

Experiencing Drama and Theatre: developing a space for communication with children & young people

The following workshop was developed in Denmark. **Slingsby** has been given approval to translate and provide these materials to English speaking audiences. We are indebted to **Louise Ejgood Hansen**, **Randers Egnsteater** and **Teatercentrum** for sharing this workshop.

Experiencing Drama and Theatre: developing a space for communication with children & young people.

Preface

This workshop aims to provide you, the teachers, with the tools to run *Experiencing Drama and Theatre* at your own school. We have tested and adjusted the concept and have arrived at something which we believe is extremely valuable. We have endeavoured to accurately and correctly describe all steps and have also briefly explained the basic ideas behind *Experiencing Drama and Theatre*.

We realise that different kitchens produce different results albeit working from the same recipe. Children, theatre plays, the physical environment and the teachers are different. Nevertheless, we feel that the fundamental idea that a dramatic experience can be appreciated and expressed with the help of *Experiencing Drama and Theatre* can be brought into any classroom.

What is it that children experience when they experience drama and theatre?

Experiencing Drama and Theatre aims to accommodate the full range of drama and theatre experiences. Most theatre performances consist of subject material that can be adapted in a variety of ways. But a drama and theatre experience is more than just the subject material - maybe that is not even the primary element. It is also a social experience and a perception experience. You enter the theatre, find your seat and the performance starts. During the performance situations, characters and stories are created through lighting, script, sound and movement.

With *Experiencing Drama and Theatre* the artistic experience is dealt with afterwards. Exactly because appreciating art is not something that simply happens, it is also something that you can learn.

In *Experiencing Drama and Theatre* we ask the students: What was your main experience? And that is how we find out that the sound equipment or the best friend giggling in the row behind you are important.

This does not diminish the experience of the performance itself; on the contrary it proves that the children have a very complex appreciation of the theatre experience. They easily jump between seeing the actors and seeing the characters, and they notice and render very precise, perceived details of e.g. lighting and costumes.

The richness of these experiences is worth holding on to - and that is what we do with *Experiencing Drama and Theatre*.

Physical Warm-up

We recommend that the children do some kind of warm-up before starting *Experiencing Drama and Theatre*. The warm-up improves concentration and helps creating space for the next process.

The following plan can be used or the teacher may choose other exercises/play proven to be useful.

Start:

All form a circle

Music: play calm music at low volume (relaxation music)

Stretching:

Up towards the ceiling

Towards the centre of the circle

Down towards the floor

Shake the whole body

Respiration:

Stretch the arms towards the ceiling while taking a deep breath

Exhale while pulling the arms down to the chest

Repeat the exercise 3-4 times

Tension/Relaxation:

Stretch your hands towards the centre of the circle

Tighten your hands as much as you can. After a moment: relax!

Tighten your toes as much as you can. After a moment: relax!

Pull your shoulders right up to your ears. After a moment: Relax!

Tighten your whole body. After a moment: Relax!

Shake the whole body

Experiencing Drama and Theatre for Grades 5-10

We have been aiming to develop a concept that can be completed in 45 minutes, being the normal duration of a lesson. However, we found that a slightly longer version produces a more in-depth and higher level of reflection. The times indicated in blue colour indicate our suggestions about where to shorten the program.

| Time | Activity |
|-------------|---|
| 0.00 | <p>Introduction</p> <p>The purpose of this workshop is to let the theatre experience take root. It is a fact that people in the audience will always remember different things after a performance, and that there is a difference of opinion as to what people feel was the most important. During this workshop you get an opportunity to reflect on your own experience and also to find out what other people found to be important. So, be sure to remember that other people may have a theatre experience which is different from your own.</p> <p><i>Purpose: to give students a brief presentation of the scope for the workshop. In line with the appreciative input, there is no right or wrong experience.</i></p> |
| 0.02 | <p>Physical warm-up (long or short version)</p> <p>We start with a physical warm-up. In the short version just stretching, respiratory exercise and tension/relaxation.</p> |
| 0.07 | <p>Memory exercise 1</p> <p>Sit on a chair with your eyes closed and imagine that you walk into the theatre/the place where the performance takes place. You enter the room; find your seat and the performance starts. Think as far into the performance as you can within the five minutes that is set for this exercise. Make an effort to remember as many details as possible: what did you see? What did you hear? What were you and other people in room doing?</p> <p><i>Purpose: To recall the experience in as many details and as accurately as possible.</i></p> |

| | |
|-----------|--|
| 0.12 | <p>Memory exercise 2 (<i>leave out in the short version</i>)</p> <p>Now, again think back to your experience of the performance, but this time also repeat your trip to the performance location physically. Therefore, go as far away from your chair as possible. You should now imagine that this is your seat in the theatre. This means that while you are walking, you should remember what you were doing and what you were noticing on your way to the performance. When you arrive at your chair and sit down, you are in the theatre and you continue to think about what happened. Once again, think as far into the performance as you can in the time given for the exercise. Try to include even more details than when doing the first exercise.</p> <p><i>Purpose: The physical repeat helps the students to remember physical experiences.</i></p> |
| 0.25/0.12 | <p>Memory exercise 3</p> <p>Now each of you has remembered as accurately as possible what you were experiencing on your way into and at the theatre. Now you have to tell each other. You are divided into pairs who are to repeat the walk to the chair. While doing so, one of you tells the other what he/she was experiencing. The other person is the interviewer and asks about different details. Remember that the person asking the questions should be curious about hearing what the other person is remembering. (You may not have had the same experiences). Afterwards you swap, so if you remember something different or more, then you can say that when it is your turn.</p> <p><i>Purpose: To give the students an opportunity to put the experience into words and gain insight into the experience of somebody else.</i></p> |

