



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume III: Drama

Dramatize English

Curriculum Unit 80.03.02
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What bothers me most about teaching English is that the students arrive each September with such negative attitudes about school, about schoolwork, about teachers, and even about themselves! What intrigues me is how to transform their negative attitudes into positive ones.

Our 7th through 12th grade students must learn a given number of skills, become familiar with certain literature, and progress according to prescribed expectations in order to be promoted to the next grade, to graduate, or to be accepted into college. Beyond that, as John Holt suggests, “we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and so well that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned.” ¹

We begin each September with classrooms full of young people who do not love learning but whose developing personalities are impressed with rock heroes who sing, “We don’t need no education. Teachers leave us kids alone.” ² Holt maintains that these negative attitudes toward school and teachers are due to fear of failure. Success in school, a child soon learns, is correlated to the number of times he can come up with the right answer. Fear of getting the wrong answer and incurring the disapproval of the teacher (or, even worse, that of their peers can be so stultifying to many children that they won’t even try. Some actually set out to fail and feel successful when they do.

Another line in the same song, “We don’t need no thought control,” is diametrically opposed to what we are trying to do in education, which is to expand our students’ powers of thinking, not control it. They need many skills to be able to think interpretively and critically. They won’t learn those skills if they have a negative attitude. I believe drama can change attitudes and help students to learn basic skills. When you think about it, Pink Floyd reaches the “kids” we teach very dramatically. One cannot even listen to today’s popular music on records without visualizing the actions, the lights, and costumes of the actor-musicians on stage. A rock concert is as much drama as it is music.

In teaching foreign languages, where oral expression is essential training for every student, I’ve used games, puppets, improvisation, skits, and role-playing, as well as script-writing and actual plays to elicit spoken words. One of the results of any kind of classroom dramatization I tried was the disappearance of tension and selfconsciousness in all the students. Those were occasions when they were most imaginative and creative, most comfortable with one another, and most confident of their abilities. They were motivated by drama; it’s as simple as that. Let’s teach drama, then, not only as a literary genre, but as a means of motivating our students.

I'll introduce my students to a world other than their own, in which they can be anyone they wish through improvisation. With drama, I hope to encourage imagination and creativity, cooperation and teamwork. Children experience an incomparable feeling of self-assurance when performing in front of the classroom or on stage with their peers. That self-assurance fosters a positive attitude toward everything—including school.

In his book, *Let's Improvise*, Milton E. Polsky says that the goals of improvisational drama are "to express and communicate to others untapped creative potential of the human imagination, and to expand and deepen an awareness of the ordinary as well as the fantastic things in life."³ With that in mind, I see no reason not to begin with improvisation the first day. The trick is not to treat it as a game, but rather a well-prepared, directed activity. Give directions when necessary in a firm (but not unfriendly) manner. Improvisation exercises may be used to break the ice and to provide everyone with the opportunity to get to know each other. At the same time, the exercises can lead directly to the first written assignment.

Create an open area, if possible. Have students form a circle and join hands. Then ask them to walk around on tiptoe, normally, and finally in slow motion. "Stop!" I'll say, "Now shake yourselves out like wet puppies." They may then say their names in order around the circle—in a whisper, in normal tones, fast, slowly. Finally have them count off in twos and divide in pairs. Seated, each pair must interview each other to obtain simple facts, such as birthplace, family, pets, favorite activities. The interviewers will then write brief biographies of the students they interviewed. Writing about people other than themselves releases them from any self-consciousness they may have. At the same time, the very fact that one is the subject of an interview is flattering while it engenders a more positive self-image. To encourage this good self-image even more, have each student make a personal collage for display in the classroom. I save magazines for my students, from which they may clip words, phrases, slogans, pictures, and whatever else they may wish to use to illustrate their values, aspirations, backgrounds, and favorite things. I also provide them with colored paper and the glue, if necessary, for such projects. All of these activities help me to get to know my students better, which I want to happen as soon as possible.

On the second day and for the rest of the first week of school, I'll want to continue with the same warm-up exercises, abandoning the ones which are less effective, enlarging on those which go well. We'll also try variations on this same theme. For example, how many ways can one say "hello," without talking? With facial expressions? Gestures? Handshakes? Let them try it out in pantomime. Then let them greet each other in gibberish and using nicknames.

