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Gerald Lee Ratliff

SUNY Potsdam, ratlifgl@potsdam.edu

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Exploring Literary Characters in Classroom Performance

Gerald Lee Ratliff
Academic Affairs
ratlifgl@potsdam.edu
SUNY Potsdam
Potsdam, NY

ABSTRACT
Original classroom exercises are an invaluable instructional tool to actively engage students in analysis and performance of dramatic and non-dramatic literary texts. The basic principle of classroom performance emphasizes a critical and creative teaching perspective that stimulates student responses to the aesthetic, emotional and intellectual content of a literary text. Selected exercises that promote a more theatrical impulse in the study and performance of literary texts present meaningful opportunities for students to give vocal and physical visualization to the actions, attitudes and emotions of literary characters and, ultimately, enriches the classroom learning experience.

A number of traditional approaches to teaching literary texts (dramatic or non-dramatic) frequently view the notion of classroom performance as an occasional exercise in oral interpretation of literature or recitative reading aloud to an audience of student listeners (Lewis, 2003). Although acknowledging a literary text’s inherent dramatic qualities, there appears to be less agreement among teachers of English and theatre on the role that classroom performance might play in giving added dimension and meaning to the feelings and thoughts of literary characters. For still others, however, classroom performance is seen as an instructive exercise that cultivates a theatrical impulse in students to engage in meaningful character interpretation and role-playing activities (Spolin, 1986).

Whether constructed on literary analysis models, conventional acting theories or inspired by original exercise discoveries, classroom performance is an invaluable instructional technique available to English and theatre teachers who want their students to see, hear and feel literary characters. Pursuing a more theatrical approach to visualizing and voicing the actions, attitudes and emotions of literary characters should also stimulate student listeners to become more active participants engaged in understanding the aesthetic, emotional and intellectual content of a literary text when it is first analyzed and then enacted in a classroom performance.

Classroom Staging

There are a number of basic principles to consider in the classroom staging of a literary text. For example, the setting of the text may be more easily visualized by incorporating an
elevated platform framed by a miniature proscenium arch at one end of the classroom or the playing space may be arranged in-the-round, three-quarter round or in a semicircle. Classroom staging may feature small step-units or ramps, fabric panels, door frames, arches, stools, wall projections, draperies or painted backdrops to depict selected locales. Theatrical elements like lighting, projections, music, sound and special effects may also be used to indicate locales or to enhance the author’s narrative description of character action and attitude.

Student performers may wear suggestive costumes and subtle make-up to suggest a more striking physical presence or carry selected hand props to more clearly define their literary character portraits. The artistic line that defines what is “literal” or “localized” staging, however, is a very thin one in classroom performance. For example, a single white picket fence in a scripted excerpt of Mark Twain’s novel Huckleberry Finn or a painted backdrop of a gnarled tree in a scene from Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot may represent a specific locale but may not give substantial textual meaning to the complex issues of adolescent fantasies and cosmic free will addressed in these respective texts.

Preparation

As you begin experimenting with your own imaginative approaches to interpreting and visualizing literary characters in classroom performance, remember that it is important to present the literature on its own terms. Adaptations or excerpts from literary texts should be condensed to meet time limitations and the sequence of incidents or events should build to an unmistakable climax. It is also important to consider the number of student performers available, and to offer opportunities for all to participate in exercises, staging assignments and performances—either as actors, technicians, script writers, designers or production crew members.

Classroom Exercises

Although there is no prescribed formula to give vocal and physical shape or substance to literary characters in classroom performance, the original exercises that follow were designed to address student vocal and physical attributes that enhance a three-dimensional character portrait; and should provide an initial physical and vocal foundation for student performers to give immediate life and meaning to literary characters. Please approach each exercise with a performance perspective that is most appropriate for your individual style of teaching. Do, however, take the creative liberty of refining these exercises to meet the special needs of your students or to reinforce your desired teaching and learning objectives for a selected literary text.
Exercise 1: Character Search

Goal: To provide student performers an opportunity to explore performance metaphors in a classroom setting.

Approach: Pre-record a brief one-minute excerpt of music from a simple lyric, jazz tune, classical sonata, popular melody, folk ballad, and rap song. Have the students listen to each selection separately until they have a sense of the tempo and rhythm associated with each musical style. Divide the class into small groups of four or five and have each group perform as they move slowly to the melodic tones of the classical sonata; move quickly to the accelerated pace of the jazz tune; relax and sway to the tone of the simple lyric and popular melody; move with a measure of hesitation to the folk ballad; and then abruptly halt and sense the staccato and strident movement suggested by the rap song.

Following a discussion of the selective role of movement to reveal character motivation or to telescope character intention, repeat the exercise without the music using the following excerpt from Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool” (Brooks, 1966). Instruct each student group that movements suggesting a forceful step forward may now be thought of as jazz or rap steps; movements of deliberate intent may be expressed in sonata steps; movements to focus attention or highlight a character point of view may be inspired by folk steps; and movements of intimacy may be signaled by recalling simple lyric and popular melody steps.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Think gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

The exercise may be extended to include character movement that is appropriate for individual student monologues, group scene study work or scripting and performing nondramatic texts. Excerpts appropriate for this part of the exercise might include a scene from William Shakespeare’s comic “mechanicals” in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Joyce Carol Oates’ character portrait of the ostrich-like Leah in Bellfleur, the “confrontation” scene of Clay
and Lula in Amiri Baraka’s *Dutchman*, Anne Sexton’s poem “Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward” or Mark Twain’s “diaries” of Adam and Eve.

