

Part I: Basic Information

Lesson Topic: Introduction to active, collaborative, creative processes in the Theatre Appreciation classroom.

Discipline: Theatre Arts

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Lesson Site: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse; La Crosse, Wisconsin

Course Name: Theatre Appreciation

Course Description: A study of theatre as an art form. Emphasis on the role of the audience as collaborators in the performance and on student understanding and appreciation of the elements of a theatrical production. The course is intended for non-Theatre Majors as part of the University's General Education program. Enrollment is about 55 students per section.

Summary: The lesson's principal purposes were to initiate an interactive environment in the classroom; to involve students actively in collaborative work; to introduce basic concepts in theatre production and performance. The instructional pattern took the form of an activity: small groups of about five students wrote, rehearsed and performed a one-two minute play for the class; we then discussed the theatrical concepts that arose. We found that the lesson accomplished all of these things, but that it worked better taught at the second class meeting of the semester, rather than the first, because the first class meeting required so many 'house keeping' details, leaving little time for discussion.

Part II: The Lesson

Learning goals:

- * To begin to think theatrically: in terms of storytelling through performance
- * To begin to collaborate with other students
- * To "get your feet wet" in participating in active learning
- * To "get your feet wet" in performing before your peers
- * To begin to become familiar with key course concepts: genre, dialogue, characterization, structure, role of the audience, etc.
- * To establish the active nature of the class

Students will be able to: understand basic ideas and terms in theatre arts

Separate the elements of production of theatrical performances

Recognize elementary methodologies in creating performance

Describe an experience in collaborative performance

Develop a beginning appreciation for the complexities and the components of theatrical production

Lesson Design:

I. Explain that the students will be creating and performing an entire play within the next half hour; and that they will do this in small groups. Instruct them to introduce themselves to one another once they are in their groups, and that while they do that, you will come around with scenarios for their plays. The word ‘scenario’ is written on the board and defined. Explain that you will also give each group a ‘genre’ for their play. The word genre is written on the board, along with these basic theatrical genres: comedy, tragedy, melodrama, musical/opera. You describe each, along with examples, and asking the class for other examples. You might offer a little demonstration of, for example, melodrama, with a hand flung across the forehead to indicate distress, or other simple sample of the forms.

II. Divide them into groups. This method, outlined below, is intended to force students to move around the room, talk to each other, and to break up the ‘I’m sitting in my chair like an anonymous sponge’ mentality that some students bring to a classroom.

- a. Students are asked to give themselves points for each of the following:
 1. for each play they have participated in, onstage or backstage: 3 points
 2. for each live play they have seen: 2 points
 3. for each class they have taken that focused upon theatre: 1 point
 4. for each play they have read: 1 point

b. Students total points for themselves silently, then are asked to line up according to number of points, in one line around the entire room going from lowest to highest. The instructor assures them that the only purpose is to distribute theatrical experience evenly among the groups, that it is not a judgment of them.

c. Once students begin lining up, they are told to break any ties according to anything the instructor desires, such as shirt color, distance traveled to class, or in any way the instructor wishes to impose order – the idea is to create a light-hearted imaginative atmosphere, so the less rational the order is, the better – one could also use birthday or who stayed up latest the night before: anything.

d. Once fully lined up students count off – with a class of 55 students, they count off in eevens, for a total of eleven groups of five each.

III. Remind them to introduce themselves once they are in groups, that you will come around with scenarios and that once they are introduced their task is to create a one-two minute play with a beginning, middle, and end. The rules are:

Each student must have a speaking character to play.

They may use any furniture they find in the room, and any doors.

They may not physically hurt anyone (this is intended as a joke).

They may not, in the interest of maintaining a safe classroom, develop racist, sexist, or homophobic scenes. “Of course,” you might say. “I don’t need to tell anyone in this room, but please avoid sexism, racism and homophobia in your scenes.”

They must have fun.

