



Improvisational Drama-Without Words

Curriculum Unit 90.02.02
by Sylvia Petriccione

The body, it's such an intriguing instrument. A statement made without any facial or body movement can convey a thought. Repeat that same statement without changing the tone of voice but raise an eyebrow or bring a shoulder forward and the message changes. Of course, the receiver of the message must be looking at the deliverer. That in itself increases the chances of the receiver interpreting the correct message.

Mime, the very word conjures up images that make me smile. Physical humor has always been a favorite of mine. A person could tell a joke and I'd laugh. Have that person add the physical component and I'd roar with laughter.

As a child I loved to watch Dick Van Dyke trip over a hassock or Lucille Ball work on an assembly line. When I was older I was fortunate to see Marcel Marceau perform. I found that I not only laughed, but could also be brought to tears through his silent gestures. Something wonderful happens when a person uses their body to the fullest of their ability.

In my unit I will explore the use of mime through the following:

- Present an overview of the history of mime, describing some of the basic components.
- State the objectives for using mime with my present population.
- Give strategies in aiding the process which will become a range of improvisations without words.

Mime

My main objective in beginning my unit with a brief history of mime, is to give the reader as many options as possible. The background information may trigger an idea in which the teacher can expand and apply to their subject area.

1. A social studies teacher might use the story of the early man hunting or the Zuni Indian Story. These two pantomimes will be addressed later and could enhance any applicable unit.
2. A literature teacher may want to use the information with students to further study mime. A creative writing unit may result from a mime experience—or possibly to delve deeper and create research papers, gaining even more information and understanding of this course of study.
3. Science teachers may want to look at nature’s natural pantomimes. The great crested grebes have a complex courtship ritual which consists of a variety of movements. Many animals and insects use pantomime to convey a message on their own level. ¹

I thought it would be very difficult to express what mime is in words. That in itself is a contradiction. As I researched this subject I found a wealth of information. The following historical account, except where noted is drawn from:

All About Mime Understanding and Performing the Expressive Silence , Loeschke pgs. 2-23.

Pantomime the Silent Theatre . Hunt pgs. 7-15, 40-46.

Mime—A Playbook of Silent Fantasy , Hamblin pgs. 16, 17.

Mimes on Miming , Rolfe pgs. 3-8.

Pantomime or mime, the two words cause quite a dilemma for those who try to explain them. Some feel pantomime alludes to a performance, while mime represents the performer. Others feel that a pantomime is a comedy and a mime is a serious drama. There are many theories, but for the most part, the words are now interchangeable. I will use both terms within the context of this unit.

Mime/Pantomime is self-expression without words. It is a silent form of communication. When performing, your body becomes your instrument. Modern mime is a form of the theatre, but its roots go back a very long way. Mime is one of the earliest modes of communication,—an expression of self. Man has used mime to express many things in a dramatic way. The first cave people acted out their daily experiences through pantomime. The adventure of the hunt made for an exciting drama, though the excitement of the drama was not the objective. Primitive people used mime to influence their environment. They believed in pantomiming a successful hunt even if that day’s hunt had been poor. By doing this they felt it would bring good luck for the next day’s hunt. ³

Mime was used in religious ceremonies. Man expressed his myths and traditions through mime.

The Zuni Indians tell a story of ten corn maidens. These corn maidens were entrusted with the care of different types of corn. Whenever these maidens felt threatened by the god of butterflies, the god of music, or the god of flowers, they would hide. Then it became essential for the people to get help from other gods. They needed to coax the maidens out of hiding so the corn crops would grow. This story was portrayed for the most

part, in mime. It was performed every four years not to celebrate but to bring rain for the corn crops. It is still performed by the American Southwest Indians, but as a ceremony to entertain tourists, not to influence nature. ³

Some primitive pantomimes were performed strictly for amusement, while others gave examples of a great event in the past of a particular tribe. Illustrations of these may be found in Kari and Douglas Hunt's *Pantomime: The Silent Theater* .

It was in the Orient that mime was first used in organized theatre. In fact, since the inception of the national theatres of Japan and China, mime has had an active role.