Improvisation can also be extremely helpful in teaching and reinforcing basic skills. To clear up any confusion about vowels and consonants, for instance, have students give their names in "op-talk." Simply place "op" before every vowel, including "y," in the name (or any word, for that matter). In "op-talk," Billy is "Bopillop" and Linda, "Lopindopa." For a warm-up on a day when a lesson on adjectives is planned, students will enjoy thinking of rhyming adjectives to go with each name, such as "calm Tom" or "blue Sue." Caution! If a student's name is not rhymable, like Zelda, or if you have a boy named Ray, tell them to use a noun instead of a name, such as "pretty city" or "gray day." After this rhyming game, ask the students to write 20-25 more adjective-noun rhymes in ink, using cursive writing. A short, painless written assignment such as this can easily be devised from many improvisation exercises. Conversely, any number of improvisations may be conceived for the express purpose of teaching new or troublesome concepts.*

Improvisational activities range from simple warm-ups to ever more imaginative and creative exercises. After you have assessed the make-up of a class and the levels of ability represented, the appropriateness of any given exercise will be more apparent. One class may respond best to five minutes of exercises at the

beginning of the class, another to ten minutes at the end. Whether to use improvisation once or twice a week is another decision to base on the students' responses. For students on a remedial level, I may decide to use improvisation chiefly as an aid in the rounding out of basic skills. And then there are those days every teacher dreads, when the span of attention of all or most of our charges is all too brief. Arouse their curiosity with an activity which leads into the lesson that has to be covered that day! Or perhaps they come to you one day after two full-period tests. A warm-up activity is a great tension-reliever.

My goal is to lead up to the study of real plays later in the year. For the true potential of creative dramatics is in helping students to gain a deeper and richer understanding of the drama as great theater. With that in mind, I plan to use a sequence of improvisation exercises which will progress from large group work to activities of a more individual and artistic character. After the introductions of the first few days, awareness and trust exercises will be introduced. "Mirrors" and "machines" are interesting and fun to try next. Follow those with various pantomime exercises. Pantomime involves more creative risk-taking and evokes some interpretive thinking on everyone's part.

Role-playing brings us right into the theater, and we'll start with roles in mime. Role-playing characters in literature and history doesn't touch anyone's personal life, so it serves appropriately as an introduction to role-playing in conflict situations with social themes. One might begin with a pantomime situation in which a student plays the role of Columbus coming to the conclusion that the world is round or Thomas Edison inventing the incandescent lamp. I would let two or three students try this at a time, then discuss the results of their efforts—focusing on expressiveness, characterization, and how believable each enactment was. The same thing might be done with characters the class would recognize from literature.

Role-playing in conflict situations is the next step. Again, much depends on the ages and levels of ability of the students. I will want my students to do a simple conflict situation in mime first: a couple is rearranging the living room furniture, but the wife is never satisfied. After doing it in pantomime, I'd let them add gibberish, then normal dialogue. If the subject has not come up before, now is the time to make it clear that no physical violence may be used.

Next, we'll progress to conflict situations in which Polsky's three p's of playmaking—people, plot, and places—⁴ will be carefully delineated in short scenes of no more than five minutes. The conflicting roles might be two people arguing over the same reserved seat and both have lost their ticket stubs. One has just arrived to find that "his" seat is already occupied. The setting may vary from a football game at the Yale Bowl to a Bach concert at Woolsey Hall or a rock concert at the Coliseum. We can place different characters—two 75 year old ladies, a young couple, and two teenagers—in each setting and examine how the various characters react. How does the setting influence actions? How is the plot affected by characters and setting? What happens when we reverse the roles? Each scene must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. I'll want the class to remember that the essential element of drama is conflict and that conflict necessitates choices and consequences.⁵

We'll consider other conflict situations, such as a teacher confronting a boy who didn't do his homework, or a mother trying to get her daughter to clean up her room. For each situation I'll want the class to consider choices and possible consequences in order to elicit as much interpretive and critical thinking as possible. For, as Esslin warns, "The explosion of dramatic forms of expression presents us all with considerable risks of being enslaved to insidious forms of subliminal manipulation of our consciousness..."⁶ To prove his point, one of my students announced in a class discussion that her greatest ambition was to become a good mother. When I asked her to define a good mother she replied, "A good mother always gives her children Jif peanut

butter, 'because choosy mothers choose Jif,—and Hostess Twinkies, 'because they are wholesome and nutritious'." We'll definitely improvise some television commercials! Perhaps I will have a student who can turn Mr. Whipple into a hateful villain—one who can discourage people from buying his "bathroom tissue." I'll let them write their own commercials for fictitious products, try out for a part in one which requires exaggerated facial expressions, such as people who lose all their traveller,s checks! We'll concentrate on expressing emotion in facial expressions, then in actions. I'll use adjectives which describe emotions for a lesson in vocabulary development.

