

Magic of Theatre in the Classroom

Sonali Bhatia

It is hard to define the magic of theatre. Maybe it lies in discovering yourself while attempting to be someone else. Perhaps it is found in the spontaneity of the well-rehearsed movements and dialogues. Or maybe it is in the sheer reality that make-believe attempts to bring out. Wherever the enchantment lies, in whichever way you define it, there is no doubt that theatre is indeed magical.

When you bring this magic to your classroom, you transform the subject you are teaching, you transform the students' perception and understanding, and you transform yourself as a teacher. You see children whom you thought of as *naughty* suddenly becoming enthusiastic learners. You watch shy students expressing themselves unselfconsciously. You wonder at loners who become team players, and backbenchers who suddenly step into the spotlight.

Is it possible? That's the question you're asking yourself now. You're wondering if you, weighed down with the number of students, the duration of the class, the space available, and a syllabus to complete can actually do theatre in the classroom.

The answer is *yes*.

Theatre is simple to do, using the space you have, the time on hand, and objects that are easily accessible in school, like rough paper, pieces of chalk and stationery items. It can be conducted as a separate activity or integrated into the subject you are teaching to give students a well rounded understanding of the concepts at hand. What's more, you don't need any special training to introduce your students to theatre; you just need to be enthusiastic about trying out something new.

A FEW TIPS

1. ***Include all the students:*** Don't leave anyone out. Conduct full-class activities in which everyone can be equally involved.

2. ***Make theatre an experience, not a performance:*** Too often, the word *drama* or *theatre* conjures up visions of a hall, a stage, elaborate sets and costumes, and a performance with doting parents crowding the aisles, taking videos of their little ones. While *performance* is part of theatre, it is important to remember that it is not the *only* goal. Experiencing, understanding, working as a team and creative problem solving are important outcomes of theatre – and these are often overshadowed by the hype of a *performance* that looms ahead. It is suggested that regular theatre in class *should not be* performance-oriented – leave performances for special occasions like *Annual Day* or *Talent Search Day*, etc.

3. ***Let students take the lead sometimes:*** Often, students come up with wonderful suggestions for topics that can be acted out or ways to enact them. Allow them to take charge of some aspects of theatre in the classroom and enjoy what follows!

4. ***Find the balance between creativity and discipline:*** This is one important aspect you need to keep in mind. Students should understand that while they are free to express themselves in various ways, this freedom does not give them the license to disturb others. If students are not used to creative freedom on a regular basis, they tend to confuse it with total abandon. They need to be trained and guided till they understand the fine line dividing the two.

5. ***Mix age groups if possible:*** Allow older students to perform for younger children, and maybe vice-versa as well, to challenge both age groups and boost their confidence.

6. ***Warm Up and Cool Down:*** Try to start each session with a *warm up* and end it with a *cool down*. These can be simple deep breathing exercises for one or two minutes each.

7. ***Think of Baby-Steps!*** Think of a baby. In the first few days, it is mostly still and quiet, absorbing the world around it, taking in thousands of pieces of information through its senses. Then it begins to move and coo a bit. Slowly its movements and the sounds it utters advance in meaning, and the baby gains more control of what it does and the effects its actions have. As it grows, it interacts with others and these interactions also increase in sophistication over time.

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The magic is there – in every student, in every teacher, in every subject and topic. It is up to us to bring it out and nurture it, making learning a richly satisfying experience for all!

Sonali Bhatia conducts workshops for students and teachers on a wide range of topics related to 'Reading for Pleasure', 'Literary Activities', 'Dramatics', 'Storytelling', 'Creativity in the Classroom', etc. She is a freelance writer and has published articles on various aspects of education and child-centred topics. Sonali lives in Bangalore.

Lesson Plan on the Magic of Theatre in the Classroom

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What follows is a sample lesson plan, based on the theme of *water*. The plan is widely adaptable to other themes, and even for those students who are actually gearing up to perform a play, to help them with characters and situations.

The steps can be conducted on the same day or on different days, depending on the time allotted to the activity. The time given is merely indicative; it may vary with each batch of students. Each step can be conducted two or three times, with increasing complexity, and variations, like *a calm day v/s a windy day*, and so on.

STEP #1: “BEING” – Individual experience: 5 – 10 minutes

This can be conducted in class, with students sitting or standing at their own places. The teacher announces what they have to experience, and each child experiences it individually. They may keep their eyes open or closed as they wish, and may perform simple gestures at their own place if it fits in with what they are experiencing. It is done in silence or with very soft sounds if required.

The teacher takes them through *being* ice, where they have to be frozen and rigid, to slowly melting and *being* flowing water, to heating up and *being* water vapour which rises above the ground. Then, it cools, condenses, and falls to earth again as raindrops.