**Exercise 2: Vocal Charades**

**Goal:** To familiarize student performers with the vocal vocabulary of character shades and tones of meaning.

**Approach:** Divide students into three groups and give each group a specific name that corresponds to the following vocal terms e.g., “jumping jaws,” “loose lips” and “trilling tongues.” Remind students that vocal variety is an essential ingredient in character development and that it is important to cultivate adequate breath support, speak at the optimum level of pitch using a comfortable rate and producing vowel sounds that are crisp and clear.

The “jumping jaws” begin the exercise by moving to the front of the classroom. Instruct the group to allow the head to fall slowly toward the chest. When all heads are resting comfortably at mid-chest, students slowly rotate the head up and down, but keep the jaw relaxed. Now instruct the group to slowly roll the head toward the right and then toward the left, making a semi-circle with the head motions. The group pauses and places both hands on the cheekbones as they slowly lift the head upward, keeping the jaw relaxed and motionless. When each head is finally lifted, the jaw should sag open. With the jaw open and relaxed, the group voices the following phrases in unison, moving only the tip of the tongue: da-da-da-da, de-de-de-de, la-la-la-la and le-le-le-le. The phrases should be repeated five times as a group and five times individually, or until the jaw begins to tense, and then the group returns to their seats.

The “loose lips” now move to the front of the classroom. Instruct the group to open the mouth wide to form an “O.” Keeping the tongue flat in the mouth, and resting the tip of the tongue on the ridge of the lower teeth, the group slowly begins to alternate the position of the lips from a small “O” to a large “O,” and then repeats the sequence ten times. When the lips are sufficiently flexible, the group voices the following phrases in short bursts of breath: oh-oh-oh-oh, ah-ah-ah-ah, mo-mo-mo-mo, and no-no-no-no. The phrases should be repeated five times as a group and five times individually, always keeping the lips rounded and the tongue flat, and then the group returns to their seats.

The “trilling tongues” group now move to the front of the classroom. Instruct the group to focus on d’s, t’s and ing’s to promote crisp and fluid articulation as they slowly arch the tongue toward the roof of the mouth and rapidly voice the following phrases: d-d-d-don’t, t-t-t-t-teeth and s-s-s-s-singing. Follow the precise articulation of the d, t and ing sound by having the group voice the following words, emphasizing each d, t and ing as precisely as possible: dentist, teacher, laughing, right, district, frolicking, distant, tepid and disappointing. The phrases and words should be repeated five times as a group and five times individually, or until the tongue,
teeth and lips are actively engaged in the articulation process, and then the group returns to their seats.

The exercise may be extended by having each group identify key words or phrases in the following excerpt from William Shakespeare’s “advice to the players” in *Hamlet* (III, ii, 1-19) that lend themselves to “jumping jaws,” “loose lips” and “trilling tongues” techniques that may reveal potential character shades and tones of meaning. The excerpt may also be voiced as a group ensemble or as a series of individual monologues.

*Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and as I may say whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness. O it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipped for o’erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it.*

**Exercise 3: Character In-A-Box**

**Goal:** To acquaint students with the role that character attitude and hand prop play in classroom performance.

**Approach:** Begin the exercise by presenting the class with two cardboard boxes labeled “Character Attitude” and “Character Prop.” The “attitude” box contains individual slips of folded paper that identify specific character attitudes, e.g., angry, befuddled, anxious, joyful, reluctant, and puzzled. The “prop” box contains items easily held in the hand that might be used to underscore the selected character attitude, e.g., eyeglasses, cell phone, fountain pen, wristwatch, note pad and handkerchief.

Students approach the “attitude” box individually and select a single slip of folded paper indicating the desired character attitude and then move to the “prop” box to select an appropriate hand prop that best serves to reinforce the selected character attitude. Each student then performs a brief 1 to 2 minute excerpt from a reading assigned several days in advance of the exercise. The following excerpt from Rod McKuen’s *Eighteen* (McKuen, 1973) may also be assigned. It is important, however, that students perform the same excerpt to insure that multiple interpretations of the selected text emerge.

*I stood watching as you crossed the street for the last time. Trying hard to memorize you. Knowing it would be important. The way you walked, the way you*
looked back over your shoulder at me. Years later I would hear the singing of the wind and that day’s singing would come back. That time of going would return to me every sun-gray day. April or August it would be the same for years to come. These long years later it is worse for I remember what it was, as well as what it might have been.

Following individual performances, there should be active class discussion of the effectiveness of the voice in conveying the selected character attitude and the role of the hand prop in serving as an extension of the character’s attitude. Following class discussion, the exercise may be extended “matching” appropriate character attitudes and hand props to monologues from Edgar Lee Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology*, Dylan Thomas’ composite community portraits in *Under Milk Wood* or Sandra Cisneros’ finely etched character sketches in *The House on Mango Street*.

**Student Responses**

Student responses to these selected exercises have been universally positive and the exercises are easily adaptable for individual, pairs or small groups of students. It is important, however, to approach classroom performance as more than just reading or speaking aloud and to encourage students to reinforce their newly acquired skills through frequent rehearsal and warm-up periods. Allow each exercise to teach the performance lesson rather than engage in an extended discussion of desired outcomes. Students should also be encouraged to make their own adjustments to the exercises in the rehearsal period. It is important to practice economy and efficiency with these exercises. Encourage students to focus on a single performance objective and a selective character portrait most appropriate to the sample literature. To paraphrase the title song in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, it is the “tradition” of preparation, application, concentration and execution of the exercises in the rehearsal period that will insuire classroom performance success.

**References**