The Greeks and the Romans used mime to perform a sketch. The Greeks were probably the first to use mime as a pure art form. Many times masks were used to interpret a certain scene/dialogue. They were then called pantomimes and were very strongly connected with dance. The Greeks had many festivals and pantomime always had a place in these celebrations. The Romans broadened the use of mime into a very popular show that was frequently risqué.

Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, the expression 'dumb shows' was used to describe a silent play.

The Middle Ages brought the jester. He traveled about bringing his improvisations to many people. Most likely, he was the example of our solo comic mime of present day. With the exception of the jester, most of the performance of mime during this time period had a religious connection. The miracle plays used mime, within the church, to express the mysteries and morales of that time.

During the sixteenth century mime was brought back for pure entertainment. This was the beginning of the Italian School of Mime, which is still active today. The Italian Commedia Dell'Arte was extremely popular. It centered on the fool, Pierrot, who was an engaging clown. The French were influenced by this form of pantomime. The established Italian characters of Pierrot and Columbine were brought to France by traveling jesters from Italy. There they developed another type of mime in reaction against the Italian school.

By the 1800's mime was recognized in many countries as an entertaining art form. Three schools of mime developed a certain individualized style. These schools were from:

The Orient—this is the oldest school. They use simple plots and sets, elaborate make-up and costumes. The mime has a sense of a spirit that comes from within.

Italy—this style is mostly comic, with broad, exaggerated movements. Slapstick prevails. There are many examples of Italian mime, presently. The work of Red Skelton is one.

France—the youngest of the schools. It combines the French ballet with the Italian characters mentioned above. They create very believable, well-developed characters. Their movements are very precise, creating an illusion of reality.

These schools had and continue to have a specific technique and structure. The above descriptions are brief.

The schools continue to influence the present mime performer. Despite cultural differences all mime is either a reflection of or a reaction to one or more of these unique styles.

Some aspects of the Italian school will be used with my students. The characters of the Italian school react in a big way. All of their actions are big and are usually stereotypical, but very human. The techniques are much less specific than those of the other schools. I feel these views will influence my classes, especially in the beginning activities.

As my students become more comfortable with these mode of expression, I hope to use some of the components of the French school. Their moves will become more subtle. They will work like an actor, concentrating on what motivates their character "n a given situation, and thus creating a more realistic drama, which is one of the objectives of the French school.

This curriculum unit has been created for my dance and drama classes. I teach kindergarten through sixth grade at an integrated city school. My students come from varying backgrounds culturally and economically. These variances have enriched the interactions within my classes. I see twenty-four different classes a week. Each class runs thirty-five to forty-five minutes long, once a week. Depending on the pace of each class, this curriculum unit is designed to last eight weeks or longer.

I plan to use this unit with my third, fourth and fifth grades. I've chosen these particular grades for a couple of reasons. One, I feel they will be open to and enjoy this type of unit. Two, my fourth and fifth graders seem to have become self-conscious, regarding their bodies. I believe this unit can be applied to most grade levels. I envision this unit being taught in grades one through six with some minor modifications, in the delivery, according to grade level.

As I've observed my students performing in school assemblies, I've noticed many of them having difficulty making the connection between what they are saying and their bodies. They are concentrating so hard on remembering their lines and forgetting to feel, move and express.

In the using of mime with my students, words will be taken away and they will develop their skills in a non-verbal drama. In so doing my objectives and goals are as follows:

1. For my students to become aware of the expressiveness of their bodies.
2. For my students to become less self-conscious around this expression and feel more comfortable within their bodies.
3. To broaden their awareness of how we speak with our bodies in everyday life.
4. To understand body language, which will help my students to interact and communicate much more effortlessly.
5. My students will be introduced to a new way of communication through the use of mime.
6. My students will gain self-esteem by accomplishing a given activity where there is no right or wrong way of completing it.
7. My students will learn to focus on a given task, tuning out all distractions. This will enable them to increase their abilities to concentrate.
8. My students will increase their attention span.
9. My students will learn tolerance and patience by the structure of the class. No one is judged and everyone is seen.
10. My students will gain confidence and increase their performance abilities and stage presence.

