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The Drama Handbook



Teaching Acting through Scene Work

DAVINA RUBIN

 GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Introduction



This handbook uses scene study to teach the craft of acting to middle-school students. A time-honored training technique, scene study focuses all the actor's available resources on one scene, rather than on an entire play. Working on a short piece gives actors an opportunity to fully explore possibilities, so that more energy may be put into the scene than in learning lines. Scene Study lets a student grow beyond the basics of getting on stage and saying the lines; it enables him or her to practice the craft of acting. Most professional actors continue to take scene study classes even after they have become successful.

The book is based on two premises. First, teaching acting should not necessarily mean teaching "theater." We like to believe that teenagers in a play learn to act. Too often, however, in school plays involving adolescents, the "theater" aspect takes over, and good acting is made subordinate to "making it all work." The production becomes more important than the craft; the costumes and sets are used to cover bad performing. Since everyone has to participate, too many students end up as the "third tomato from the left" after the teacher has picked a few for the most important roles.

The second premise of this book is that teaching drama to middle-school children (grades 6–8) is different from teaching it to children of other ages. Middle-school students

have grown a bit more sophisticated since elementary school. They are no longer, in their eyes at any rate, “kids.” They are inhibited, but they crave a means of self-expression. The inhibition and the craving together often lock them in an internal war, battling to find a way to express themselves without risking too much in the process. Young teens can learn to use a drama class to express their own feelings and sometimes will find a new lens through which to view the world.

Why Scene Study Works

Anyone who teaches young teens will tell you that drama comes naturally to them. The trick is to get them used to being dramatic in front of an audience, whether there is a stage or not. It is an evolutionary process, throughout which one learns gradually how to feel comfortable doing things in front of an audience. A good drama class focuses on the craft of acting; it involves the skills of emotional expression, communication, interaction, movement, and cooperation. It eventually can, and often does, lead to theater work. But a class in scene work stands on its own as a valuable educational tool.

Once students are beyond elementary school, the idea of playing a small part in a class production holds less appeal than ever. On the other hand, pre- and early adolescents are not always ready for the broad scope of a full-scale production. Many middle schools do not have the facilities to stage such productions, and many middle-school teachers, unless trained in the dramatic arts, lack the skills

to truly teach students the craft of acting. The idea of a large production can be as intimidating to a teacher as it can be to students.

Scene work, therefore, makes the ideal heart of a middle-school drama program. It offers students the opportunity to pick the work they want to do, to choose their partners, and to make decisions about the presentation of their scenes. It gives them a chance to be a “star” in an unthreatening setting. It also gives them a degree of control and practice at decision making, both integral to any education. Scene study allows students to explore a wide range of expression, both emotionally and intellectually, as actors, writers, and directors. On a personal level, this often affords them an insightful look into their own and others’ behaviors.

When students tackle small acting tasks in front of a group and are successful at them, they are willing to attempt more. The more they succeed, the more they are willing to try. Eventually, instead of feeling a fear of failure, they look at performing as something at which they can succeed. Unlike a large play, scenes do not loom as huge performances, but rather as “works in progress,” with which students can study, re-do, and experiment.

Teachers assigned to do a drama class can also be caught up in the fear of inadequacy and failure, especially those with limited experience in dramatic productions. Because scene study focuses on teaching a craft, not on creating a production, you will find that once started, the program practically runs itself.

Setting the Stage



Before students begin their scene studies, there is some preliminary work to do. Begin your drama classes with group activities that build trust and at the same time help you learn about your students. These are nonthreatening activities, so students usually have fun and leave class with a different attitude about the word *drama*. It is important for them to understand the relevance of trust to a drama class. On stage, they must be able to trust that the other actors will be there for them.

These exercises can take from three to five class periods, depending upon how many students you have, how often you meet, and the length of your class period. The exercises have great value, as they enable students to examine and define their emotions. If you take longer to do the exercises do not panic. Taking time with these will yield results later.

Trust Circle

Though I learned this activity in Gary Austin's improvisation workshops, I have been in many other classes which also do trust activities similar to this. If you know others and feel comfortable with them, use them as well.

