

Acting from the gut

Help your students get out of their heads

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HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS constantly monitor themselves, sometimes to a degree that proves crippling for them, both as actors and as humans. Fearing embarrassment, students default to acting choices that are small, safe, risk-free, and boring. How can you, as a theatre teacher, free them from self-consciousness? How can you create a group dynamic that supports risk, failure, and process? The short answer is: Teach students to act from the gut not the head.

The series of exercises below can easily take a full semester but can also be compressed into six to eight fast-paced classes. The amount of time you spend on each exercise will depend on how deeply you want your students to go and how quickly they absorb the material. The format for each class should be similar. Begin with a physical and vocal warm-up, repeat yesterday's ending exercise, introduce the next exercise in the sequence, and conclude with a reflection.

Even if the activities are out of your comfort zone, your students (and you as their teacher) can gain a lot from experimenting with exercises intended to encourage risk-taking. Teaching students to act from their gut not only gives them a powerful new acting tool but also fosters a supportive and caring community in your classroom.

How to begin

Each time you introduce an activity, *explain* its purpose, *demonstrate* how to do it yourself, and *participate* with the group.

For example, I always begin class with a physical and vocal warm-up. About a third of the way through the warm-up, I explain that it's important to warm up, because when we're nervous, our shoulders tend to hold a lot of tension. As I demonstrate, I invite the students to join me. "Let's pretend we're backstage, and we're nervous, so our shoulders creep up to our ears, and this makes our voice get higher and higher, and the rest of our body gets stiff, so our arms are kind of flapping by our sides."

Then we are all walking around with our shoulders glued to our ears, talking in high-pitched voices, flapping our arms, and gener-

name _____

period _____

ally looking like weirdos. This seemingly spontaneous, casual activity accomplishes my secret goal. Make it OK to be silly and remind students that what we're doing has a purpose. We warm up to relax our bodies, because otherwise we look nervous onstage.

We conclude our warm-up with an energy circle. First, everyone in the circle holds hands and crouches down, bowing their heads to the center of the circle. We all breathe diaphragmatically and create an "ah" tone. Then, as we intensify the sound, we slowly begin to stand. Finally, we speed up and get louder, until we let go of our hands and explode vocally and physically, jumping as high as we can to touch the sky.

I'll participate with the group with as much gusto as my 65-year-old self can muster. This helps to set the tone that we can be silly but also serious and that we're all in this together. This is a perfect way to launch into

our first challenge: Sound and Movements.

Sound and Movements

As always, begin with an explanation. Remind students of the goal: to respond instinctively, without overthinking. This is the way we are in life. Most things you feel come from your gut not your head. Our mantra for this exercise is "Don't think, just do."

Exercise 1. Put the students in a circle. Without thinking, make a sound (not words, just a sound) and do a movement from the gut — the bigger the better. Have students repeat your Sound and Movement over and over with you. Do this three times with three different Sound and Movements, each time having the kids repeat it with you. The bigger and braver you are as their teacher, the more you give them permission to be the same.

Exercise 2. Explain that when you say,

"Go," the students will each do their own Sound and Movement, all at the same time, repeating that same one over and over until you tell them to stop. Have them face out from the circle, so they can't observe one another. This helps release them from self-consciousness and the fear of being judged. Say "Go," and let the students repeat their Sound and Movement until you say, "Do a new one." Have them create at least three Sound and Movements this way. Keep repeating their mantras: "Don't think, just do," "Go with your gut," "Take a risk," and "Deepen it." Repeating these phrases helps to reprogram their acting choices and remind them of our goal.

Exercise 3. Tell the students to face into the circle. Speed is key to preventing self-consciousness, so without pausing say, "Do another one now. Go!" They should all simultaneously do a different Sound and Movement, repeating it until you say, "Stop." Still facing in, explain

Tips and tricks for making it safe to take risks

FEAR OF LOOKING stupid is a large, if not the primary, de-motivator for high school students. I take artistic risks in front of the kids. The teacher needs to model all activities fully. If you're willing to make yourself look silly, then you give your students permission and a model of how to do the same. The message should be "I want you to have fun, but take it seriously." They should understand that it's silly with a purpose. The goal is to build an atmosphere of courage and safety in the group.

Group rehearsal. Everyone practices at the same time. The focus is not on performing for each other. This will help students stay focused on the exercise and not on how they look in front of their peers.