As I begin this drama unit with my students I will stress the rules of the room. The rules are:

1. Respect for each other and themselves.
2. No one is to negatively criticize another's response to a drama activity.
3. One person speaks at a time; the rest of us listen to what is being said.
4. Any questions or comments about a given activity are to be asked at the beginning or end of the lesson. Once the drama has begun those not involved directly will watch and wait until it is completed before questioning.

I always have my students sit in a circle. I use a moderate sized space which contains no furniture. This may be adapted to your classroom by moving furniture. We normally sit on the floor but again you may use chairs if necessary.

As the director of each drama activity I have certain cues to take us out of the drama when needed.

1. I ring a bell which means: stop, look at me, and listen to what I will say.
2. I say the word "freeze," which means just that. Whatever position my students were in when I said that word, they stay in, until I say "melt." This doesn't mean they will melt to the floor. They are to resume normal posture and look at me and listen for direction.
3. I clap my hands three times for Stop, Look and Listen.

Any one of these cues is effective when explained to students before the activity. These cues become part of the drama class, to be used many times.

If there is a problem with behavior, I say ask a student to leave the circle. They are told this before the activity begins. I give them all two warnings, the third time I have to speak with one of them, that person will leave the circle for a time. That student may earn their way back into the circle after sitting out quietly for a period of time (to be decided by the teachers).

All of this is used to create a safe space for my students so they will feel comfortable expressing themselves. They will realize that inappropriate behavior is not acceptable. If they want to participate in the activities they will have to demonstrate the appropriate behavior.

As the director of any of these activities I may choose to stay out of the activity or at times be part of the drama. I am free to move in and out of the activity whichever will be most productive.

Activities Conductive to Mime

Week One

The following activities will be broken down into a weekly plan. As stated previously, I see each class once a week. A lot depends on the pace of the individual class. The length of activities will take the whole period thirty-five to forty-five minutes. Any activity may be repeated as a warm-up or main activity the following week.

I will begin with a variation of the name game. We are all seated in a circle on the floor. I will say my name and then do a particular movement. The person sitting to my right will say my name do my movement and then say their name and do their own original movement. This continues all around the circle. The person to my left will be the last. They have the challenge of saying everyone's name and doing everyone's movement as well as creating their own movement.

This exercise helps with: focusing, concentration, memory and spontaneity.

Two variations of this warm-up activity are as follows:

1. Children are to say their name and show on their face how they are feeling.
2. I will give my students an emotion such as: anger, boredom, happiness. They are to demonstrate this emotion without words, using their face and upper body. I will encourage large movements and exaggerated expression as indicated in the Italian school of mime. These warm-ups may be used as a whole lesson or as a start to a main activity.

Week Two

The next exercise I plan to use is mirroring. I pair the students with the person sitting next to them. They are to remain sitting, facing each other. I demonstrate this in the center of the circle with a volunteer. Once everyone has seen my partner and I, we will begin. We start with the hands. One person who has already been designated the leader will start to move slowly so that their partners can follow along. The non-leader moves with the leader during the same movement at the same time. They are never to touch each other but their hands can be close to each other, palms facing inward toward their partner. I will give them a few minutes and then I will say switch. Now the non-leader becomes the leader. We continue with this exercise for some time. I may say switch three or four more times. As my students become more comfortable I will encourage them to move their upper body then stand and move their whole body. I would also suggest using facial expressions. Eventually the pairs are moving as one.

This exercise helps students to take direction from their peers, focusing and concentrating. Also, it is starting to move the body with the rhythm of others.

At this time this exercise is to be used as a warm-up stopping the activity with the hand movements only.

Now, still in pairs we will begin a sculpting exercise. Again, I present this in the center of the circle, with a volunteer. My volunteer is now a piece of clay and I am the sculptor. I direct my piece of clay to remain very still and relaxed but to conform to any way I put their body. They are then to hold that position. At this point I direct my comments to the circle. Emphasizing how important it is to treat your clay gently and with respect. The sculptors are very careful, *at all times*, when molding their clay. Sculptors must be considerate when placing their clay in position, remembering that clay has to hold that position for some time.

I will advise my students that they may want to create a statue, shape or action with their clay. I will designate who is clay and who are the sculptor first. Then we will reverse and sculptors become clay and clay becomes sculptors.