Have students stand in a circle. You stand in the middle of the circle and ask a student to come into the center. The student stands in front of you and closes his or her eyes. Gently turn the student a few times, making certain that you hold on so that the student is not dizzy when he or she starts walking. When you let go, the student, eyes still closed, must walk back and forth across the circle. Students in the circle stop the walker by gently placing their hands on each shoulder, and then gently turning him or her around and letting go. The student then walks across the circle again, and continues to do this until you say to stop. Students standing in the circle must be as quiet as possible.

Find a place for yourself in the circle after the student begins walking. This enables you to watch the students and model for them what you want done.

When you first explain this exercise, tell the students what you will want them to do when their turn is called. First demonstrate with your eyes open, and, as you walk back and forth, tell students they will have their eyes closed. Then close your eyes and keep walking.

You will notice that many students flinch long before they get to the edge of the circle. It's as if they have suddenly walked into a wall; tell them to walk through it. This teaches them to trust the people in the circle, but, just as important, to trust themselves and their own judgment. They know there is no wall there, so they should keep walking.

WHAT STUDENTS LEARN ♦ The Trust Circle teaches students to trust each other and to be trustworthy. This is of major importance for actors on stage who must trust all the others they work with. When one person trusts another, it gives both people more confidence. Talk to students about the trust necessary to do a scene with another person.

WHAT YOU LEARN ♦ You will see the dynamics of the class and how the students interact. The Trust Circle will teach you a great deal about students' personalities and responsibility levels, and how well they cooperate. You will spot the students who need attention, those who are more fearful or shy, and those who are not able to take on the responsibility you have asked of them. All this comes, not from watching the child in the center, but from watching the children in the circle.

Count to Ten

Improvisation teachers use this exercise. I have seen several variations of it, such as Running the Alphabet. Count to Ten works better for large classes. Use this activity within the first few days of a drama class and during the term as well.

Have students sit in a circle and tell them they are going to count to ten. Explain that because the counting will be random, no one will know who is going to say each number. If two or more people say the same number, you must start over from the beginning. Generally, it's a good idea for you to start off the first few times and let the class continue. At some point, simply sit in the circle and leave it up

to someone else to start. At times students will not hear the two voices say the same number, so you must listen carefully and be the arbitrator. If the students “get away with” reaching ten without actually following the rules, they are never really happy.

This is a fascinating exercise to watch. It can take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, and you will see the class go through many emotional changes. First, students will giggle and laugh when two people say the same number. After a while, they will get exasperated, then they will start targeting those students who *always* have to say a number, and often say two or three. As they get closer to ten, they will groan and laugh when they fail. Then they will regroup and begin again.

Some students will call out every other number; others will always say the same number. Some students will try to control it all by “assigning” people numbers to call out. A bit of gentle coaching is sometimes necessary, but try to limit it. If students do the exercise on their own, it makes their achievement that much more satisfying. As you coach, point out why it is necessary to be silent sometimes. This is another trust activity. Students must learn to trust that someone will eventually say the next number.

Finally, they will reach ten. There will be cheering and clapping, and they will feel like a team.

WHAT STUDENTS LEARN ♦ Count to Ten takes teamwork, cooperation, patience, and participation. Students learn that sometimes not talking is as valuable a contribution as talking. One interesting aspect of this exercise is that “cheating” gives no satisfaction. I have seen a class do this by keeping scrupulously to the rules, because winning only meant something if the students really did it.

WHAT YOU LEARN ♦ This exercise offers another chance to see the group dynamics in action. You will notice your shy students, who never call out a number at all. (You might coax: “I want someone who has not called a number to start us off with number one this time.”) You will also identify the students who need to control by orchestrating the whole activity and telling other students which number to call. You will observe the students who must say a number and are almost compulsive about it.

Five-Second Look

When my students filled out their last journal entries for drama, I asked them which exercise had helped them the most. A surprising number wrote Five-Second Look. I say surprisingly because I designed this exercise for teaching public speaking and communication, not acting.

This exercise helps speakers overcome a fear of being in front of a room of people. Students learn to scan an audience, giving equal eye contact to all parts of the room. Though not really an acting exercise, students say it helps them to be more comfortable on stage.