Mix up the group. Students naturally stick with their

posse. Have the group change places in the circle several times. Establish a ground rule of "no dyads," no looking across the room at your BFF and rolling your eyes.

Build relationship and trust as a teacher. Whether it's a daily class or a one-off workshop, use the time before class to talk to students. Ask them how things are going, what they're watching, etc. Share something about yourself. Let them know how excited you are to be learning with them. Weave something they said yesterday into class today: "I was thinking about what you said yesterday."

Be a great role model. Always give your all, take risks, and have fun, but take the work seriously.

that one person will do a Sound and Movement and then we will join in, repeating that Sound and Movement together over and over. Go around in a circle and have one student at a time do a Sound and Movement, repeating it as the entire group joins.

Through Sound and Movements, the students have practiced acting from the gut not the head. In each exercise, you subtly raised the level of risk, without giving the students a moment to panic.

Working with a partner

Remind students that the most important person in a scene is not you, it's your partner. You act (and react) to your partner.

Have students form two lines facing each other. The people directly across from each other are partners for this exercise. The students in Line A will do a Sound and Movement, immediately without thinking, to their partners. Then the partners in Line B respond with their own Sound and Movement. They should keep repeating their Sound and Movement, acting and reacting to each other through the gut until you say, "Stop."

After each exchange, have the A line rotate so that each student has a new partner. Do this at least three times. Make sure to switch things, so students from each line get to experience both initiating the Sound and Movement and responding to it.

With this exercise, students work on being responsive to a partner, reacting to what they're getting.

Transformations

Once your students seem ready, explain that you will move on to a more advanced challenge: Transformations. Explain that a Transformation is a deepening and extension of a Sound and Movement. It asks the student to commit even further.

The teacher demonstrates a Sound and Movement, then transforms it, deepening and extending it as riskily as possible. That means starting with a regular Sound and Movement, then gradually growing it to be as big as you can, both vocally and physically, just as we did with the Energy Circle.

Exercise 1. Have students turn away from each other and practice, repeating the Sound and Movement. When you say, "Transform," they should

continue to extend and evolve the Sound and Movement until you tell them to stop. Have the students do this several times, and give them guidance. Tell them to use a different part of the body, start with a different part of the voice, etc.

Exercise 2. Now the students are ready for you to raise the risk level. The B's should sit and watch. Have the A's do Sound and Movements (all at the same time, each student doing their own), repeating them over and over. When you shout, "Transform," the A's should push their Sound and Movement as far as they can, repeating it over and over until you tell them to stop. Then switch groups.

When the exercise is done, say to the students, "Was it interesting to watch?" They will inevitably say it was. Ask why and listen to their responses. When they remark on how brave or big or fully committed their

were, they are reinforcing the new norms you are establishing for the group. Reflect their comments back to them. "It was interesting to watch because you were all acting from the gut."

Exercise 3. Have the students face each other in two lines, replicating the earlier exercise. One student initiates the Sound and Movement, and the other responds with their own Sound and Movement. But now, upon receiving the prompt to transform, the first student transforms their Sound and Movement, and their partner reacts, transforming their Sound and Movement in response.

Do this exercise several times, making sure students experience both initiating and responding. You have now moved your students incrementally (in tiny, safe steps) into more artistically risky territory.

bs

bs are the building blocks of a scene. The next step for students is to put a verb in their gut and express it as a (wordless) Sound and Movement.

Exercise 1. Show the students a bunch of index cards, each containing a verb. Make the verbs varied and surprising: confuse, delight, muffle, impress, challenge, worship, etc. Have the students stand in a circle facing out. Give each student an index card with a verb. When you say, "Go," have the students do a Sound and Movement expressing their verb, all at the same time. When you tell them to stop, they should put the card on the floor in front of them, rotate to the next card in the circle, and when you say, "Go," do a Sound and Movement expressing that next verb. Do this several times.

Exercise 2. As you did before, put the group into two lines, with verb cards lined up in the middle. With you telling them when to start and stop, the A's should do a Sound and Movement expressing the verb to B's, and the B's should react (not using a verb,

just responding to what they've gotten from their partner). The routine is the same. Have both rows of students rotate in different directions, so that each group gets several different verb cards. Allow each line both to initiate and to respond. Keep reminding the students, "Keep the verb in your gut" and "Don't be afraid to take a risk."

