

# Case Study: CO/LAB Theater Group

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## Program Summary

- CO/LAB provides a creative and social outlet through theater arts for individuals with developmental disabilities, most of whom are 14 or older. Participants are referred to as “actors” by CO/LAB staff.
- CO/LAB’s programming is divided into “CO/LAB:core” and “CO/LAB:connect” .
  - CO/LAB:core consists of both one-off and weekly classes. The weekly classes culminate in a showcase performance of work devised throughout the semester.
  - CO/LAB:core participants can choose between Musical Theater Production, Ensemble Theater, and Acting Topics classes.
  - CO/LAB:connect classes are offered through partnerships with community organizations. These workshops and residencies are taught by CO/LAB Teaching Artists and modeled after the CO/LAB:core classes, and are flexible based on the partner organization’s needs.
  - CO/LAB:connect also offers opportunities for professional development opportunities for artists and educators as well as community engagement events. Community engagement events are designed to foster neurodiverse theater experiences between CO/LAB actors and other corporations and community organizations.
- Classes are capped at 12-15 actors, and are staffed with 2 Teaching Artists and 4-6 Supporting Artists.



- Teaching Artists are paid to facilitate CO/LAB:core and CO/LAB:connect classes.
- Supporting Artists (SAs) are volunteers who assist Teaching Artists in the classroom by participating alongside CO/LAB's actors and providing extra support where needed. CO/LAB provides training and professional development for SAs.
- SAs can be "rotating" or "consistent." Rotating SAs volunteer for a minimum of two classes per semester; consistent SAs volunteer at least once a week, and work with the same class each week.
- CO/LAB:core classes are free for participants but the organization takes a deposit at the beginning of each semester to ensure consistent attendance. The deposit is returned in full at the end of the semester if the actor has not violated the attendance policy.
- CO/LAB piloted a leadership initiative in Summer 2017 for experienced actors to receive training and take on Supporting Artist roles in CO/LAB:connect classes and camp counselor roles at CO/LAB's summer partnership with Bluelaces Theater Company, Camp BlueLAB.

## Program Profile

CO/LAB (Creative Opportunities without Limits and Boundaries) Theater Group was founded in 2011 with just one class of 13 actors. The organization was initially jumpstarted on a grant, and has since grown to offer between four and six CO/LAB:core classes per semester, in addition to several CO/LAB:connect classes that take place off-site.

### **CO/LAB:core**

CO/LAB classes are mostly offered to individuals ages 14 and over with developmental disabilities. In addition, CO/LAB recently started offering occasional classes for younger participants ages 9-13. All CO/LAB:core classes are closed to family members and other outside observers, so individuals attend on their own, unless they require one-on-one attention beyond CO/LAB's capacity. Each class is staffed by two Teaching Artists and between four and six Supporting Artists, creating a 2:1 actor to support ratio. Teaching Artists are paid by CO/LAB, and Supporting Artists are neurotypical adult

volunteers. To begin volunteering with CO/LAB, Supporting Artists must attend a professional development training session led by CO/LAB staff that prepares them to work with adults with developmental disabilities. For their first semester, Supporting Artists can rotate among different class selections and must participate in at least two classes. After their first semester as a Rotating Supporting Artist, volunteers can become Consistent Supporting Artists by attending the same class every week, and performing in the showcase with the actors at the end of the semester. Supporting Artists and Teaching Artists are offered regular professional development sessions. In addition, CO/LAB brings on an arts education consultant and disability professional consultant to ensure that the organization is keeping current with best practices in both spheres.

CO/LAB refers to their participants as actors rather than students. In the same vein, all CO/LAB:core classes take place in professional rehearsal studios in Midtown Manhattan or Brooklyn. Actors are expected to adhere to the CO/LAB Pact, which is posted in every core and connect class. It reads, “1. Respect, 2. Listen, 3. Keep space 4. All are welcome.”

Each class begins with a 10 minute long dance party. Teaching and Supporting Artists select songs and take requests from actors, and everyone is encouraged to talk to someone new during dance party. Following dance party, Teaching Artists lead physical and vocal warm ups; these change based on what the goals of that individual class are and can help to focus or energize the ensemble. After warm ups, each class takes a different form. Early in the semester, activities focus on developing ideas for scenes, and focusing these ideas on conflict and resolution, character, and environment. Each session wraps up with a group reflection on that day’s goal; for example, if the goal was to focus on being a leader, the ensemble will reflect on how well they think they embodied that goal throughout class. Finally, the ensemble performs CO/LAB’s closing ritual together, which is the same in every class. Actors are supported based on individual needs so that they can achieve what success looks like for them and their abilities. The Teaching Artists take care to know each actor and develop ways to support them so that actors of all abilities are welcome.

