

# Drama in the Classroom

by Karen Smith

*“Education should strive not for the acceptance of one voice, but for the exploration of many voices.”*

—Douglas Barnes

For years I used drama in the classroom. Sometimes students engaged in formal drama that focused on a product, or play for a particular audience. Most often, however, I used drama to help students explore and make sense of their worlds. These enactments were carried out for the benefit of the learner and focused on what was being learned through drama and students' new understandings about a topic, themselves, and their world.

I was lucky to have a friend, who worked with our local children's theater, volunteer in my classroom every Friday afternoon for two years. From him, I learned the power of drama to help students reframe their understandings into new perspectives. He also taught me that negotiating and constructing meaning through drama is a gradual process that demands time and attention. I learned that creative drama was most successful and useful when I took time to establish an environment of trust where students were willing to risk sharing their ideas. I also learned about some basic drama skills that enhanced the quality of our dramatic experiences whether improvising a scene from a story, revising a piece of writing to “show not tell,” sorting out understandings about a difficult concept in social studies, like war, or figuring out a concept in science such as the relationship between an atom and electrons. Below, I share some exercises I used to build trust among our learning community members, and to develop the skills we needed to effectively express and make sense of our world through drama.

## Tips for the Teacher

- Create activities where students get to know each other on a personal level
- Make the first drama activities simple enough so all can be successful
- Make evaluation a **necessary** part of each experience.
- Evaluate positively, asking questions such as:
  - What worked well?
  - What did you see, hear or feel that you could believe?
  - What was said that really fit the character?
  - What did you learn from this experience?
- Never allow children to make negative comments or focus on what didn't work well or what they didn't like.
- If an activity or drama experience isn't working right, don't hesitate to stop in process and discuss the problem with the students.

## Trust

### Activity 1: Getting To Know You

Ask each student to bring a picture of her/himself to class, or draw a self portrait as a class activity.

When this is done, draw a large star in the middle of a large sheet of paper. Draw a name out of a hat that contains the names of all the students in the class. Ask the student whose name is drawn to leave the room for a few minutes. While s/he is out of the room, put this student's picture (or self portrait) in the middle of the star and brainstorm all the positive things the class has to say about him/her and write them on a separate piece of paper.

Ask the student to return to the room, look at the list, and pick the five words s/he likes the best. Write one of these words at one of the five points on the star. Post the star for the day. Do this each day, until each student has been featured.

**Believability****Activity 1: Magic Chair Activity**

This activity can be done with the students at their desks or seats. Tell them they are sitting on a magic chair that is going to change into a lot of different things. Each time it changes, their behaviors should reflect the change. Begin calling out a type of chair/seat and give students time to adjust. The person calling out the name of the chair should pay attention to what students do well and point this out during the evaluation.

Possible Chairs:

- The throne in a grand ballroom; you are the king or queen
- A bus stop in the rain
- The first car on a roller coaster
- A chair in the dentist's waiting room; the same chair after 30 minutes; after one hour
- A chair in the principal's office
- A beanbag in front of the television

Evaluation:

- Talk about why students sat the way they did and how it felt. Ask if they have ever been in a similar situation and how it felt.
- Talk about who used gestures, facial expressions, etc. that made their actions believable.
- Ask a couple students who were especially believable to demonstrate their magic chair to the class.
- Have children think of chair for others to sit in.

**Activity 2: Pass It On**

Have students sit in a circle in chairs or on the floor. The teacher or student reaches into an imaginary box and picks an object. Through gestures and actions (no words), this person provides information on the objects' size, weight, texture, etc. For example, if she pulls out a long-stem rose, she might grasp it and get stuck by a throne, hold it gently between her thumb and index finger while she smells it, etc. Then she passes the object to the person seated next to her. That person accepts the object in a believable way, does something to signal what it is (e.g., if it's a rose, he might pick off a petal or two) and then passes it on.

Possible Objects:

- Dirty sock
- Hot potato
- Kitten
- Diamond ring
- Game-boy
- Apple

Evaluation:

- Talk about who used gestures, facial expressions, etc. that made their actions believable.
- Have children think of other objects to pass.

**Concentration and Cooperation****Activity 1: Imaginary Clay**

Have class sit in a circle. The teacher or student has an imaginary ball of clay. The size of the ball can change as it moves from person to person. The first person with the clay creates an object while others watch. The gestures and actions should provide clues to what is being made. Once the object is complete, the person gives it or sends it to someone in the circle. (If they make an object that is mobile, like a football, bowling ball, or airplane, they may want to throw or roll it to someone.) The person receiving it must be paying close enough attention to make his receiving movements believable. The person who receives the object then uses the clay to create a new object.

Evaluation:

- Talk about who used gestures, facial expressions, etc. that made their actions believable.
- Talk about how the two people cooperated to make their actions believable.
- The evaluation should focus on both those who made the object and those who received it.

### Activity 2: Play It Again

Divide the class into small groups or pairs. Assign each group a game that they will act out, using imaginary equipment. Encourage the students to concentrate and cooperate, and to make their game as believable as possible. Have game should last at least a minute or two. Present each game to the class. The objective is not for others to guess the game that is being played; rather, it is for the students who are not playing the game to focus on what the group did to make the game believable.

Possible Games:

- tug-or-war
- basketball
- skate boarding
- jump rope
- baseball
- soccer
- volley ball
- ping pong
- dodge ball

Evaluation:

- Talk about who used gestures, facial expressions, etc. that made their actions believable.
- Talk about how the two people cooperated to make their actions believable.

### Activity 3: Moving Day

Pair students and tell them they are members of a moving company. Their truck has been backed up to the front door of an apartment house where they are going to deliver several items.

Pick a pair of students to begin the exercise. Give each pair an item they will cooperatively unload. Talk them through the process for moving the object from the truck to the apartment. For example, have them unload a piano: Pick it up, take it through the front door, up a flight of stairs, down a narrow hallway, etc.

Objects for Moving:

- An aquarium full of water and expensive fish
- A very delicate crystal chandelier
- Seven pet cats, uncaged

Evaluation:

- Talk about who used gestures, facial expressions, etc. that made their actions believable.
- Talk about how the two people cooperated to make their actions believable.

### Activity 4: Dramatize a Story

Pick a story that students know well and have them act it out either verbally or non-verbally. (*The Carrot Seed* by Ruth Krauss works well for this exercise.) Divide class into small groups and give them time (approximately 10 minutes) to discuss how they will go about presenting the story to the class. Have them decide who will play each character, what actions or dialogue they will use to make their character believable, how they will cooperate to make the play believable, etc.

Present the groups' interpretations of the story.

Evaluation:

- Talk about participants who used gestures, facial expressions, dialogue, etc. that made their actions/dialogue believable.
- Talk about how people cooperated to make the story believable.

**Conclusion**

During the first couple months of the school year, I spend about an hour, once a week on the above activities. While my goal is not to create actors, I do find that when students internalize these basic drama techniques—trust, believability, cooperation, and concentration— their dramatic interpretations are enhanced and the use of drama as a heuristic for making sense of the world is enriched.