This activity assists students in working together, cooperatively. It also gives their bodies the experience of being moved and shaped in many different ways. They are starting to create messages with their bodies.

Week Three

I will start with a warm-up mirroring variation. Using hands first and moving on to the whole body. Refer back to Week One.

Next we will continue to work with sculpting in another way. Seated in the circle, I will ask for two volunteers. One to be clay and one to be the sculptor. The sculptor will begin to mold clay into position. I will then say "Freeze" and now the sculptor is part of the clay. One by one the outer circle will come in to mold the clay. If I say "Freeze" they become part of the sculpture. If I say "Thank you" they sit down after shaping the clay in some way. After everyone has had a turn sitting in the circle will join me in walking around the sculpture. These children will be thinking of a title for our work of art. To dismantle the sculpture I will take "magic dust" from my pocket and say "When I sprinkle my magic dust on clay, you will become boys and girls again and take your seat in the circle." We will then hear the different titles for our sculpture.

This activity further aids my students in working together, increases attention span, focusing on task, increasing body awareness and strength. They are becoming aware of a quick end of a movement. They also work with developing a concept around an improvised sculpture.

Week Four

We will start with everyone sitting in a circle facing the back of the person in front of you. One head will be in back of the other. A designated student will be instructed to make a face and turn around and show it to the person behind them, then, return to normal. That person now makes the same face and passes it on accordingly. This continues around the circle until it reaches the person who created it. This person then shows the group the ending face. Hopefully it's the same face that we began with. If not, we can try again! The moves in this activity should be quick and precise. This reflects the French school of mime.

The next few activities are on the move. One or more may be used this week, if time allows. If not they may be used at another time. Detective Walk is an activity that will encourage students to move in space and interact. I will have everyone begin to walk around the room in any direction they choose. I will then direct them to walk as slow as possible—without touching anyone. That rule holds true for the whole exercise. After a few minutes I will direct them to walk at a normal pace. If I see students clustered together I will say, "When you see an empty space, fill it." I will then direct my students to walk as fast as they can without running, walking at a normal pace. Now they are to pick someone out that they aren't good friends with and keep that

person insight at all times. The trick is that they can't let that person know they are watching and they have to keep moving at all times.

The next walking exercise will help students to gain strength in their legs and to feel weight shifts.

I will ask my students to pretend they are walking on ice. I will guide them through these exercises by doing it with them. First, we will put all our weight on one foot, then we will pick up the empty foot and put it down slowly feeling the foot as it touches the floor in front of us. This requires shifting their weight from one foot to the other. Another way to do this is by thinking of peeling your foot off of the floor one section at a time and putting that same foot down the opposite way you peeled it off. Example: If you took your toes off last, (started with the heel), then you would put your toes down first when taking the step, shifting your weight as each section of your foot touches the floor. Remember ice breaks easily!

Now as we are walking in water that is up to our hips. I will then ask them to answer my following questions by showing me:.

How do you move in deep water?
Is it cold?
Is it warm?
Is it pleasant?
Can you move quickly
How does your upper body help you to move?
How are your hips and legs moving?
Show me!!!

Next you are walking with a globe on top of your head. Be careful, you do not want it to roll off. All of these walking exercises help students to focus on how their bodies move in a particular situation. They are done as a group so no one will be self-conscious. Everyone will be concentrating on doing their move.

Week Five

The next exercise will help individuals to perform before a group—a solo. It will also encourage my students to imagine, visualize, pretend in a pantomime.

I will use two sticks, possibly dowels around three feet long and then like pointers. As usual we are sitting on the floor in a circle. I will begin the activity. I will use the sticks in an activity or as an object like playing the violin, walking on stilts, or looking in binoculars. I will act this out, with the sticks and without words. My

students will then guess what I am doing and what the sticks have become. We will go around the circle, continuing in this manner until everyone has a turn. I may choose to go around again suggesting that this time two or more people may work together to create a scene.

The preceding activities will have helped my students to be comfortable with holding positions, moving and pretending in silence. By Week Five we have participated in a pantomime. This exposure will enable my students to take a more active role in the next mime-drama improvisations. I will not direct as actively as in the previous exercises.