All CO/LAB:core classes are free of charge, except for a \$100 attendance deposit that core class participants get back at the end of the semester if they adhere to the attendance policy. Actors are required to attend every class; if they miss more than three classes per semester, they cannot participate in the showcase at the end of the semester. If an actor is going to be absent from class, they or their caregiver must let the CO/LAB staff know at least one hour in advance of class. If an actor is late or absent

from class without prior notice, \$10 is deducted from their deposit. This policy was implemented to give participants an incentive to attend class regularly and on-time; after several semesters of free programming, the CO/LAB staff determined that a financial incentive to follow the attendance policy helped actors and their caregivers take class attendance requirements seriously. This also holds actors to a professional standard and teaches important life skills such as commitment to a group and accountability.

## CO/LAB:connect

CO/LAB:connect classes can be broken down into three areas: workshops and residencies at Day Habilitation facilities, schools, or other community centers; community engagement days with larger groups such as corporations or other volunteer organizations that allow employees to spend a day with CO/LAB's actors to gain exposure to a neurodiverse community; and professional development for other arts and disability organizations. The structure of most connect workshops and residencies



is very similar to that of core classes; the professional development connect classes are similar in nature to CO/LAB's training sessions for their Supporting Artists. CO/LAB:connect is a fee-based program and provides a revenue source for CO/LAB.

For most connect classes, CO/LAB goes in with a pre-existing lesson plan that looks like a standalone core lesson plan. Teaching Artists occasionally develop unique lesson plans specifically for a connect partnership, for a small additional charge. These lessons can incorporate the partnering organization's goals for their participants; if an organization is looking to emphasize conflict resolution, CO/LAB designs a lesson plan that tackles that topic through theater activities. As an example, CO/LAB led a workshop for Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts as part of their Passport Program at the New York Library for the Performing Arts (pictured on the left) based upon the library's Musical Theater exhibit to engage individuals with disabilities with the exhibit in a unique, sensory friendly way.

## Leadership Initiative

CO/LAB began a leadership initiative for its participants in Summer 2017. This initiative offers opportunities for experienced CO/LAB actors to receive training and take on Supporting Artist roles in CO/LAB:connect classes and camp counselor roles at CO/LAB's summer partnership with Bluelaces Theater Company, Camp BlueLAB. Camp BlueLAB is a summer camp co-led by CO/LAB and Bluelaces for campers ages 9-13 with developmental disabilities; for more information about Camp BlueLAB, click [here](#).

CO/LAB staff put together a set of criteria actors need to participate in leadership training: they must have two or more years of experience at CO/LAB, be over the age of 21, have a positive attitude, take initiative, and be on time and reliable. The staff then identified twelve actors who met this criteria, and reached out to them via email with a personal invitation to apply for the leadership initiative, with plans to accept two counselors for Camp BlueLAB and as many Supporting Artists as were interested for CO/LAB:connect classes. Additionally, staff sent an email to all CO/LAB participants to inform them of the leadership initiative and invite them to express interest so that CO/LAB staff can work with them towards the goal of being qualified for the leadership initiative in the future.

Actors who were invited to apply for the leadership initiative had to fill out a form with their availability for trainings and classes, along with a personal statement for those interested in working as a counselor at Camp Blue/LAB. Because counselors would be working with younger campers, they were asked to detail in why they would be a good leader and whether they had experience with younger children. Personal statements could be submitted in writing or as a video.

Leadership training took part in three sections, and were structured similarly to the one-day training that new Supporting Artists receive. The leadership training placed emphasis more on learning by doing, by going through a sample CO/LAB class lesson plan and debriefing after each activity to understand useful strategies in the classroom. CO/LAB staff exhibited certain behaviors that class participants might engage in during an activity or game that might be part of a typical lesson plan, and actors in the roles of Supporting Artists practiced strategies like offering a break or using an item from the sensory toolbox based on the scenario. They then had a chance to discuss what other options were available to them in that situation and ask questions. The first of CO/LAB's

three leadership training lesson plans, along with their counselor handbook that outlines expectations for Camp Blue/LAB counselors, can be found in the “Additional Resources” section of this case study.

Following Camp Blue/LAB, counselors had the opportunity to meet in person with CO/LAB program staff to debrief about the experience. Other actors in non-camp leadership roles serving as Supporting Artists for CO/LAB:connect classes receive a mid-semester and end-of-semester follow up with program staff to evaluate their performance.

## Highlighting Best Practices

### **Establish a routine, then build on it.**

CO/LAB’s classes always begin with a dance party, followed by warm ups, and always end with a reflection and closing ritual. These touchstones give participants a sense of what to expect each class, and allow for them to build skills as theatrical concepts are scaffolded into the warm up routine. While dance party at the beginning of a semester might involve less direction from Teaching Artists, by the end of a semester, participants are encouraged to talk to new people and make bigger physical choices during dance party. The dance party also supports actors during the transition into class, providing time to acclimate to the space.

