



New Beginnings

Curriculum Unit 99.03.05
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One day an Asian, an African, an angel, a South American, and an extraterrestrial said the same prayer to God. " I'm tired of seeing the same things every day." "The same rice, the same giraffes, the same Eden, the same Amazon, the same Halle Bop." "Please send me somewhere different!" So God took each one gently up in his hands and told them, "Close your eyes and we'll play a game called where am I now?" So He spun them around, and spun the earth a little faster and placed them gently back on land. " Open your eyes, and tell me if this is different enough."

Join me on a brief journey through the eyes of these strangers.

SETTING

Somewhere on earth, all five characters land close by one another, open their eyes, and begin to converse about the differences in each other and all the people passing by.

SCENE

African: " That person is different from me because his eyes are slanted."

Angel: " That person is different from me because she's having a Batmitzva."

South American: "That person is different from me because her skin is darker than mine"

African: " That person is different from me because his skin is lighter than mine."

Alien: " Well that person is the same as me because he's got four legs, a loong neck, and short antennae on his head."

African: "That's not a person, It's a giraffe!"

God: "Every single person is different from every single person. Similar sometimes, different definitely."

All: " We must be in America!"

This simple scene tells of the journey of how five people/ beings arrived in America. It is clear why they came;

they were all seeking change. It is clear how they got there. God simply dropped them there.

What about us? In order to understand who we are today better, we must delve into the roots of our heritage. How did we come to be American? The answer to this question will be the basis of the curriculum unit *New Beginnings*. This unit will integrate the art of drama with the immigration process. Very often you can't fully understand what would prompt another person to such a life altering decision as to leave their homeland unless you've experienced the details of the situation first hand.

Freshman drama students will utilize this unit. As these students embark on their high school career, they may find a common ground between themselves entering a new atmosphere, and the characters they will create who will make their way throughout the course to a new land called America. Through the exploration of character work, basic acting skills, and essay writing, the students will create a character from somewhere other than America. By exploring the specific details, either factually, or imaginatively, of their characters' daily life in their homeland, combined with the immigration procedures within a given time frame, the students will recognize the obstacles, advantages, and many possible reasons for becoming an American citizen.

In the short piece I have written in the opening of this unit I chose to include an alien, and an angel. My thought being, never say never. Everything is possible. One or two students might entertain a similar philosophy, and limiting them to the obvious may only hinder their creativity. The objective is to show the students that as Americans we all originate elsewhere, and by ultimately putting them in someone else's shoes, they may gain a greater acceptance toward others who are so called "different" from them.

Methods of Approach

Much of the work will be done in groups to allow the students to brainstorm their ideas. For time management, the class periods will be divided in half. For the first two weeks, the first half of the class period will be dedicated to researching the country of choice, and immigration procedures pertaining to the year of choice. The second half of the class period will be dedicated to basic acting skills and character development.

For the first three days of class, pose to the students the following question: If you could have been born anywhere besides America, in any year, and be any type of person, besides yourself, where, when, and who would you be? Have the students write their ideas in as much detail as possible. Give them free reign to be as imaginative, or as obvious as they wish to be as long as they are detailed and specific. Each student will read their ideas aloud and should be permitted to share physical character examples of the character. On the fourth day, the students will be asked to choose one of the three characters they may want to be as a basis of their character work. For example, suppose the student ultimately chooses intergalactic space traveler, *Andromeda*, 1983. Their initial description of that character might read as follows:

I am an intergalactic space traveler. I soar through the universes in a V shaped, multi-colored light, slow craft. It travels beyond human comprehension through the galaxies until it reaches the earth's orbit than it kicks into slow gear. I observe human beings and study the way they act and react to each other and their ever-changing environment. My species does not age. I receive nourishment from mineral rocks that grow in the black holes in space, but my favorite snack food is cheese from the earth's moon.

Library access will now be set up for the students to begin researching information on their chosen birthplace, but this does not have to be their only means. If they know someone originally from their chosen birthplace, the student might want to set up interviews with them. Poems and short stories are also encouraged as accessible information. A basic questionnaire outline will be given as a guideline, but they will be expected to access as much information as possible. At the completion of their research, the students will be given a character analysis worksheet. (1) This worksheet will be used in two ways. First, the student must answer the questions based upon their own selves giving them a greater understanding of their own characteristics. Second, the student must answer the questions based upon their unit character. Answering these questions from two points of view allows them to make clear and concise choices for the characters further development throughout the unit.