The children go through these steps by making their bodies rigid or flexible as required, and moving up or down.

The teacher needs to speak slowly and clearly in a soothing voice. At each step, long pauses are needed to allow the students to experience what is required. Here is an example: “*Be ice. Feel hard and rigid and cold. You are solid. You cannot move. Now, slowly, it is getting warmer.*”

You are melting. Feel yourself loosen up. You can move. You can take any shape you want. How do you feel? What shape do you take? Now, it is getting hotter. You are becoming steam. You are moving up, up, into the air. You are so light, you are rising, rising. You rise to a level where it is cold again. Slowly, you become water again and fall to earth."

STEP #2: "BEING" – Shared experience: 10 minutes

After they have done *Step #1* alone, the students are now ready to work in small groups. *Step #2* is an adaptation of *Step #1*, and may be conducted with them in their own places, or in a shared space in front of the class or in the hall.

What the teacher narrates is similar to *Step #1*, but now, students hold each other and experience it together. If they are in their own places, it could be two/four students holding each other and going through the experience. In a bigger space, they could be asked to form their own groups of as many members as they like.

Students now realize that they have to adapt the speed of their movements to the rest of the group, and move smoothly. They automatically start adjusting to each other as a team, without being specifically instructed.

STEP #3: "DOING" – Shared experience with a presentation: 10 – 15 minutes of planning, followed by 5 minutes of presentation time per group

Now, the students themselves take over, working in groups of four to seven members. They are given some time to plan the movement, sound, and co-ordination. They are allowed to add dance movements and any sound effects and props they can make themselves, using things available around the classroom.

After they have planned, groups take their turns to present the water cycle to the rest of the class. Time permitting, the similarities and differences between the presentations could be discussed after all the groups have performed.

STEP #4: "DOING" – Shared experience – Elaborate: Time to be decided mutually by the teacher and students

The students are now ready for a more elaborate experience. They plan an entire scene, or even a play, based on the water cycle. Now, they have a setting – *Is this river water? Is it a pond or a waterfall? Is it sea water? Are there other characters, like human beings, fish, whales, and other sea creatures? Are there boats? What is the role of the water cycle, then? Are the drops of water characters in the story? If it is sea water, what happens to the salt? After evaporation and condensation, do the drops fall back in the same body of water they had come from, or does the wind take them somewhere else? What do they feel?*

The students use their knowledge of geography (at whatever level they are) and their creativity and imagination to add movements and dialogues and create a whole story. They make use of simple backdrops and costumes (made out of dupattas and newspapers) to give life to their characters. They may sing or dance to give an additional dimension to the scenes as well.

ADDITIONAL LEARNING OUTCOMES

The water cycle story could lead to dramatizing of what happens to the drop of water when it is in a closed space (say, a room in a house), in the city, in a farm, in a factory and so on. This could lead to discussions on conservation of water, rain-water harvesting and other topical issues.

POSSIBLE ADAPTATIONS

This basic lesson plan can be adapted to almost any topic. Some examples – the life cycle of a butterfly; a solar or lunar eclipse; the various methods of transportation; mathematical operations like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division; various topics in history, and the like.

Theatre has great potential to transform any class into a fun-filled experience that facilitates intensive learning. It makes lessons interesting and meaningful, and allows children with various skills and abilities to shine. Use this tool in your classroom, and feel the magic!

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Words Section



Dramaturge (noun)

Meaning

- a dramatist
- a literary editor on the staff of a theatre who liaises with authors and edits texts.

(*Oxforddictionaries.com*)

Additional Information ~ One of the *dramaturge's* contributions is to categorize and discuss the various types and kinds of plays or operas, their interconnectedness and their styles. The responsibilities of the *dramaturge* vary from one theatre or opera company to the next. It might include the hiring of actors, the development of a season of plays or operas with a sense of coherence among them, assistance with and editing of new plays or operas by resident or guest playwrights or composers/librettists, the creation of programs or accompanying educational services, helping the director with rehearsals, and serving as elucidator of history or spokesperson for deceased or otherwise absent playwrights or composers. At larger theatres or opera houses, the *dramaturge* works on the historical and cultural research into the play or opera and its setting.

Usage ~

- The program is committed to the exploration of new forms of writing, and this process is supported by able and eminent dramaturges.
- She has acted as a dramaturge in her current book-length project, entitled *Shakespeare by Design*.
- The dramaturges' research of the musical will play a key factor in the future development of the genre.

Derivatives ~ *dra-ma-tur-gic*, *dra-ma-tur-gi-cal*, adjective; *dra-ma-tur-gi-cal-ly*, adverb
dramaturge is also referred to as *dramaturg*.