### **Find ways to rotate social groups so that participants have the opportunity to engage with new people.**

As CO/LAB’s programs become more established, the program managers noticed many actors returning semester after semester. Because one of CO/LAB’s major goals is to provide a social outlet for their actors, they reserve a few spots in each class for new participants, so that there is a consistent opportunity for actors to interact and collaborate with new people.

*“...we’ve started this semester holding 4 spots in each class for new participants so that we’re deliberately bringing new people in every single semester. Obviously if they don’t get filled, we’ll re-release them to our current pool, but in the name of trying to diversify and keep our program a social outlet for people, we think that it’s important for participants to meet new people. We are interested in diversifying our actors’ experiences.”*

-Becky Leifman, Co-Founder, Executive Director, and Teaching Artist at CO/LAB Theater Group

### **For a free program, find an alternative way to encourage regular attendance.**

The \$100 attendance deposit from each actor described above creates an atmosphere of professionalism and accountability around attendance. Actors often work in groups and showing up is extremely important, a life skill that actors must learn. The emphasis placed on attendance through the deposit places value on this important element of the program.

*“The biggest challenge that we came up with, in speaking to some of our partners... is that when you have a free program, it is so hard to get people to commit to it. I think when you’re building a show, which is the nature of our consistent weekly classes, the idea of being held accountable is really important to the ensemble and to each individual. We need them there. And so we wanted to figure out a pay structure that would keep them in the classroom and hold them accountable in some way, without prohibiting access... We do have other programs where you can drop in and drop out, but this is really about being part of an ensemble, being part of a community, and building something together. So if someone just wants to try it out, we have other programs, but this really is for someone who wants that consistent weekly program.”*

-Arielle Lever, Co-Founder, Director of Programming, and Teaching Artist at CO/LAB Theater Group

### **Teach skills-based lessons in a way that allows students to really practice the task you’re teaching them.**

Because all of CO/LAB’s work is based in theater, they are well-positioned to practice social and emotional skills through role play and improvisation exercises. When a CO/LAB:connect partner is interested in bringing skills-based learning into a workshop, CO/LAB Teaching Artists develop lesson plans that allow for embodiment of different scenarios and creative thinking in the moment.

*“A lot of times [partners, like schools or day habilitation programs] want to learn a skill in a creative way. For example, we’ll do conflict and compromising with others in the lesson plan, and the whole thing is about conflict resolution, but it’s all through theater games... The big thing about CO/LAB is that you’re not learning by watching a video,*

*you're up on your feet doing it, so a lot of those things are learned in a way that's very different than they do during their day."*

-Arielle Lever, Co-Founder, Director of Programming, and Teaching Artist at CO/LAB Theater Group

## **Establish a process for consistent, high quality professional development for staff.**

CO/LAB provides multiple opportunities for professional development for staff to improve practice and best serve and support their actors. Each year they hire an arts education consultant to observe and give feedback to teaching artists and leadership. They also hire disability consultant to help inform their work. Teaching Artists meet regularly and are provided workshops from CO/LAB leadership as well as outside facilitators. Supporting artists also receive professional development. Teaching artists and supporting artists meet prior to each class as a teaching team to review actor needs, what would best support individual actors, and how to support actors in small groups.

*"...the professional developments span both artistic PDs and disability knowledge/awareness/best practices. We're trying to make those balanced, because obviously where we come from is artistry, and so a lot of our past four years have us asking the question, 'How can we make sure we know exactly what we're doing to support our actors and be knowledgeable?' And now I think it's our job to continue to make sure that the artistry is really high while keeping up with the ever-changing disability industry and practices."*

-Arielle Lever, Co-Founder, Director of Programming, and Teaching Artist at CO/LAB Theater Group

## **Treat participants as adults and allow them experiences that are age appropriate.**

CO/LAB places a high emphasis on treating their actors as adults. While the content may be adjusted for differing cognitive levels, they are always approached as a class of adults. The participants are called actors as opposed to students, the classes are held in professional rehearsal spaces, and the actors are often co-performers with their neurotypical peers (supporting artists). CO/LAB's leadership initiative offers a chance for experienced CO/LAB actors to serve as supporting artists during CO/LAB connect classes and CO/LAB's summer camp partnership with Bluelaces Theater Company.



*“A goal we have for the participants is to give them a legitimate theater experience. We’re really strongly adamant about being in traditional theater spaces as opposed schools or a community building, which is tough, in terms of finding spaces, but important. That’s another goal and value of ours.”*

-Arielle Lever, Co-Founder, Director of Programming, and Teaching Artist at CO/LAB Theater Group

## **Additional Resources**

- CO/LAB leadership training lesson plan
- CO/LAB counselor handbook