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Using theater games to enhance language arts learning

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My fifth-grade class eagerly looks forward to drama time each day when they participate in theater games, improvise scenes from books, assume the role of a literary character, and much more. All kinds of learning take place in the drama circle, and the students have learned to approach this subject with the same seriousness that they give to the basics of math, reading, and writing. From my viewpoint, drama is a time for my students to enrich their language arts learning in an exciting and pleasurable way.

There are many reasons why drama should be integrated with daily classroom instruction. It improves social skills such as concentration, confidence, and cooperation—what I call the three Cs (Fennessey, 2000). It is also an opportunity to practice oral language. When students are involved in drama activities, they develop fluency in language and nonverbal communication skills—the use of the body, face, and voice to communicate (Cornett, 1999). It is especially important for students learning English as a second language, who may not speak English at home. With an opportunity to participate in drama and in plays, these students are motivated to use the language, thus improving fluency and pronunciation (Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002). It’s also important that teachers provide opportunities for drama in the classroom because of the widespread view among linguists that language is primarily a spoken art. Adding drama to the language arts curriculum can provide the necessary opportunities for development of language and language-related abilities (Stewig & Buege, 1994).

The classroom teacher does not need to be a creative drama specialist to successfully lead a drama activity. Many theater games are simple,

fun, and easy to learn. The games were designed to help the actor develop specific skills related to his or her working instrument that consists of the body, voice, and intellect. Theater games can be applied in the classroom for the same purpose. The drama games are energy sources (Spolin, 1986) that help students develop skills in concentration, problem solving, and group interaction.

A sample of games

At the start of the year, the theater games that we play focus on building confidence, cooperation, concentration, and the development of a safe place for learning through drama. Upon this framework of attributes, I move on to teach more elaborate games that give practice in listening and oral language and that provide motivation for reading and writing activities. In this article, I share a sampling of theater games that I’ve used successfully for many years in the language arts classroom.

One-line improvisations

This game coordinates the body and voice creatively. All the players gather in the drama circle, either standing or sitting. The leader shows one object. (Some objects that I’ve used successfully are a long piece of cloth, a pole about the size of a yardstick, or a round object about the size of a flying disc.) The leader explains to the group, “This object can be anything you want it to be. You are a magician and you can change it into something new as it goes from player to player around the circle. When you get the object, you need to use the object that you have created and say a line that will

help the other players identify your object.” The leader then demonstrates. If the object is a pole, the leader might wave it back and forth across “the ground” as if it were a metal detector and then say, “I know I lost that gold ring here somewhere.” Once the players have the idea, the object moves around the circle. Each player transforms it and then passes it to the next player. If a player cannot think of an idea, it’s passed again. Here are some examples of objects that players have created in the past: a magician’s wand (“Ladies and gentlemen, watch closely as I wave my magic wand”), a vacuum (“I’d better clean this up before mom gets home”), a fishing pole (“I can’t even get a bite”), and a toothbrush (“With this toothbrush, I’m guaranteed to have no cavities”).

Identify the object

This observation game develops the use of sensory detail in descriptive language. The players sit (I encourage crossed legs and straight backs) in the drama circle. The leader explains that when the signal is given, all players look straight ahead with hands cupped behind their backs. The leader places an object in each player’s hands, and through the sense of touch, the player describes the object. (I usually model this before we start.) A player might say the following:

Its shape is round on the top and thin on the bottom, like a handle. Part of it feels like plastic, and the round part feels smooth like glass, or maybe a mirror. It has a rim around the glass part. It’s not very heavy.

At this point, the leader says, “Can you name your object?” If the player identifies the object correctly (magnifying glass), then the game moves on to the next player. If the player makes a wrong guess, the leader can ask questions to help the player: “What is the shape? What is the texture? Does it have any moving parts? What material is it made of?” Or the leader can identify the object for the player because the focus of the game is on using the sense of touch and putting what the player feels into words. After each player’s turn, I ask that the object be placed in the center of the circle. The leader also makes clear to the players that they cannot give hints to others or peek at their object or someone else’s.

