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Acting Out in Class is a Good Thing!

**A brief essay examining the use of
readers' theatre in the classroom
and the effectiveness therein**

In his rapid-paced and insightful book, *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell asserts that “we learn

by example and by direct experience because there are real limits to the adequacy of verbal instruction” (2005, p. 71). While he explicitly refers to “verbal instruction,” his recognition of inadequacy is easily expanded to include other types of teacher-directed instruction as well. Instead of this 'passive' type of learning—in which the child has limited participation in his or her knowledge formation process—Gladwell is proposing a more active approach to education.

Though he is a proponent of active learning, he was not the first to introduce this concept. John Dewey, in the now-epic work *Experience and Education*, claimed that children learn through doing, not through being told (1997). Since then, this idea of learning through active participation has been continued and extended by numerous researchers from Knapp, to Stimson, to Lancelot (Knobloch, 2003).

A common misconception is that active learning—or learning by doing—can only be done within the context of certain academic subjects, of which reading is not one of them. However, with just a little creativity and the tenacity to go against some educational norms, you will realize that active participation during reading time is quite simple and, better yet, a whole lot of fun! One incredibly effective method of active learning for reading is readers' theatre. This activity gets students involved through drama and acting. In readers' theatre, students assume the roles of characters in a particular book, and then read lines from a script as a type of performance for their classmates (Fountas & Pinell, 2006). While reading the story themselves or having the story read to them is effective, presenting the text orally allows the students to experience a completely new level of expressive language. The boys and girls involved are given the opportunity to practice voice inflection, intonation, verbal fluency, and many more important aspects of spoken language (Fountas & Pinell, 2006).

Aside from the linguistic benefits of readers' theatre, performing in front of an audience of peers also develops significant social competencies. For instance, shy children are given

the opportunity to 'come out of their shells,' so to speak. Children who, during a lesson, usually do not raise their hands might find an organized performance to be the *perfect* time to have their voices heard (Fountas & Pinell, 2006). Of course, that courage to perform in front of peers heavily relies on the teacher's effectiveness at creating a safe and fostering environment within the classroom (Fountas & Pinell, 2006).

So, what exactly is the teacher's role and responsibilities in readers' theatre? First, as mentioned, the teacher is the figurehead that essentially establishes the classroom environment. It is therefore his or her responsibility to create a classroom in which each child is comfortable enough to make mistakes without the fear of ridicule—in essence, a 'safe' learning environment.

Second, the teacher has the incredibly important decision of which texts to use in class, and further, which ones will be both appropriate and exciting to use in readers' theatre. There are a few genres of texts that really lend themselves nicely to readers' theatre. Those include narratives, poems, songs, scripts, and informational texts (Fountas & Pinell, 2006). Each of these types are easily adaptable to readers' theatre in their own ways. For instance, poems can be easily divided to students by stanza, and they are easily performed because they “includ[e]...rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and interesting language” (Fountas & Pinell, 2006, p. 320).

Third, and going along with the selection of appropriate texts, the teacher is responsible for progressing the activity in a variety of ways. The teacher will need to move from simple texts in the beginning of the year, to more advanced ones as the year goes on (Fountas & Pinell, 2006). He or she will also need to paradigmatically shift from the 'teacher role' to the 'proctor role.' In the beginning the teacher will plan and dictate roles to the children, but as the year progresses, the activity should shift to more “independent work by the students” (Fountas & Pinell, 2006, p. 324).

Like any other activity, readers' theatre shouldn't be used all the time, but rather it should be staggered with other validated classroom practices for reading, such as sustained silent reading, shared reading, choral reading, and others. However, when used effectively, readers' theatre can provide students with a unique experience developing their linguistic understanding, expressive language, and social competence.

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