

I am Joni Warner, MFA, Educational Theatre. I am a Theatre in Education Consultant, a Drama in Education Practitioner, and an adjunct faculty member at a small liberal arts university, in a small town called Adrian, in the Southeastern corner of Michigan. That little university is called Siena Heights University. We are a proud Dominican University. Apparently we are the best kept secret in Southeastern Michigan, because the education department has been offering the training that is “crucial to excellence in education” and practicing this “profound rethinking of teacher training” well over 25 years. Our education department is housed in the theatre and performing arts building. Our students don’t sit and watch videos to learn about our philosophy, they learn teaching through drama “hands-on” with intensive training in a laboratory setting that involves real “live” children. We believe so strongly in using theatrics in teaching that we went much further than developing a class to support our philosophy, we adopted that philosophy for our entire program. At Siena Heights University: TEACHING IS AN ART. Today, I hope to immerse you in just a few of our techniques for acting like a teacher as well as drama strategies for enhancing your teaching experience.

In preparing for this presentation I discovered that there seems to be a “great deal in interest in employing active learning techniques in the college classroom. Faculty are recognizing that learners gain knowledge and insight through action. In addition, professors are more aware of differences in learning styles, and the importance of using a variety of instructional techniques to address as many of these as possible. There has also been increased emphasis on creating community in the classroom, whereby students learn through interactions with each other and assume joint ownership of the educational experience.

All of these considerations can be addressed by using acting games in the classroom. They provide opportunities for participants to tap into their imagination, think for and express themselves, as well as attend to the voices of their classmates. As a result, students can experience growth in cognitive, social and moral domains.”

(Rhem & Associates, Inc., “Role Plays and Expressive Exercises”, 1999, POD Network, The National Teaching and Learning Forum,
www.TheNationalTeaching&LearningForum

In the mid 70's the "University of South Carolina developed a program for the College of Education entitled "Teaching as a Performing Art". It was developed to elicit better teacher performance in order to produce more effective student performance. It was designed for closed-circuit television or resource center access. The course consisted of 52 half-hours of videotape, 26 half-hours of audio tapes, a student guidebook, and a textbook. The videotapes were divided equally into (1) theory and performance demonstration units, and (2) interviews and discussions with guest faculty from arts and education. The theory-demonstration sessions consists of the principle philosophies and concepts with 80 performance illustrations. Performance demonstrations were created (for all academic areas) to further illustrate modes and styles of performance, adaptivity, ensemble techniques, theatrical skills, the pedagogy of the arts, nonverbal communication, and the training-educative-and-celebrative teaching experience. The entire series was written and produced by students and staff at the University of South Carolina (Gillis, Don, "Teaching as a Performing Art", ERIC SEARCH ED117093, publication date, 1975-12-00, non-journal) www.file//C:\DOCUME\1\Jo\LOCALE~1\Temp\FSA1Y05F.htm

“Teaching as a Performing Art”, was the topic of research in 2007 by Rod Hart at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. This study involved the creation and implementation of an acting course for educators. The primary objective of this course was to assist educators in their role development by providing them the space and support (through arts training) to experiment with different ways of being in the classroom. The results of that study indicate that a number of arts-based activities enabled teachers to improve ways of being in the classroom by embodying strategy, courage, voice, honesty, poise, and excellence. (Hart, Rod, “Act Like A Teacher: Teaching as a Performing Art, Scholar Works @ UMass Amherst, www.scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations/AAI3275803

In his book, Teaching as a Performing Art, “Dr. Seymour Sarason focuses on the often overlooked role of teachers in galvanizing an audience – their students. Sarason argues that teachers will better engage learners if they are prepared in the artistry of doing so. Sarason sees teachers as actors and thus uses the traditions of stage performance to inspire ways to foster connections between teachers and students. He explains how the rehearsal process actors undergo and direction they receive would benefit educators. Recognizing that implementing his ideas would require a major shift and profound rethinking of teacher training programs, Sarason suggests that this training is crucial to excellence in education. Dr. Seymour Sarason is a Professor of Psychology Emeritus at the Yale University. In 1962 he founded and directed the Yale Psycho-Educational Clinic, one of the first research and training sites in community psychology.” (Sarason, Seymour Bernard, Teaching as a Performing Art, Teachers college Press, 1999)

Typical Class

Rehearsal: Voice, Body, Emotions, Blocking,

Set the Stage: Although most classrooms make a good traditional stage, I prefer “theatre in the round” – A circle creates an intimate atmosphere and invites participation. Some activities benefit from being “staged” in different parts of the room, for that you may choose area staging.