Playmaking, the last step before studying drama as literature, is really an introduction to plays. Now it's time to discuss movement on stage, lighting, sound effects, and suspense which keeps the people in the audience glued to their seats. I'll give the students props to stimulate ideas for scenes and skits, let them pantomime a song or a story. For more advanced students, you might want to investigate some of the finer points of drama: how a character expresses his feelings in a monologue (soliloquy) addressed either to himself or directly to the audience and how the plot may be altered by the addition of a third character into a conflict situation. The emergence of sub-plots may be considered as well as other elements which go into a full-length play. It depends on the interest and ability of the class and the time that can be allowed for in-depth study of drama.

The choice of an actual play or plays will depend in large part on what you have learned about your students (unless) of course, a specific work is already in the curriculum). For my middle school students, I want one-act plays and, as I've learned from experience, the shorter the better. I will want them to learn and remember the basic elements of drama so that they will have a foundation of knowledge about plays upon which to build as they continue their studies in the higher grades. In short, I hope that they will be able to read or study a play hereafter with some insight into what is involved in a dramatic production.

I've chosen three plays from *15 American One-Act Plays*,⁷ in which the essential elements of drama are presented in such a way that my students will be able to study and understand them easily. I want them to remember that a play must have a conflict situation which creates a problem for the main character or characters. We'll compare the plot, setting, and characters in each play, and I'll try to help them find the conflict, the climax, and the consequences. Three class days will be devoted to each play. One or two days more will allow an overview. These three plays are easy enough for almost any class, yet interesting and challenging for the brightest students. The subject matter and language are quite acceptable and ideal for my purpose of helping students begin to really understand drama.

As a culminating activity, cuttings from each play may be prepared to present to the class. It would be necessary to rehearse these cuttings outside of class—ideally, on stage. I would recommend that this be a full-fledged effort with respect to movement on the stage, voice projection, characterization, props, and so on. A half-hearted effort is not worth the trouble. If we can arrange to do this, I'll try to achieve the most polished performances possible.

First we'll read *The Lottery*, Shirley Jackson's shocking story (adapted for the stage), in which the winner of a small town's annual lottery is stoned to death. We'll concentrate on the plot in *The Lottery* and look for clues the author gives us, while withholding essential information. The exposition, the development, the climax, and the denouement are so clear in this play that it will serve very well to introduce students to these concepts. For some classes, the elements of conflict may have to be pointed out, though, especially in the beginning of the play. The main idea, that people should always uphold traditions just because things have always been done that way, is worth investigation. After we've discussed each play, I'll ask students to pantomime and improvise certain segments, such as the opening scene, in which two boys are searching for stones, and the

entrance of Joe Summers with the lottery box. The cutting we'd rehearse for a possible stage presentation would be the high point, where the "winner" is revealed.

Stanley F. Kaufmann's charming comedy, *The Still Alarm*, about two men, calmly carrying on a conversation while their hotel burns down, is my second choice. We'll concentrate on the setting this time and the essential stage directions. Everyone in the class will become a set designer for this play and produce a diagram of the entire set with all details noted. We'll determine whether or not the stage setting was adequate for the play and how the setting must provide whatever information the author considers necessary. Kaufmann precedes his set directions with a "vital note," stating that the actors must remain calm and polite throughout the play. We'll improvise the place in which the men discover that the hotel is on fire—Kaufmann's way, and then the way one would expect people on the eleventh floor of a burning hotel to act. This is the part of the play I'll want to put on stage. The students will utilize the set fully here—the bellboy entering through the door, each man going to a window—even though I would want imaginary props and scenery have the actors mime the opening of doors and windows.

The radio play, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, by Lucille Fletcher, in which an invalid overhears plans for her own murder, will acquaint the class with another form of drama. In this play, the emphasis is on character. Mrs. Stevenson has a very real, compelling personality. Through her words, we discover her thoughts and feelings, her state of health, her opinions of others, and all of the qualities and traits which make her husband wish she were dead. The stage directions and dialogue provide plenty of modifiers for the study of emotions in this character, with words like querulous, unnerved, frantic, and sarcastic. Of course, only sound counts in a radio play, but we'll try out facial expression and body language in class. If we perform a portion of this play on stage, I'll line up the characters and the sound-effects people behind the microphone. As each steps up to the mike, that will be a secondary kind of action, including the motions and expressions naturally arising when reading a script. On stage, we'd enact the beginning, where Mrs. Stevenson overhears the plans for the murder on the telephone. This excerpt would be ideal for a tape recording as well.

I expect to complete the study of the three plays by the end of April and would schedule the performance of the three segments immediately after the work is completed. An actual performance would constitute a special event for the class to look forward to—a powerful motivational factor in itself. Regular warm-ups and other dramatic activities would continue, in any case, until the end of the year.