IV. They find their groups and begin to talk. You go around and give them their scenarios. These are the scenarios we used:

You went out for the evening and forgot your wallet

You go home and Mom and/or Dad have made some changes to your home.
You are meeting a blind date in a public place
You need to tell your mom or dad why you aren't doing so well in school
Your little brother or sister has money; you don't and you need it for a big evening out.
You find out you are dating the same person as your best friend
You borrowed your friend's car and it is in the ditch.

V. You go around to each group to distribute the scenario and a genre. Genres are randomly assigned.

VI. Allow them about 7 minutes to plan and rehearse. Urge them to get up, find some room and actually act it out in rehearsal. Go from group to group answering questions and asking how it is going, helping them to solve problems and stay on task.

VII. It will be noisy, so yell loudly: "One minute! You have one minute left." Then allow them 2-3 minutes more.

VIII. At the end of the preparation time, get their attention and announce that now they'll each do their plays in turn, but that first we have to talk about one important thing. "What does an audience do at the end of a performance? They burst into wild, spontaneous applause! So now we're going to rehearse our wild spontaneous applause. Let's say the first group has just finished their amazing play, and so we....." and you start the applause, complete with whoops and hollers, maybe some whistling. They join in – if they are reluctant, you do it again, after saying that they weren't quite there yet, and need more rehearsal.

IX. Students perform the plays, one right after the other. The instructor takes notes on moments that are good examples of the concepts to be introduced: dramaturgy (crisis plots and their parts), characterization, stock characters, diction, blocking, sightlines, dramatic question, thought, genre, etc.

X. Discussion ensues, led by the instructor, of various concepts, terms, processes, and purposes of theatre. The discussion is somewhat unpredictable and organic, as it arises directly from the work the students present.

Lesson Rationale: The lesson is intended to address some major problems in teaching Theatre Appreciation to a population of General Education students. Our department holds the philosophy that active learning is best, and that the Gen Ed class especially, should be interactive with hands on projects forming the basis of the class. This lesson introduces the active nature of theatre production while also getting students up and participating. The lesson presents students with simple versions of real world problems in theatre, such as plot construction, characterization, and stage movement. It provides context for discussion of terms, based directly upon student creations. It tends to help students value their own creative abilities, and to invest in the imagination, which is a key component in any artistic activity.

Related files: “Observer’s Guidelines.”

Part III: The Study

Introduction: One faculty member who participated on this team had used this lesson repeatedly over the course of seven years’ teaching. The first time she created it, she was interested in the “Quick before it sets” idea of setting a tone for a course within the first hour of meeting with the class, so that student expectations were immediately attuned to the instructors’ plans for classroom methodology. Since most of the course was to be active group creative work, the initial day should also, she felt, operate that way. Other team members were invested in active learning but had not used this particular exercise.

The exercise was intended to introduce the idea and basic processes of theatre itself, and some basic ideas, concepts that are then used throughout the rest of the semester. Instructors sought ways to involve students in their own learning from the start in this class, so that the experience in the classroom is active, rather than passive. Theatre itself is active, even for the audience member, so the goal was to invent a lesson that would inculcate those attitudes in the class.

Approach: Observers sat in the back of the class, and were introduced as theatre faculty who were observing the learning process that day. Students were briefed on Lesson Study when they were asked to sign permissions, and assured that video of their classroom work would not be shown outside the classroom.

When students broke into groups, observers each selected one group to observe, and moved to sit near it, without interacting except to answer simple direct questions from students. Observers used the attached form, called “Observer’s Guidelines,” to record their observations.

While observing the groups work on the problem, observers noted the group thinking processes, the questions they raised about stated learning goals and about content, and then, in watching scenes and the discussion afterwards, observed student participation in the discussion, such as questions asked and nonverbal responses such as nodding or note-taking.

Findings:

These findings are organized by learning goal.

* To begin to think theatrically: in terms of storytelling through performance. One observer commented that students immediately began to think in terms of ‘plot’ or story events. They related events to genre, assuming such things as: if there is a death it has to be a tragedy. They also observed that comedy was a difficult genre to perform because it was hard to get jokes to work. Team members thought that deeper discussions would aid learning, broadening student understanding or the workings of theatre performance.