Most modern mimes perform solo or in a duet. It is rare to see a group of twenty-seven mimes performing at once. Therefore the following lesson plans will be geared toward performing solo and in small groups. The next lessons are a bit more complex as my students will be given imaginary objects, ideas or actions to interpret. They will have to work together in small groups and make decisions within that group. My original objectives as stated earlier will be fulfilled by Lesson Three. Those three lessons will constitute weeks, six, seven, and eight.

Lesson 1/Week Six

Cat, Window, Puddle

Materials None

Time 20-40 minutes

Objectives To create a scene with imaginary objects. To communicate actions with designated matter.

Description Group is seated in a circle. The stage is center of the circle. The circle becomes the audience as individual prayers come into the center to perform. Four imaginary objects are given. They are: a cat, a window, a door and a puddle. All of these objects must be used within a player will go to the center of the circle and use these imaginary props to create a scene. That player will then ask the audience "what happened?" This will help to evaluate the non-verbal communication. Next another player will enter the circle and create a different scene using the same imaginary props. Continue as above remembering players may not repeat earlier performances. All those in the audience will have a turn to be a player.

Lesson 2/Week Seven The Quiet Contest

Materials Slips of paper with objects and actions written on them. Examples: A flying airplane, filling a glass with water, drying and breaking a dish, a clown performing, etc. There should be enough slips of paper for everyone in class.

Time 15-30 minutes

Objectives For students to become an object/character in a given scene, through showing, not telling. To think and act quickly.

Description Students will be split into two equal teams. Each team will face each other in parallel lines. Example 24 students, 12 on each team, Team A makes two parallel lines of 6. Each student is facing another—the persons they are facing are their partners. Team B does the same. Each student in one line on each team will receive a slip of paper. They may look at what is written on the paper but will say nothing. There will be a designated beginning to the lines. The two teams will begin at the same time—on signal. The first pair on each team will start. The person holding the paper will pantomime what is written. The partner will then interpret the mime until the correct response is given. Once the appropriate response is given the pair of partners sit down and the next pair continue. We have winners when one team is all sitting. The teacher is to keep a close eye on the performers and to keep the activity from becoming a guessing game.

Variation Students may not look at the slip of paper until it is their time to perform.

Note

1. Remind students to become what they are trying to convey.
2. Remind partners that they are to watch what is being performed then interpret, not just guess randomly.

Lesson 3/Week Eight

Materials Students may use simple props—such as chairs, tables, desks. This is optional—the teacher may choose to have no props or set a limit.

Time 35-45 minutes.

Objectives To create a scene, interacting with peers. To share responsibility with peers. To convey a dramatic improvisation without words.

Description Students are broken into four or five groups—depending on the size of the class. There should be five or six in each group. Students are given examples of an activity that would involve a group, such as a baseball game, a tour bus and guide, a shopping trip, etc. Each group will then go to a designated area of the room to discuss what they are going to do. They may not use any of the examples that were given and of course, they may not use words in the drama. After a set amount of time, such as five minutes, the groups will reassemble in a circle.

Each group will have an opportunity to perform their scene. After each performance the audience will speculate as to what was going on.

Variations Give a category, such as television shows, movies, sporting events, etc.

The body techniques that are needed to proceed with mime are just touched upon in this unit. I encourage the reader to look at the following books:

Mime: A Playbook of Silent Fantasy
Exploring Mime
Be a Frog, A Bird, or a Tree

These books, listed in my bibliography give excellent illustrations and directions to guide you through body movements.

My goal is not for my students to become professional mimes, but to feel comfortable with themselves in performing a drama without words. I feel this will be achieved.

Notes

1. Douglas and Kari Hunt, *Pantomime The Silent Theater* (Atheneum, New York, 1964), pgs. 11 & 12.
2. Hunt, *Op. cit.* pgs 12, 14.
3. Hunt, *Op. cit.* pgs. 14, 15.
4. Maravene Sheppard Loeschke, *All About Mime* (Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey 1982), pgs. 5, 22-23.

Student Bibliography

Carlson, Bernice Wells, *Act It Out*, New York: Abingdon Press 1956.