Make Your Entrance (either physically or into your lesson) Memorable: Use music, lights, sound, perhaps a prop.....

Transition Activity: Get each student connected as you transition into the lesson. These activities serve as a ritual to transition into the “reality” of the classroom.

Warm-up/Motivation: Two to three minutes of physical warm-ups/stretching with students will get them focused and ready to “perform”. (For short “brain-activating” activities, I recommend that you refer to BRAIN GYM).

Show-Time: Together, discover the “voice” and dramatic structures of the lesson.

Evaluation/Reflection: Come back together to discover the student’s feelings/understanding about the lesson and find the most memorable moment from the day’s work. Pass around a “talking stick” and when the students have the stick they can share what they remember about the lesson. Share a phrase and movement that represents the most important part of the lesson

Make Your Exit (either physically or out of your lesson) Memorable: Perhaps a quote, a humorous joke, statement, or even song and dance.. Keep them coming back for more.

Theatre is a collaborative art. The director depends on the actor’s involvement and input to put on an effective production. Indeed, perhaps the most productive fulfilling aspect of directing a student play is to reinforce, encourage, and use students’ input whenever possible. Students become excited and committed to the production when their ideas are highlighted, honored and used. It fosters a feeling of creative empowerment, opens up their imaginations, and gives students confidence to risk offering more ideas. Students’ fresh ideas also inspire the production and give the director ideas for this and future productions.
(Thistle, Louise, *Dramatizing Classic Poetry*, Published by Smith and Kraus Inc., 1999)

Let’s rephrase this paragraph and relate it to your classroom instruction:

Learning is a collaborative art. The instructor depends on the student’s involvement and input to facilitate an effective lesson. Indeed, perhaps the most productive fulfilling aspect of presenting a lesson is to reinforce, encourage, and use students’ input whenever possible. Students become excited and committed to the lesson when their ideas are highlighted, honored and used. It fosters a feeling of creative empowerment, opens up their imaginations, and gives students confidence to risk offering more ideas. Students’ fresh ideas also inspire the lesson and give the instructor ideas for this and future lessons.

Let me make a clear distinction between drama and theatre. While theatre focuses on product, drama focuses on the process of dramatic activity as an educational tool. Drama uses “theatrics” to enhance learning. It can be adapted to all ages and abilities. Through dramatic techniques, participants are allowed to risk at their own level of comfort. When first experimenting with Dramatic Structures, things may seem a bit chaotic. I realize that “creative chaos” is often scary but more often it offers some of the most creative, educational, memorable, and insightful experiences your students will ever have.

Dramatic Structures for Extending/Enhancing Classroom Learning

Tableau: Human sculptures, freeze frame tales, slide shows of the story, family portraits, and crime photos – all consist of one to five still images created by students to tell a complete story. The image may include one student, frozen in a pose that reflects the idea, or it may be an image that will involve half, or all of the class.

Media Interviews: News reports, talk shows, interviews, documentaries (filmed or live), and radio and TV advertising – explore aspects of roles in and out-of-context. Talk shows are often self-starters and need less facilitating than others.

Inner Monologues: Leader calls out “freeze!” and as all are frozen, one by one the students, as their characters are allowed to speak their thoughts.

Scenes that aren’t there: Much like non-linear time, create improvised scenes that might have occurred between those that happen in the story or experience, using the same set of characters, setting, and given circumstances. Think: “the magic if”

Thought Tracking: During a tableau, the leader circulates, touching each student in turn, to speak his or her thoughts out loud.

Hot seating: The leader or a student is set in front of the group in a designated role. The group questions the person in role, either as themselves, in the roles of a group with a particular relationship to that character (e.g. reporters, family members, business associates, etc.) or in collective role representing one person with a particular relationship to that role (e.g. mother, boss, employer).

Who is to Blame: Courtroom cases, debates – Can you try the Big Bad Wolf for destruction of property? Who will the witnesses be? Who will testify? You might also chose a head line from the paper or other news worthy events.

Experts: Students take on the role of experts – whether business executives, government officials, scientists, or explorers. This idea couples well with Media Interviews structure. Try a talk show with a panel of experts on a topic such as political events, environmental issues, history, etc. Each expert takes on the topic based on their area of interest (or research).