* To begin to collaborate with other students

All observers commented on how quickly and positively students tackled the problem. One commented, “This assignment was a microcosm of the creative process in theatre. In my estimation, it was highly successful.” Another wrote, “Students created a quick bond.” The team felt that by posing a limited yet challenging problem that held some “real-world” attributes, students were encouraged to invest in the process. That investment is one of the basic ingredients in theatrical production.

* To “get your feet wet” in participating in active learning

The group process mirrored the collaborative process used in theatre arts. Team members observed that students quickly tackled the problem at hand. Since hands on creative projects comprise much of the semester’s work in Theatre Appreciation, the exercise was seen as a good introduction to the rest of the semester.

* To “get your feet wet” in performing before your peers

Team observations suggested that while students did indeed ‘get their feet wet’ they also wanted more positive feedback for taking such a risk so early in the semester. Observers expressed surprise that students were so willing to take that risk, in particular in the musical genre. Students actually sang in front of their peers, even students who were not skilled singers sang.

* To begin to become familiar with key course concepts: genre, dialogue, characterization, structure, role of the audience, etc.

The second time the lesson was taught, it took place on the second day of class instead of the first. This allowed more time to discuss concepts. The discussion however, needed more structure, the observers felt. When the lesson had been taught the first day, limited time meant a very focused, instructor-driven review of concepts along with examples. Team members felt that perhaps a structure for student-driven, inquiry-based processing of information would work better. Team members proposed giving the students the list of concepts or terms before the exercise, encouraging them to take notes on examples from the plays performed, and then to discuss those in small groups before the large class discussion took place. This process might help preserve the student centered learning that formed the basis of the exercise itself.

* To establish the active nature of the class

Observers’ notes reflect that one of the keys for success in the exercise is the lack of time. Students have little time for apprehension since the time to prepare the performance is so limited. Another observer commented: Students “said yes to the activity . . . and worked together without a negative response.” As stated above, the groups formed for this exercise were then used throughout the term in other group activities, so that the bonds formed then worked throughout the semester.

Conclusions:

Most team members felt the lesson was more valuable when taught the second day because the additional time that could be used in discussion and development of deeper understanding of basic principles helped student learning. Team members felt that overall the lesson achieved most of its goals quite well. It did introduce an active

environment early in the course, while also introducing beginning principles and content. It provided an initial ‘bonding’ and confidence-building experience for students in a relatively low stress atmosphere. Students generated the material, which then could be used as examples throughout the semester.

The first time the team taught and observed it, the lesson was taught the first day of class. The second time it was taught on the second day of class, because the team observed that there was little time for discussion after the lesson, and that holding the discussion during the following class meeting meant the lesson would not be fresh enough in students’ minds for the strongest links between experience and reflection.

Students rather quickly settled into group process. In most cases the students were strangers, so working relationships were set up within the actual group work. (These groups were used throughout the rest of the semester as working groups by most instructors who adopted this exercise.) The teaching team discussed the possibility of assigning roles to each student in a group, such as recorder, time keeper, etc., but for a fairly quick process like this one, it seemed to most of us to be unnecessarily complicated to do so.

Students were sometimes confused by the genre assignment, particularly “musical/opera.” Instructors can solve this when going around group to group to see what questions students have. In case of the musical/opera genre, occasionally a group will be too anxious to sing in front of class. In those cases the instructor may opt to change the genre to a non-singing one. Students may also worry about ‘writing songs’ but all they need do is change words to a tune they already know – the key is to give them permission to be silly, and to take away the burden of doing something of high quality. Perhaps telling them that you know it’s a big assignment for a short preparation time, and that the point is really to give everyone the same experience as a starting point for class will help to relax the students.

For future use, the team members plan to try various methods of developing the discussion/content portion of the exercise. In addition to the method outlined above one team member intends to do ‘before and after’ quizzes to test knowledge; another will use a ‘one minute paper’ to assess understanding of basic ideas.