At this point the students will begin to write a three- part essay. Essay writing will be encouraged throughout the unit, and all work will be kept in individual folders for the students to reference and to guide their progress.

Using the same intergalactic space traveler as an example, the character may now be perceived in a more extensive manner, and the description might possibly now be elaborated upon as follows:

My name is Io (4). I am an Intergalactic Space Traveler. That is my job. I am named after one of the 16 satellites that orbit Jupiter. I come from a galaxy called Andromeda. It is 2.2 million light years from earth. The exact name of my birth-place is Brightonox in the land of Vindemiatrix. The atmosphere is cool and gelatin-like. The surface of the land is spongy, so instead of walking, we bounce. We have weather similar to earth. As earth is the third planet from its' sun, we are the third land from Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse is our closest star, and is three times the size of the sun. When Betelgeuse shines well upon us we call this span a geusey span. We get showers in our weather as well, only it is our ground that breaks open and stones pull upward and fly straight into the atmosphere. This doesn't happen too often. On Vindemiatrix, we communicate with a language called Monocerus, but we have a heightened communication ability that allows us to understand every known language in the universe. There are 300,000 Vindemiatrixian in our sector. We have no need for laws because we are unified peaceful beings. Our main source of nourishment comes from Betelgeuse. When we get the signal that we need to be nourished, which is when liquid flows from our visual receptors, we simply stand outside and face the gigantic star, and we become full. Our most frequent tradition is to visit the earth to celebrate our creators' greatest masterpiece: the human being. We visit earth at least once a month, their time. We celebrate by throwing glowing rocks through their sky. Wur arrivals are often very noisy and create electrical flashes throughout their firmament. To compensate for the commotion, we release multi-colored arches in their sky for their viewing pleasure.

With these sample essays I have combined basic facts with imagination to demonstrate the beginnings of how this unit will play out. The students may choose a character more common or more extraordinary. Keep in mind that this is a drama class, the possibilities are endless.

Essay writing

Part I

Students will write an initial essay of the lifestyle and culture of their chosen birthplace. This essay will include facts listed from the questionnaire outline in as much detail as possible.

Part II

Students will write a detailed essay of their character based upon the choices they've made. This essay will include the specifics listed in the character analysis worksheet. Again in as much detail as possible.

Part III

Students are ready to begin combining the previous essays to create a story of what their characters daily life was like growing up. This is absolute imagination, and only the facts of their birth-place need to coincide.

When all essays are complete, the students will assemble into groups of four. Each member of the group will read their essays aloud. A question and answer period will follow each reading to promote further ideas that may have been overlooked. The students will now collaborate on ideas about possible reasons why each character would choose to leave their birth-place and venture to America. Each student will then choose one primary reason on which to base his/her further character work. Throughout the course of this unit, students may, and hopefully will, ultimately find many reasons as they develop a thinking character.

Basic Acting Skills

It is difficult if not impossible to teach someone to be an actor. However, they can be guided into sharpening their creative imagination, and intuitive skills. The best places to begin are through relaxation, concentration, and sensory exercises. There are many different ways to approach these areas, but we shall keep to the basics.

Relaxation- Releasing unnecessary tension from the muscles

Objective

By practicing this process, the students will eventually be able to assess and relax their bodies under any circumstances within five minutes.

The purpose for relaxation to an actor is not for rest. What use would an actor be on stage or in film if they were half asleep? Relaxation is used to release stored tension in the muscles and should always be practiced in an active and energized manner. Begin by having the students sit in their chairs as comfortably as possible without holding on with their arms or legs, etc. Remind them to pay close attention to their breathing, inhaling through the nose filling the diaphragm with air, and slowly releasing the breath through the mouth. They may now begin to assess the muscles from the tip of their toes to the top of their head. In order for them to release the tension, they must move each area of the body slowly and specifically, acknowledge the tension, focus

their breath to the area, and tell that area to relax. To maintain the relaxation, we test the previous areas by once again moving it, this time using only the energy required. Once the entire body has been assessed you may stand up, shake out each muscle, and bounce lightly on the balls of the feet. Always maintain a steady breathing pattern. Students will feel relaxed, refreshed, and awake.

Concentration- Focused exploration and assessment

Objective

Student will understand that in order to create believability as a character, concentration is a must.

Give the student an everyday object. One with weight, texture, color, and fragrance is preferred. Ex: A glass of soda. Have them hold it and study the physical attributes of the object for five minutes. Take the object away, and ask them to recreate holding the object trying to remember the details. This is not a miming exercise, but one of exploration. Therefore, in this exercise, as in all acting exercises, the students should not be trying to obtain a result.