More Improvisations to Teach Skills

1. Vocabulary Development

- a. Any word can be mimed as in the game, charades.
- b. Skits may be enacted to clarify meanings of new words, such as "querulous," which occurs in the play, *Sorry, Wrong Number*.
- c. If there is a lack of understanding in a statement, such as the proverb, "As ye sow, so shall ye reap," enact a pantomime skit.
- d. Ask students to pantomime words to avoid, like "got." How horrible can they make this word look?

2. Getting the Main Idea and Summarizing

After role-playing situations, fantasy trips, or tales in pantomime, ask students to write a very brief summary (depending on their abilities) in a few sentences. Can they express the main idea in a word or two?

3. Using Possessives

Go on a fantasy trip. Divide the class into two or three groups. Each group in turn forms a semi-circle in front of the class. The first student tells what he or she will take and holds it up in pantomime. It must be an item belonging to the second student, which begins with the first letter of its owner's name (Mary's mittens, Louis' long-johns). The second student repeats the first item (and the pantomime), then adds one of his own. The last student takes everything, including something from the first student. At their seats, they write down all the items they remember.

4. Sentence Elements

Call students to the front of the room, assigning each a word in a sentence to mime. The words which represent the subject may take two steps to their right, the predicate takes two steps to its left, and the verb steps forward. Each student then says the word he represents aloud. Or, assign the words in the sentence out of order and have students align themselves properly, then say their "names."

5. Transitive and Intransitive Verbs

Students assume the roles of subject, verb, and direct object in a sentence, such as "The dog watches the cat." They act out the statement. In the intransitive example, "Mittens is a cat.", we need only two students, who will be the subject and the verb. The subject, Mittens, goes past the verb to assume the position of the appositive, "cat."

Drama Puzzle

(figure available in print form)

Suggested Diagrams for a Set Design

A.

(figure available in print form)

B.

(figure available in print form)

1. Study the entire play carefully.
2. Compile a list of all furniture and props needed.
(Note locations, if given.)
3. Enlarge one of these diagrams (or use a cardboard box).
4. Draw shapes for all furnishings and

props.

5. Indicate location of doors and windows.

6. Label everything!

Chart Showing Stage Locations

(figure available in print form)

Movement Chart

(figure available in print form)

1. Place the characters on the stage at the opening curtain.

2. Use circles to indicate their positions and label.

3. Use arrows to indicate *one* main movement of each character.

*For additional suggestions on how to use improvisation to teach basic skills, see Appendix.

Notes

1. John Holt, *How Children Fail* (1964; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977), p. 218.
2. Pink Floyd, "Another Brick in the Wall, part 2," *The Wall*, Columbia Records, 36183, 1979.
3. Milton E. Polsky, *Let's Improvise* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), p. xii.
4. Polsky, p. 117.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
6. Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), p. 13.
7. Paul Kozelka, Ed., *15 American One-Act Plays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

Teacher Bibliography

Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama* . New York: Atheneum, 1964.

A large, scholarly volume, this book is extremely worthwhile for its theory and definitions.

Esslin, Martin. *The Anatomy of Drama* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1976.

An interestingly written book, especially useful for the structure of plays and the meaning and value of drama.

Howes, Alan B. *Teaching Literature to Adolescents: Plays* . Chicago: Scott Foresman and Co., 1968.

Many good pointers for teachers.

Polsky, Milton E. *Let's Improvise* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1980.

This is a marvellous new paperback, written with a great deal of enthusiasm, and profusely illustrated with photographs of actual improvisations.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater* . Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

The most complete book on improvisation—a basic text.

Styan, J.L. *The Dramatic Experience* . Cambridge: The University Press, 1965.

A small book, significant history of the theater, with beautiful illustrations, charts, and diagrams.

Student Bibliography

Barrows, Marjorie Wescott, Ed. *Currents in Drama* . New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968.

A fine collection of plays—one-act and longer—with a clear and simply written introduction which explains dramatic terms.

Feigenbaum, Lawrence H., Ed. *Radio and Television Plays* . New York: Globe Book Co., 1956.

This and the following collections are hard to find, although most public libraries have at least two or more on hand.

Ferguson, John, Ed. *Seven Famous One-Act Plays* . Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1953.

Gassner, John and Mollie, Eds. *15 International One-Act Plays* . New York: Washington Square Press, 1969.

Griffith, Francis, et al, Eds. *One-Act Plays for Our Times* . New York: Popular Library, 1973.

This collection includes Tennessee Williams' "The Case of the Crushed Petunias."

Griffith, Francis J. and Mersand, Joseph, Eds. *One-Act Plays for Today* . New York: Globe Book Company, 1945.

Vidal, Gore, Ed. *Best Television Plays* . New York: Ballantine Books, 1956.

Many good plays, including “The Mother,” by Paddy Chayefsky.

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