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 0.30/0.17 | <p>What did you experience?</p> <p>Divide the students into groups (4-5 in each group). The groups have 4 sheets of A3 paper with the headings (see appendix i): What did you feel? What did you hear? What did you see? What do you think about it? Everybody to write or draw one - or more - things on each sheet. The teacher to circulate between the tables and help the students proceed as well as supporting them with appreciative input regarding what each of the students have experienced.</p> <p><i>Purpose: To get the students to provide subtle details of the experience based on various senses.</i></p> |
| 0.40/0.36 | <p>The most important/strongest experience</p> <p>The spider diagrams (see appendix ii) are distributed to all students. They are asked to choose an important/strong experience related to the theatre performance, which they write in the big bubble in the centre. Then they write some details in the smaller bubbles, which describe the chosen experience: What do you think about it? What happened: How was the lighting? What did the actors do? etc. It is the student's own experience that is important. Also, no experience is better or more correct than somebody else's experience.</p> <p><i>Purpose: To give the students an opportunity to show what they think is important - also when it is a negative experience or an experience that other people think is less important.</i></p> |
| 0.45/0.40 | <p>Presentation</p> <p>Do a round of each group where you tell what you have written in the spider diagram. Afterwards you can continue talking about your different experiences. Again, the teacher supports with appreciative and curious input.</p> <p><i>Purpose: To give the students the opportunity to express what they find to be important and get an understanding of what others have chosen.</i></p> |

0.55/0.43

Rounding-off and evaluation

In a group the teacher rounds off and gives the students an opportunity to reflect on what it was like to do the workshop, what they have learnt.

Purpose: To create a collaborative finish to the program and give the students praise for being able to express and share their theatre experiences.

REMEMBER:

1. Make a copy of the spider diagram for each student and one set of the four sheets with headings for each group.
2. Consider the physical setting: Space for warm-up and the walk. The exercises work best if there is some space around each individual chair. How are the groups to be placed?

Developing a space for communication with appreciative input

In order to give children and young people an opportunity to put into words their own perceptions, feelings and thoughts it is essential that both students and teachers have appreciative input to *Experiencing drama and Theatre*. Appreciation means to watch, listen and hear the other person:

- To see the other person as a competent person who wants to and is able to contribute with something constructive
- That what means something to another person is not necessarily the same as that which means something to yourself.
- To set aside own opinions, attitudes and values for a while, thereby creating space and acceptance of other opinions.
- Spoken statements can be explored by asking supplementary questions, thereby giving the stories about the theatre experiences more details and increasing value.
- In an appreciative flow there is no right or wrong answer. All answers contribute to making the stories about the theatre experience more complex and composite.

Authentic Questions

Authentic questions may keep your attention focused on the other person to improve your understanding of what the other person understands, what the other person experiences, thinks and feels.

Authentic questions:

- Is a question for which you have no answer until you have asked the other person
- Is based on the experiences and perception of the person asked. As the saying goes: *You are an expert of your own feelings, perceptions and experiences.*
- Are open and curious
- Questions may be something like "Could you give a bit more details?" or "What does it mean when you say ...?"

Children and Young People as an audience

Children and Young People are competent as an audience. From their early childhood children rely on an aesthetic mode of understanding, which they encounter in art as well. The tangible and the perceived play a crucial role in visual art as well as in plays. At school the primary focus is on the students learning to have a conceptual and abstract attitude to the world. That is important, however, by means of a sensual input, art is able to create a different space where the answers are not given and there are good opportunities for feeling, understanding and thinking. From that perspective, artistic experiences are essential for modern development, which concerns independent reflection and the ability to have a creative and collaborative attitude to the world.

***Experiencing Drama and Theatre* was developed by Postdoc. ph.d. Louise Ejgood Hansen, Aarhus University, Tine Eibye, Souschef/drama teacher at Randers Egnsteater, cand.mag. Pernille Welent Sørensen, Consultant Teatercentrum and student assistant Marie Gorm Konradsen. Along the way 8 classes from Randers have assisted us by testing and adjusting the concept. The project received support from The City of Randers, Region Middle Jutland, Scenekunstnerværket in Region Middle Jutland, Teatercentrum and Aarhus University.**

Literature and Resources:

For the development of *Experiencing Drama and Theatre* we gained inspiration from, among others:

- Matthew Reason: *Young Audiences*, Trentham Books, 2010 (analysis of children's experiences with theatre).
- Flemming Mouritzen: *Legekultur: essays om børnekultur, leg og fortælling*. Odense Universitetsforlag, 1996 as well as Beth Juncker: *Om processen: det æstetiske betydning i børns kultur*. Riswenw Akidrwe, 2006 (About child culture and children's understanding of aesthetics).
- Maja Loua Haslebo and Danielle Bjerre Lyndgaard: *Anerkendende ledelse*. Dansk Psykologisk Forlag, 2010. (about appreciative conversation).
- Olga Dysthe: *Det flerstemmige klasserum*, Klim, 1977 (about authentic questions)

What do you feel?

What did you hear?

What did you see?

What do you think about it?