

RJ Mabanta

Institution Designer. Storyteller. Narrative Strategist.



RJ Mabanta builds spaces where nobody has to audition to belong.

SHORT BIO · 55 WORDS

RJ Mabanta started in biochemistry, switched to theatre, taught debate in Seoul, performed on the stage at Shakespeare's Globe, and ended up designing schools. He is a K-12 principal, a doctoral student in Leadership & Innovation at University of the Pacific's Benerd College, and COO of DŌA Academy of the Arts. He founded Searchlight Studio, LLC. *You'll arrive beloved.*

PRESS rj@rjmabanta.com

WEB rjmabanta.com

LEADS

Regional Principal,
Heritage Peak Charter
School

BUILDS

COO, DŌA Academy of
the Arts

FOUNDED

Searchlight Studio, LLC

STUDIES

EdD, Leadership &
Innovation, Benerd
College



BIOS, IN THE LENGTH YOU NEED

Copy, paste, and go.

ONE LINE · 15 WORDS

RJ Mabanta is a school principal, institution designer, and narrative strategist who builds spaces where nobody has to audition to belong.

MEDIUM · 113 WORDS

RJ Mabanta is a K-12 principal, institution designer, and narrative strategist. He trained as an actor (MFA, University of Delaware), performed on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe, and brings the rehearsal room's ensemble, feedback, and stakes to how schools are built. He is Regional Principal at Heritage Peak Charter School, COO of DŌA Academy of the Arts, and founder of Searchlight Studio, LLC. He was Founding Principal of New Pacific Charters and part of the founding design team for San Diego's newest high school in thirty years. He is a doctoral student at University of the Pacific's Benerd College. He builds spaces where nobody has to audition to belong. *You'll arrive beloved.*

FULL · 210 WORDS

RJ Mabanta started in biochemistry, switched to theatre, and trained as an actor (MFA, University of Delaware). He held a UC Davis education fellowship with Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, performed on the Globe's stage, and taught dramatic literature, speech, and debate to elite students in Seoul.

He is a K-12 school principal, serving as Regional Principal at Heritage Peak Charter School. He was Founding Principal and co-designer of New Pacific Charters, where he wrote the charters and led a team that won approval from two demographically different districts. The network now runs three sites. In San Diego he was part of the founding design team for the district's newest high school in thirty years. His practice is grounded in Liberatory Design and restorative practice, through his work with the National Equity Project and the International Institute for Restorative Practices.

He is COO of DŌA Academy of the Arts, a nonprofit that pairs working industry professionals with young artists. He founded Searchlight Studio, LLC, a narrative strategy studio. He is a doctoral student in Leadership & Innovation at University of the Pacific's Benerd College and serves on the Advisory Board for Equity & Belonging at the Los Angeles Education Partnership.

He builds spaces where nobody has to audition to belong. *You'll arrive beloved.*

HOW TO INTRODUCE HIM

Education: RJ Mabanta is a K-12 principal and school designer who builds schools where nobody has to audition to belong.

Arts and youth: RJ Mabanta is COO of DŌA Academy of the Arts, where working industry artists mentor young artists. He trained as an actor and performed on the stage of Shakespeare's Globe.

Strategy: RJ Mabanta is a narrative strategist and the founder of Searchlight Studio, LLC. He helps leaders and organizations understand who they are, how they are experienced, and what they must become.



What RJ is here to talk about.

When the Theatre Kid Runs the School

Rehearsal rooms run on ensemble, feedback, and stakes. Most schools run on compliance. RJ shows what changes when a leader trained as an actor designs the school: a staff that rehearses, students who are cast instead of sorted. *For educators, school leaders, and teacher-prep programs.*

Already Legendary: The Artist-Storyteller Framework

Most youth programs start from a deficit: a young person to be trained, corrected, and built up. RJ starts from the opposite premise. Every young person arrives as a full story already in progress, and the arts are how that storyteller gets heard. At DŌA Academy of the Arts, young people are Legends, Teaching Artists and Mentors give them craft, instruments, and agency, and the medium (music, film, theater, poetry) matches wherever their truth lives. *For youth-serving organizations, arts educators, funders, and producers.*

Why Your Belonging Sucks

Belonging is designed, disrupted, or withheld. Most organizations withhold it by accident. RJ names how it happens and what a leader does instead. A direct talk with room for discomfort and humor. *For leadership teams, boards, and conferences.*

Why Narrative Comes Before Everything Else

Most organizations don't have a strategy problem. They have a story problem. Until the story is clear, no rebrand, no campaign, and no strategic plan will hold. RJ works at that layer first, through Searchlight Studio, LLC. *For founders, executive teams, and communications leaders.*

Formats: keynote, workshop, panel, podcast. Lengths and AV on request.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR HOSTS AND INTERVIEWERS

- Q1** You started in biochemistry and ended up designing schools. What connects them?
- Q2** What does "nobody has to audition to belong" look like inside a real school or program?
- Q3** What did theatre training teach you about leading adults?
- Q4** You say belonging is designed. Where do most organizations design it wrong?
- Q5** You call yourself a Narrative Strategist. What does that mean, and why do leaders need it?
- Q6** DŌA calls its young people Legends instead of students. Why does that word matter?



FACTS AT A GLANCE

The details, in one place.

CURRENT ROLES

Regional Principal, Heritage Peak Charter School
COO, DŌA Academy of the Arts

Founder, Searchlight Studio, LLC

Doctoral student (EdD), Leadership & Innovation,
Benerd College, University of the Pacific

Advisory Board for Equity & Belonging, Los
Angeles Education Partnership

EDUCATION

EdD in progress, University of the Pacific
MAEd, Educational Leadership, California State
University

MFA, Theatre-Acting, University of Delaware
BAs, Theatre and Media Industries, UC San Diego

CREDIT LINE

RJ Mabanta, Institution Designer. Storyteller.
Narrative Strategist.

SELECTED WORK, WITH THE TEAMS HE LED

- Founding Principal and co-designer, New Pacific Charters: charters written and approved in two districts, now three school sites.
- Founding design team, San Diego Unified's newest high school in thirty years.
- Led teams in San Diego schools that lowered suspensions by 65% and moved a school out of CSI status.
- 2022: led a team that raised the College and Career Indicator for a Heritage Peak region from 21% to 93%.
- 2019: coordinated and led summer IB programs for global students at Harvard and MIT.

AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

- Headshots, color and black-and-white, print and web
- Logos: Searchlight Studio, LLC and DŌA Academy of the Arts
- Résumé (PDF, 2 pages) at rjmabanta.com/press

PRESS CONTACT

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rjmabanta.com · searchlight.studio

Every inquiry is read and answered personally,
within one business day.

Textures inspired by the weavers of Ilocos and Abra, with thanks.