Minefield

This game develops specific directional language. The players sit in the drama circle. All around the inside of the circle are objects scattered so that they cover the space evenly. (I choose soft objects that will not injure the players when stepped on; e.g., scarves, chalkboard eraser, magazine, writing paper, hats) The leader chooses someone to be “it” and puts a blindfold on that player. The player who is “it” needs to travel across the inside space to the opposite side of the circle without stepping on a “mine.” The player is directed by the voice of the “navigator” (there can be two). Once the leader chooses the navigator, the game begins. The navigator’s directions might sound something like

Take six baby steps forward. Turn a quarter turn to your left, then step out about six inches to your left and slide the other foot in to meet the left foot. Lift your right knee high and take a giant step forward, then bring your left foot next to your right.

The leader watches for any contact in the minefield and if the player who’s “it” touches any object, *kaboom!* (I usually appoint a sound effect person to make the explosion sound. I say “contact,” and the sound effect person makes the explosion effect.) After practicing this game, the players become quite adept in choosing the specific language needed to help “it” safely travel across the drama circle. Once students play this game, they beg to play it every day.

Role-playing book characters

This game promotes an understanding of character traits. To prepare students for this activity, it’s necessary to introduce a read-aloud story or use a book that is familiar to students in guided reading. Either in a guided-reading group or in a read-aloud session, discuss the main characters with the learners. On chart paper, record the characters’ names and the personality traits that identify each one. Ask students to find a line from the book or an action that supports the personality traits attributed to the characters. For example, I read James Marshall’s adaptation of *Hansel and Gretel* (1994), and the students identified the character of the wife as mean, selfish, and a liar. They cited the line, “Those wretched children of yours are gobbling

everything up. Do you want your pretty little wife to waste away?" (p. 3) as dialogue that revealed her personality.

After the preparation, I pair the learners for the drama activity. One student takes the role of a reporter and another student assumes the role of a character of his or her choice from the book. The reporter prepares questions designed to discover how the character feels about events, people, or the settings in the book. For example, the reporter might interview the student who is playing the role of the witch and ask, "What were you thinking when you found those two children at your door?" Each pair performs the improvised interview for the drama circle audience. Through voice, gesture, and facial expression, the actor playing the role of the character from the book needs to focus on revealing the character traits to the audience. If the reporter has difficulty creating questions, then the audience or the leader might pose some of their own.

Improvising a scene from literature

This game develops an understanding of plot, character, and setting. When improvising a scene from a story, look for a dramatic moment in the plot that also has the possibility for a number of parts. In the following example, which is a scene from *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (1989), the characters, setting, and conflict already exist in the literature, and the students interpret how this scene would look if it were brought to life.

Improvisational drama is a process, like writing or reading. When my students dramatize literature, I take them through a series of steps: brainstorming, planning, the first playing (drafting), reflecting, revising, and replaying. Exciting scenes often don't happen on the first try—they evolve. In the scene-building process, students, working with the teacher as a facilitator, gradually build a scene that has interest.

During the brainstorming and planning stage, we gather in the drama circle in front of the easel to create a simple outline for the improvisation. I ask three basic questions and record responses to them on chart paper. Teachers and students might use the following questions and responses for the chosen scene from Lowry's book:

- *Who* are the characters in the scene? Mr. and Mrs. Johansen, Anne Marie Johansen, Ellen Rosen, and Nazi soldiers.
- *Where* does the scene take place? The Johansens' apartment in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1943.
- *What* is the main problem or conflict? Nazi soldiers are searching the Johansen apartment to find hidden Jews. The Johansens pretend that Ellen Rosen is their daughter to save her from being taken away to a concentration camp. The trick works, and the soldiers leave.

Following the planning, the students act out the scene, and I sometimes interject questions. This is called side-coaching (Spolin, 1986). Students are instructed to listen to me and react, but they must continue the scene without coming out of character. When the scene ends, we discuss what worked and what could be done to make it better. I go back to my original three questions: Was the conflict revealed to the audience? Did the audience understand the setting? Was the relationship between characters revealed to the audience? After we've discussed revisions, we're ready to replay the scene. The replay takes longer because the actors' dialogue and movement has become more detailed.

Balance seatwork with creative drama

Creative drama has always played a significant role in my classroom. Often theater games are a follow-up or a lead into a reading or writing lesson. After many years, I rely more and more on this strategy because it works and the children love the time they spend working in the drama circle. Although these games are a small sampling of drama activities, they are enough to experiment. As teachers we need to continue our search for effective ways to develop language arts literacy. When pencil-and-paper tasks seem to be more valued than ever by school systems as we test and retest our children, it becomes important to try to balance seatwork with creative drama. Drama is a time

when our children's voices can be heard and valued for their self-expression.

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