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# Teaching English in the World

## Close Reading on Your Feet: Performance in the English Language Arts Classroom

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I have a theory about why educators talk with such enthusiasm about teaching literature through performance: It works.

Performance works because it gets students excited about literature. It works because it helps students truly understand the literature. It works because students cannot get enough of it.

Perhaps the best way to define teaching through performance is to say what it is not. It is not the students sitting at their desks reading assigned parts of a play out loud. It is also not those same students standing in a row in front of the room, textbooks in hand, reading their assigned parts out loud. And, it is definitely not the teacher reciting Hamlet's soliloquies to the delight of the class.

There are innumerable ways to incorporate performance methods into an English language arts class, and these methods are all variations of close reading on one's feet. Performance happens when students look closely at a piece of text and use

their voices and bodies to explore the subtleties of the author's words.

I have employed performance teaching methods for years as an English teacher at Farmingdale High School in New York, as a master teacher and director at the Folger Library's Teaching Shakespeare Institutes, and as an English teacher educator at Stony Brook University, where I teach a course entitled Performance and Technology in the Teaching of Literature and Composition. Integrating performance technologies into the teaching of English has such a dramatically positive impact on teachers and students that all teachers should consider the many ways they might use performance methods to enhance their classes.

**Though I received far more contributions than I can include here, I hope readers will be inspired by the many great ideas I am pleased to share in this short space.**

To demonstrate the power and diversity of performance methods, I asked some former teacher education students—who are now secondary English teachers—and several colleagues from the Folger to describe especially effective performance assignments they have designed for their students. Though I received far more con-

tributions than I can include here, I hope readers will be inspired by the many great ideas I am pleased to share in this short space.

## Poetry on Your Feet

Poetry might not be the first genre to make one think of performance, but it is actually a natural fit. Josephine Libassi (Jal1221@aol.com), a teacher at Longwood High School in Middle Island, New York, writes about the success she has had getting her twelfth-grade class to more closely identify with the feelings of influential poets. Her assignment requires students to research details of a poet's life and to compose a dramatic reading of a poem that fits the poet.

I wanted the students to read the poem "in character," as the poet might have. One student read Langston Hughes's poem "The Weary Blues," using jazz recordings from the 1930s to enhance her presentation. In her research, she learned about some of the hardships as well as triumphs that Hughes experienced, and when she read this poem, she did so with passion.

Nicole Sears (nsears@bayshore.k12.ny.us), who teaches ninth-grade English at Bay Shore (NY) High School, also assigns dramatic readings of poems. Her students create soliloquies or even complete screenplays out of poems. The unit culminates in the students' producing a

group performance of a poem of their choice. The groups compose playbills, construct intricate scenery, and record sound effects and music.

One group acted out Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool" by sauntering around our makeshift theater in synch, shuffling their feet to the rhythm of the jazz drums they had playing softly in the background, walking faster and faster until they came to a halt and dropped to their knees with pleading looks in their eyes at the last lines, "We / die soon." Looking into those pleading eyes, I knew that the poetry had touched them and that they had learned how to use it to touch others.

Jill Mountain (jillmountain@yahoo.com), who teaches eighth grade at James Wilson Young Middle School in Bayport, New York, also wrote about making a Langston Hughes poem come to life. Mountain's students perform "I Loved My Friend" as if it were dialogue, and the whole class participates in casting, blocking, and setting various scenes and emotional tones appropriate to the poem.

In one class, students set the poem in an airport where two friends are saying good-bye. The characters were Friend 1, who is saying good-bye; Friend 2, who is leaving; and a pushy flight attendant. The scripted poem on the overhead looked like this:

I loved my friend [Friend 2]  
He went away from me.  
[Friend 1]  
There's nothing more to say.  
[Flight Attendant]  
The poem ends,  
Soft as it began,— [Friend 2]  
I loved my friend. [Friend 1]

The class, in this case, decided that Friend 2 would be happy about

going away but that Friend 1 would be upset. The performance began with the two friends hugging to say good-bye. Friend 1 was reluctant to let go. The flight attendant came to pull them apart and pushed Friend 2 down the ramp while delivering her line in an annoyed tone. After Friend 2 waved and delivered his last line, Friend 1 fell to her knees and wailed her last line. The performance was short, but the class put considerable effort into the nuances of emotion that should accompany each line.

