Off the Digital Canvas: Activating Physical Expression Through Visual Art

A Drama-Based Instructional Resource for Introductory Level Acting Courses

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Overview

Character development often begins with students reading and analyzing a script, but young actors sometimes require additional instructional support to fully utilize and activate their expressive qualities. The following teaching resource guides students through a still image exercise where physical character choices (e.g. facial expression, gesture, pose, and posture) are practiced in isolation. This exercise helps young actors maximize the potential of their physical choices when developing a character based on a given situation or context. George Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884) was used for this exercise, but other works of art can be selected. Criteria to consider when selecting different works of art include choosing images with multiple characters, a clear setting, and high potential to develop a sequential narrative.

Standards

Below are recommended standards to focus on based on grade level:

Tennessee Theatre Curriculum Standards, Grade 5

Standard 2.0 Character Acting: Students will develop basic acting skills by portraying characters in improvised and scripted scenes.

2.2   Use imagination to form and to express, thought, feeling and character.

2.5   Employ movement to express thought, feeling and characterization.

Tennessee Theatre Curriculum Standards, Grades 6-8

Standard 2.0 Character Acting: Students will develop basic acting skills by portraying characters in improvised and scripted scenes.

2.2.3 Demonstrate an understanding of a variety of vocal techniques, body language, and facial expressions that may be used to portray a given character.

Tennessee Theatre Curriculum Standards, Grades 9-12

Standard 2.0 Character Acting: Students will develop basic acting skills by portraying characters in improvised and scripted scenes.

2.2.1 Write a brief character history

2.2.3 Use physical techniques such as posture, movement, gestures, and facial expressions to more fully develop the character.

Sample Instructional Sequence

1) Share George Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884) so that the entire class can view and respond to it together. Prompt students to identify what they see in Seurat's painting, and as some students make interpretive comments, ask for evidence from the work of art (www.vtshome.org). (What did you see in the painting that made you say or think that?)

2) Explain how visual art can provide insight into a character. Going back to Seurat's painting, ask students what kinds of information can be inferred from the work of art. (What does the painting tell us about the setting, relationships between characters, and/or the events that may have happened the moment before?)

3) Prompt students to select one character from the painting and create a still-image (Needlands & Goode, 2000) that mimics their gesture, posture, and pose. Spotlight one student's still image and ask the rest of the class what physical choices they observe their fellow actor making. Prompt students to consider how this character might feel. As students respond, ask them to provide evidence from the actor's choices. (What do you see in the actor's still-image that made you think or say that?) Thank the student for sharing their work with the class.

4) Going back to Seurat's painting, explain to students that the artist did not provide much character detail in terms of facial expressions. If we were to fully develop a character inspired by this painting, it would be up to the actor to infer additional information. Sometimes an actor has to develop a backstory for characters where limited information is provided.

5) Ask students to write responses to the following questions about their selected character from Seurat's painting:

   • Why did your character come to the park?

   • What happened to your character earlier that day?

   • What is on your character's mind?

   • What does your character want to happen before the end of the day?

   • What is your character's overall state of being?

6) Prompt students to go back to their original still-image and add details based on their character's backstory. Walk around and provide feedback as needed.

7) Ask students to create two additional still-images that include a moment before and after their character came to the park. Students should have a total of three still-images for their selected character: before, during, and after the moment depicted in Seurat's painting.

8) In pairs, ask students to share their work with each other and provide feedback about the physical choices they observe in each still-image. Prompt students to consider how their fellow actor used gesture, posture, pose, and facial expression to communicate information about their character. If time permits, the teacher may ask students to share their work for the entire class.

9) Guide a closing discussion asking students to recap their process for developing their character. Ask students how their physical choices evolved based on their character's backstory. (Where did your character's backstory come from and how did it help you develop your character?)

The attached sample rubric may be used and adapted for this exercise. It is highly recommended to share this rubric with students so they fully understand expectations. The purpose of this rubric is to assist the teacher with providing feedback about their student's work. It is also a great way to make sure teachers are assessing only the skills and knowledge taught. For example, under the physical character choices criteria, expectations in regards to placement in relation to audience have been included. Note

that the above sample instructional sequence does not include any support for this. If placement in relation to audience is a skill you have taught and need to reinforce, then it should be included. Otherwise, it is not recommended to assess students on this unless it has been taught and they fully understand expectations.

References

Needlands, J., & Goode, T. (2000). *Structuring drama work: A handbook of available forms in theatre and drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seurat, G. (1884). *A Sunday on la grande jatte* [Painting]. Retrieved from
     http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/27992

Visual Thinking Strategies. (2014). Retrieved from http://www.vtshome.org/

		Off the Canvas Sample Rubric		
	(Please Adapt as Based on Student Needs and Instructional Goals)			
Criteria	Mastery	Proficient	Emerging	Unacceptable
Physical Character Choices	Gestures and facial expressions are natural and completely align with the performance. Varied use of pose and posture is present in all still-images. Body is always open to the audience and never upstages self.	Gestures and facial expressions are natural and mostly align with the performance. Varied use of pose and posture is present in at least 2 of the still-images. Body is rarely closed to the audience and only upstages self a few times.	Gestures and facial expressions are repetitive and mechanical. Varied use of pose and posture is present in at least 1 of the still-images. Body is usually closed to the audience and sometimes upstages self.	Gestures and facial expressions seem random and unrelated to performance. Varied use of pose and posture is NOT present in any of the still-images. Regularly upstages self.
Preparation	Does not waste any in-class rehearsal time and makes full use of feedback given by peers and/or instructor.	Wastes very little of in-class rehearsal time and makes use of most feedback given by peers and/or instructor.	Wastes some of in-class rehearsal time and only makes limited use of any feedback given by peers and/or instructor.	Wastes majority of in-class rehearsal time and does not utilize any feedback given by peers and/or instructor.