Sensory Awareness- Heightening the abilities of the five senses

Objective

Students will understand that sharpening the five senses breathes a more believable life into a character.

Heightening sensory awareness is useful to every actor in that we absorb and remember all daily information through our senses. Keeping senses sharp allows an actor to work with more than words from a script by aiding him/her in creating a believable environment. For example, suppose the given circumstances in a scene are that it is raining and you have no umbrella. The rain is making you chilly. By recreating the effects of the rain sensorially, that is how it looks, sounds, tastes, feels, and smells, the body will naturally react the way it would if it were actually raining. Therefore instead of a character indicating that it is raining, maybe by pulling a jacket over his/her head, you will instead have a character responding in the moment to the affects of the rain. Once again begin by sitting relaxed, and focused on breathing. Dealing with the immediate classroom environment, begin with the sense of sight. How many different things do you see? Are the colors vivid? What are the details of objects around you? What can you see through your peripheral vision? Can you extend that vision further, and see more clearly? Move to sound, taste, touch, and smell in the same way, always questioning yourself to gain more detail, always striving to reach a higher level. This exercise should be done on a daily basis to keep the process sharp.

Methods of Character Development

Objectives

To free up the students' own habit of expression.

To prevent any two actors from developing the same characteristics.

Students will learn to make quick decisions as another character.

Students will begin to apply relaxation, concentration, and sensory technique into their stage work.

People watching- Students will choose one person for one day. They will study the details of their walk, body language, facial expression, vocal quality, posture. The student will recreate the subject in class.

Animal exercise- Students will choose and study their favorite animal, also recreating its' physical attributes in class. They will incorporate the animals' movement with their own. This exercise should not be rushed, and may be done over a period of a few classes.

Whose hat is this? - Students will be given an array of hats to choose from. By answering the questions: occupation, age, and location, the students will define what type of character would wear each hat. Students will move about the room wearing the hat as others ask ten random questions about who the person in the hat is?

Improvisational Scenework

For this section of the unit, I have given two scenarios on which to base improvisations, titled Coming to America, and The Arrival. To best aid the students to ultimately build a story around their character, it would be beneficial to continue a chronological order to the improvisations based on what might happen next in their characters' lives. For example the next improvisation could be centered around finding employment, or meeting your neighbors for the first time, etc.

Coming to America

Objectives

Students will understand how improvisation aids in character development.

Students will incorporate sensory exercises into their scene work.

Students will learn basic problem solving.

This improvisation will incorporate the elements of objective, conflict, and resolution, and these should be there only guideline. Remind them that we are not seeking particular results. The purpose is discovery. Begin with allowing the students time to create their sensory environment and to establish their own space within the classroom. The character is ready to board the craft of choice that will take them to America. They are bidding farewell to your loved ones. Objective- To discover their characters' reactions to a highly emotional situation. Conflict- You realize that you left your ticket at home. Resolution- The improvisation cannot conclude until the character has fully played out the events, and resolves the issue. There is no right or wrong, only different choices.

The Arrival

The characters have arrived in America. Once again have them establish their own space within the classroom. Let them know that they will all arrive in the same place at the same moment in full character. Let them move about the room in silence. Each character will have their own image of America, and they should

respond fully to their new environment. Now allow them to verbally react to the other characters in their surroundings. This would be a good point for the students to begin a character journal to be written in on a weekly basis, or as often as possible. The journal should include both the characters thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. The students may also want to record their notes on process and their personal progress. Following improvisations, students should discuss the outcomes, always focusing on what they were able to extract for further use.

Readings and Films of Interest

As the unit progresses, students will read and view materials directly related to immigration such as:

A View from the Bridge - Set in the 1950's this play depicts illegal immigration and its consequences.

A Bintel Brief - Letters from Jewish immigrants to the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward.

Men In Black - Tommy Lee Jones, and Will Smith play the 90's version of intergalactic immigration officers.

City of Angels - An angel must relinquish his immortality in order to love a woman.

Throughout the readings and viewings, the students will be encouraged to put aside their created characters in order to experiment with some of the scripted characters. This will allow them to work on more than one character at a time.

As part of their grade, students will turn in their journals, which should include the characters trials and tribulations from their moment of leaving their homeland, to achieving their ultimate goals in America. Through the series of essay writing, improvisations, and journal writing, the students will ultimately script a short play that will include each created character.