Another teacher who assigns poetry performances, Barbara Morris (babmo@juno.com) of Farmingdale (NY) High School, puts eloquently the reasons for engaging students in poetry performances. "Like a song," she says, "poetry is an appeal to the ear, a celebration of sounds. The rhythm created by the lines and the shape the mouth and tongue take when forming the consonants and vowels makes up a performance." Morris also reminds us what is important in assessing students: "If the performance is not award-winning, do not feel as if something went wrong. The purpose was the process."

### Performing the Novel

Applying performance techniques to a novel might seem like a stretch, but many teachers have made the leap. MaryEllen Dakin (mdakin@revere.mec.edu) of Revere (MA) High School has done a great deal of work on performance teaching methods as a master teacher at the Folger's Teaching Shakespeare Institutes. She uses performance to help students better understand the more subtle aspects of some difficult and

even controversial texts. "*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel both rich and troubling in voice," she says. "Just as we wonder about Shakespeare's prejudices when we explore *The Merchant of Venice* or *Othello*, we need to listen for Twain's voice in the undercurrents of his limited narrator."

How does Dakin use performance to encourage students to listen closely to literature? She suggests finding places in the text where the narrator is saying one thing and probably thinking or feeling something else. "Huck's lies," Dakin says, "disguise truths too dangerous or difficult to say out loud in Huck's world." Likewise, Jim's lines should not be taken at face value. Here is where performance can help:

I ask students to revisit Chapter 16, where Jim is on the alert for Cairo and freedom and Huck's conscience gets the better of him. As Huck paddles off in the canoe to betray him, Jim showers Huck with praise, "Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; de on'y white genlman dat ever kep' his promise to ole Jim." I ask students to read the dialogue at face value, and then we talk about Jim. Students politely suggest that Jim is just too good to understand the dark motives; words such as *clueless* surface. Then I ask for other possibilities—What if Jim knows? What if this is Jim's way of appealing to Huck's better angels? I hand out copies of the dialogue and set students to work writing subtext (what a character may be thinking but not saying literally) and planning a performance of the dialogue, challenging the students to hear and to speak the voices beneath the text.

Gina Savino (gmsavino@optonline.net) of Smithtown (NY) High School has used performance strategies in the classroom for the last two years. The results for student achievement have been outstanding. To review *Great Expectations* before the students write an essay about the text, Savino assigns a pantomime, modeled after the “dumb show” in *Hamlet*, in which students silently perform as another student narrates. She explains:

I split the class of twenty-five into five groups and each group chooses which character's life story it will tell. The students write and choreograph the narrative, practice, and perform in front of the class. While the performance goes on, the audience writes down the important points conveyed about the character. After the performance, we discuss both the quality of the performance and the main points written by the audience. The result is an engaging, student-generated review of the novel. The students are invested in the information they present and record because they are actively involved in the process.

At Scarsdale (NY) High School, humanities teacher Steven Mounk-hall (STMounkhal@aol.com) uses performance pairs to link students' readings of *The Catcher in the Rye* with *The Odyssey*. Mounk-hall focuses the students on the journey element prominent in both texts. His students are required to read a thirty-page section of *Catcher*, and self-selected pairs of students must “perform short scenes from the reading that illustrate an archetypal moment from Holden's journey.”

Having performed similar scenes based on the same theme from *The*

*Odyssey*, the students are already familiar with the activity. Class begins with each pair performing its half-page script, edited from the text by the students for performance. The students who are not performing take notes on the elements of the performances. After performing, each pair is responsible for explaining, briefly, how and why the scene they wrote and performed is related to the journey element of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Ted Tibbets of Poland (ME) Regional High School (ted@mainelyshakespeare.com), and creator of Mainely Shakespeare (<http://www.mainelyshakespeare.com>), suggests that performance can help students better understand and remember complicated plot points from novels. Tibbets uses “character cards” to identify what role each student is playing, and then he acts as director, setting the stage for the action of the novel.

My students are often confused by the ending details of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Out come the character cards. I re-create the attack scene with an oak tree, Scout, Jem, Bob Ewell, Boo Radley, a (not real) kitchen knife, and a (definitely not real) switchblade. The vague details, clouded by the dark and Scout's interpretation, become clear as the students go through the motions of the plot.

When teachers use performance techniques often enough, students can become capable directors themselves, raising even further the intellectual engagement with literature that performance can facilitate.