This book contains a section on pantomime plays which will give ideas to new performers. Teachers may want to look at this too!

Carlson, Bernice Wells, *Do It Yourself! Tricks Stunts & Skits* , New York: Abingdon Press, 1952.

Silent stunts pgs 87-89. Examples for children to make shadow pictures and mime through Nursery Rhymes.

DePaola, Tomie, *The Clown of God* , New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1978.

A story of a traveling player, set in the time period of Colombina.

De Paola, Tomie, *Sing, Pierrot Sing*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1983.

A picture book in mime. The traditional characters of Pierrot and Columbine are featured in this story without words.

Krementz, Jill, *A Very Young Dancer* , New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976.

A story of a young dancer who takes lessons and performs with The School of American Ballet. It is a good example of the discipline that is required to become a professional dancer/performer.

Lynch-Wilson, Janet, *The Shadow Puppet Box* , New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1980.

This book has information on making and performing puppet shows. This can aid children in getting ideas for sets, for a mime performance.

Sorine, Stephanie Riva, *Imagine That! It's Modern Dance* , New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

Pictorial examples of how children can create objects, shapes and actions using their bodies. This book would also be beneficial for teachers to use for instruction.

Teacher Bibliography

Carr, Rachel, *Be a Frog, Be a Bird, or a Tree* , New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1973.

This is a book of creative Yoga postures. A fine example of how children can strengthen their bodies with fun, imaginative exercises. The prose are geared toward children. The pictures and ideas will help teachers to instruct.

Furness, Pauline, Ph.D., *Role-Play in the Elementary School* , New York: Hart Publishing Co., Inc., 1976.

Ideas as to the incorporation of drama within the classroom. Pgs. 30-32 give examples for pantomimes. There are fifty-two lesson plans that deal with ethics, social skills, behavior and much more.

Grenough, Marshall, McGuire, O'Rourke, Spector, *Bananas* , New Haven: 1979-80, Title VII Arts Pilot Staff.

Written by New Haven teachers—a collection of drama games and activities.

Hall, Sweeny & Esser, *Until the Whistle Blows* , Santa Monica, California: Goodyear Publishing Co., Inc., 1977.

A manual of movement games and activities.

Hamblin, Kay, *Mime, a Playbook of Silent Fantasy* , San Francisco, California: The Headlines Press, Inc., 1978.

An entertaining and informative book on mime. Gives a brief history and a creative and enjoyable way to begin mime through pictures and written instruction.

Hunt, Douglas and Kari, *Pantomime: The Silent Theater* , Hartford, Connecticut: Connecticut Printers, 1964.

An extensive history of mime, from its roots to the television mimes of the 1950's and early 1960's.

Loeschke, Maravene Sheppard, *All About Mime* , Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982.

An examination of mime/pantomime, comparing, explaining, summarizing the history of the schools of mime, the different types of mime and giving instruction for the beginner. There are some good examples of mime walks.

McCaslin, Nellie, *Act Now! Plays and Ways to Make Them* , New York: S.G. Phillips, Inc., 1975.

Gives ideas for drama games and activities. Also playwriting and dramatizing stories and ideas. Pgs. 44-45 tell of the commedia dell 'arte troupes.

Rolfe, Bari, Ed., *Mimes on Miming* , Los Angeles, CA: Panjandrum Books,

A history of mime as it developed throughout the centuries. Excerpts from many great mime performers discussing their art form.

Spolin, Viola, *Theater Games for the Classroom. A Teacher's Handbook* , Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1986. A wonderful manual, clearly stated lessons for utilizing drama in the classroom. Many games can be applied to a unit on mime.

Stolzenberg, Mark, *Exploring Mime* , New York, Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1979.

A manual for beginning mime with clear pictures and written instructions.

Wagner, Betty Jane, *Dorothy Heathcote, Drama As a Learning Medium* , Washington, D.C.: National Education Association of the United States, 1976.

For those teachers who are interested in taking drama further as an educational tool.

Way, Brian, *Development Through Drama* , Atlantic Highland, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1973.

Another book for those who would like to incorporate drama in their classrooms. Gives many examples and approaches of drama/movement to begin with and develop further.

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