Exercise 3. Add Transformations. The student does a Sound and Movement to express their verb, and their partner responds. When you yell, "Transform," the student deepens and extends their Sound and Movement, and their partner responds in kind. Rotate and do it again.

Approaching words

Moving toward words can reignite self-consciousness, as students try to be funny, smart, or cool. That's why it helps to begin with "Blah, blah" scenes.

Exercise 1. Explain to the students that they can't use words. The only thing they can say is "Blah, blah." Pick a verb card and demonstrate. Then give students a verb card and have them practice "Blah, blah" monologues, facing away from each other. Have the students rotate several times, using "Blah, blah" as a way to express several different verbs, making sure they come from the gut.

Exercise 2. Put the students into two lines facing each other. Remind them that the most important person in the scene is their partner. Give all the A's a verb card. They should put this verb in their gut, then have a "Blah, blah" dialogue in which they try to express their verb to the B's. The B's should not know what the verb is, since we wouldn't in real life. The B's should respond, saying only "Blah, blah." Switch, so both partners get a turn.

If you have time, this exercise can be repeated with different partners. You can try having half the group do their “Blah, blah” scenes while the other half watches or have one pair show their work at a time.

Exercise 3. Next, construct a two-beat scene, using two verbs. Explain to the students that each time you change your verb, you change your beat. Give each student two verb cards. Partner A does their verb to partner B and partner B responds, using gestures and “Blah, blah” dialogue. When you yell, “Switch,” partner A immediately switches to the second verb. Encourage the students to commit just as deeply and immediately to the second verb as they did to the first. As before, have pairs rotate so students get a chance to work with different partners and experience both acting and reacting with verbs.

If a student balks, saying the verbs don’t go together or there’s no way they’d be in the same scene, explain that their scene will be very interesting. Remind students that, in life, people switch from one verb or action to another all the time. People are not logical.

Exercise 4. Explain that you will no longer tell students when to switch from the first verb to the second. Now they must decide for themselves when to switch. There are only two possible motivations: First, while doing the first verb, they discover something internally that makes them switch to the second verb; or second, something in their partner’s reaction impels the switch to the second verb. Have pairs rotate and make sure each student experiences both initiating and responding.

Words

Introducing words can make it easy for students to go back into their heads. As a silly and serious way to address this pitfall, make all the students hold up their hands and say, “I swear that even though I will be using words, I will still make it come from my gut and not transfer to my head — or else

you can throw me out the window.”

Tell the students that even though they’re using words, you don’t want to hear any good playwriting or hilarious improvisation. If they start to feel that they’re in their head, they should go back to saying “Blah, blah” or just repeat the same words. The goal remains the same: acting from the gut.

Repeat all the “Blah, blah” verb exercises listed above, except have students use words.

Objectives

We then introduce objectives into our scenes. Objectives are what you need, want, must get, or have to do to the other person.

You will need a new set of index cards with a different objective written on each one. It’s helpful to make the objective cards a different color from the verb cards. Examples of objectives include: I need to impress you; I want you to help me cheat on the test; I

must get you to respect me; I have to get you to work for me tomorrow.

Exercise 1. Give students one objective and six verb cards. They should choose two verbs that work with their objective. Have all the students do monologues on their own, all working at the same time, using two verbs to try to achieve their objective. When they’re done, have the students put their objective and verb cards down, then rotate to the next spot in the circle. Repeat the activity a few times.

Exercise 2. Pair students by putting them in two lines facing each other. Only partner A should take an objective and choose two verbs to achieve it. In a scene with partner B, partner A tries to get their objective, while partner B reacts. To make the scene work, tell B’s to resist a little, even though they don’t know the objective. Switch, so the B’s get a chance.

Exercise 3. Both A’s and B’s choose an objective and two verbs. Let them try to do the scene. A’s and B’s should be doing their verb to their partner and reacting to their partner at the same time. Afterward, ask them what they noticed. Point out that when we get this complicated, we need a playwright.

Conclusion

High school students spend most of their school day relating to their environment through their heads, not only in their academic classes but also in social situations, as they strive to maintain coolness in a world where a single gaffe can live forever online. My goal in teaching acting is to make students feel comfortable with who they are and therefore comfortable in taking artistic risks. When you can help a group of students support each other in being silly, making mistakes, and having the courage to take risks, you’ve changed their lives forever.