Josh Cabat (jhcabat@hotmail.com), teacher at Roslyn (NY) High School, has students create movie-style previews or trailers for literature they read in class. After

showing the students several trailers as models, Cabat assigns groups of students to compose ninety-second trailers that must include at least five to seven lines of dialogue from the book and must include attention to the following elements: narration (or voice-over), the scenes shown, and superimposed graphics.

Once the projects are completed, we film the trailers with the students acting out lines and reading the narration. If a school has production facilities, students could superimpose graphics. But no teachers should let lack of access to such facilities stop them. I have had my students simply act out the trailers in front of the class, with an offstage narrator, performers acting out the scenes, and group members holding up the graphics on handwritten cards.

Cabat sees several advantages to using his trailer assignment. “Students are instantly familiar with the format. From a pedagogical standpoint, it is effective because it demands that the students comb through the book to find lines that support their particular vision. Since the students must choose a theme for their trailer, they are required to think about the larger issues of the book.”

At Manhattan Hunter Science High School in New York, Kate DeFeo (kadybug1978@aol.com) has her ninth-grade humanities students perform a Hindu wedding:

By actually performing a traditional Hindu wedding ceremony, the students are able to understand the traditions and then make connections to other world religions we study. The whole assignment takes two weeks to prepare and we have certain committees—for example, the

dance committee—work outside of class. The overall product is an amazing and memorable Indian feast and ceremony with authentic food, henna, dancing, dress, and ceremony.

DeFeo's planned event could be a springboard for a host of related research and writing assignments, so the results of the work involved in planning it can extend to more than one day.

### Once More on Your Feet: Innovative Play Performance

The most logical genre for incorporating performance, of course, is drama. But even with plays there are many innovative ways to get students out of their seats and into the text.

Joe Bonfiglio (JBonfiglio@aol.com) of Hanover (NH) High School adds a new twist to teaching *Macbeth*. When he had more students than parts for them to perform, he invented a new version of “character doubling.”

We literally had two students play each character. They were tied together arm-to-arm with my collection of fine, nonsilk ties. Each pair had a distinctive prop and color scheme for their costumes. The Macbeths had to move together, divide their lines both for appropriate sharing and audience comprehension, and work as a unit in terms of movement and gesture. Introspection could be done as a dialogue between the two heads.

Bonfiglio says the results of his experimental theater assignment

are astonishing. “The students debate gesture and movement more than normally since it must be synchronized. It isn't great theater, but it is great learning.”

At Harborfields High School in Greenlawn, New York, James Incorvaia (jamesinc@optonline.net) uses student desks as a way to get his class motivated to interpret character development in Neil Simon's *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. On the first day of the reading, Incorvaia places seven desks in the front of the room, on stage in front of the class. Each desk has a sign with the name of one of the seven main characters on it facing the audience. On the back of the sign is a place for student-actors to write private notes about the characters as they read to the class. Incorvaia explains further:

The play's main character and narrator is fifteen-year-old Eugene Jerome, the playwright's alter ego. On Eugene's desk in the classroom, the character's name faces the class, and the reverse of the sign reads, “Teenaged smart mouth.” These private notes are amended by actors, and subsequent readers benefit from previous actors' notes. The sharpest additions to our understanding of character often originate with the students themselves. After sitting in Eugene Jerome's father's desk, a student wrote, “Jack: Good Heart/Bad Heart.” The character suffers a minor heart attack in the play.

Incorvaia found over time that his students would arrive earlier and earlier to class to be the first to

claim the desk of their favorite character. Motivation achieved!

### Use Performance to Transform the ELA Classroom

As readers can tell from the diversity of assignments presented in this short column, the possibilities for performance in English classes are limited only by teachers' and students' imaginations.

Many English teachers have lamented that students are not engaged in close reading and interpretation of the texts under study. While this absence of engagement no doubt results in lower test scores, even more importantly, it results in fewer lifelong readers from our classes. English teachers often take it personally when students are not transfixed by the authors who have fascinated them. By adapting performance techniques not only to drama but to novels and poetry as well, teachers can help students literally get into the literature. Teachers who have been frustrated in their teacher-centered attempts to get students more concerned about reading excellent literary works are amazed at how transformative an active, performance-based assignment can be for students.

Close reading on your feet is a powerful way to learn. I hope *English Journal* readers, inspired by the performance-based ideas presented here, will push back those desks and let their classes do some vertical thinking. Why should the students of these contributors be the only lucky ones?