Lesson Plan I

Objective

Students will find alternative solutions through debate.

Upon reading and establishing the logical breakdown of A View From The Bridge (1) students will be set up in character pairs as follows: Catherine versus Rodolpho, Catherine versus Uncle, Uncle versus Rodolpho. Students may take turns playing each role. The rest of the class will act as moderators. Characters will engage in a conversational debate according to their own viewpoint. As the debate plays out, students in the audience may randomly ask questions pertaining to the conversation at hand. The actors must acknowledge the questions by motivating the conversation toward a logical conclusion. The lesson will continue until every student has a chance to participate.

In Conclusion

Students will refer back to the script and play out scenes in accordance with motivations extracted from the debate.

Materials

A copy of A View from the Bridge

Lesson Plan II

Objective

Students will utilize the brainstorming process to discover a form of problem solving.

Using the Bintel Briefs (2) as a guideline, students will compose a help letter pertaining to a difficult situation which their character is facing. Students will assemble into groups and improvise a scenario based on their letter. Other members of the group will enter the improvisation with possible means for a solution.

In Conclusion

Students will incorporate this exercise into the short play that will be written as part of their final grade.

Materials

A copy of any page from A Bintel Brief.

Paper and pen.

Activities

International Culture Day-Students bring a food, beverage, piece of music, or poetry pertaining to the Country or birthplace which they have chosen to base their character upon. The items should be presented with full knowledge of their origin.

Character Swap Day-After viewing the works of the other students, take one day to allow the other students to do impressions of someone else's character. This will give the students another view upon which they may wish to expand.

Ellis Island Day Trip-Teacher will set-up the necessary itinerary. This activity may be more beneficial if done early on in the course. A follow up to this trip might be an improvisation based upon the physical inspection process that the immigrants had to endure.

Immigrant Chat Day- Perhaps a great deal of impact would be gained from speaking to a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp who found relief in America. This may be possible through the Holocaust museum in Queens, N.Y.

Questionnaire/Outline of Origin

1. Name of Birthplace /Country
2. Capitol
3. Geographical Location
4. Climate
5. Language/s Spoken
6. Population
7. Form of Government
8. Natural Resources
9. Main Source of Food
10. Traditions

Character Analysis Worksheet (3)

I. Physical Silhouette

1. Characters age, weight and height
2. Type of speech
3. Characteristic way of walking

4. Particular mannerisms or idiosyncrasies

5. Nationality, section of the Country

II. Character Biography

1. Childhood
2. Educational background
3. Occupation
4. Hobbies
5. Home-Life
6. Social Life
7. Style of dress
8. Level of I.Q.

III. Psychological Silhouette

1. What is the character's environment like?
2. What is his/her self-concept?
3. How does the character behave under emotional stress?

4. What is the character's outlook on life (optimistic/pessimistic)?

IV. Sensory of Physical Images

1. Animal
2. House
3. Color
4. Music
5. Type of beverage
6. Season of year
7. Odor
8. Type of literature
9. Furniture
10. Transportation

Endnotes

1. Miller, Arthur. A View from the Bridge. Dramatist Play Service, 1957
2Metsker, Isaac, A Bintel Brief, Doubleday and Co. 1971
3Character Analysis Worksheet This worksheet is used at Hamden High School, and is believed to be the work of Julian Schlusberg.
4National Geographic Atlas of the World Revised 6th Edition, National Geographic Society, Washington D.C. 1992

Readings

Miller Arthur, A View from the Bridge Dramatist Play Service Inc. 1957
Isaac Metsker, A Bintel Brief, Doubleday and Co. 1971
F. Paul Miceli, Where Democracy Triumphs, New London, Conn. 1931

Bibliography

Miller Arthur, A View From the Bridge Dramatists Play Service Inc. 1957- This play tells the story of a young woman who falls in love with an illegal Italian immigrant, while her jealous uncle tries to convince her that he wants to marry her only for citizenship.
Metsker Isaac, A Bintel Brief Doubleday and Co. 1971- This collection of letters from Jewish immigrants in the early 1900's sent to the editor of the Jewish Daily Forward ask for help with daily struggles in the format of Dear Abby.
Sonnenfeld Barry, Director, Men In Black 1997- Two top secret immigration agents protect the planet from dangerous extraterrestrials and intergalactic terrorists.
Siberling Brad, Director, City of Angels 1998- An angel must give up his immortality and live as a human, no matter what fate has in store, in order to love a woman.

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