among college students.