Teacher as Actor

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WHAT DOES AN ACTOR KNOW THAT YOU NEED TO KNOW?

Actors and teachers are both communicators. Actors tell stories written by playwrights, or improvise from their own imaginations and experience. Teachers are also story tellers, creating universes for students that fill their students’ minds with facts, as well as narratives, both fictional and non-fictional.

Actors train to master their crafts. They study their instruments of voice and body, become aware of how they can access their emotional lives to bring depth to their roles, and discover how they can stay present, aware and focused, in the midst of a process over which they don’t have control – the entire production! They also train to trust their creative impulses, and give free rein to their imaginations as they explore texts, create characters and give performances.

Teachers also play roles. Within the context of the classroom and the role of Teacher, they are sometimes called upon to also play the roles of Parent, Disciplinarian, Cheerleader, Psychologist and Problem Solver. They are also the Producers, Directors and Set Designers of their classrooms. Finally, they even play the roles of Critic and Audience Member as they appreciate and assess their students’ learning. They can wear many hats during the course of a day, just as an improviser takes on a character as though donning a cap, giving them a new way of seeing the world through different eyes, with specific physical and emotional expression.

Since teachers are responsible for “producing their classroom,” they need to pay close attention to their own processes. They must learn how to better produce engaging classrooms where students learn, and can prove they’ve mastered the content on state mandated tests. This is where an actor’s knowledge base can enhance what a good teacher does already.

Great actors – like great teachers – know what they want to accomplish with their material, know how to break down scripts and lesson plans into playable actions and beats, have vocal and physical instruments that are flexible, toned, and full of energy at their command, and understand deeply the responsibility of bringing all of themselves to their roles. They know how to transform themselves and the given situation into expressions that reach into each audience member’s heart and mind.

How does an actor do that? What does an actor know that a teacher could benefit from knowing? What is it that great actors do exactly? Is it their commanding voices? Or is it a physical grace and stage presence? Do they care more than others that you are moved to experience the universal through their specific character choices? Are they possessed of a certain passion or energy? Do they emanate a “charisma” that makes the audience take notice, want to listen, strain forward to catch whatever it is that they want us to know, to feel, and to experience?
Ultimately great acting, like great teaching, is a sum of the parts. Wavelength will focus on the correlation between actors and teachers, offering ways in which the craft of acting will enhance teachers' repertoire to engage their students.

Let’s begin our journey to enhance the many skills and talents teachers bring into their classrooms daily. We will focus on what an actor knows that might help you become the most engaging, insightful and creative teacher you can be.

SEVEN TIPS TO ENHANCE YOUR CLASSROOM

1) Discover Your Voice & Body
2) Know Your Text
3) Generate Energy & Surprise Your Audience!
4) Create the Space
5) Take Risks
6) Say “Yes-And”
7) Explore & Heighten
8) Use Your Imagination

Discover Your Voice & Body
Teaching is a profession like acting that is dependent on speech and effective communication. The voice is an essential tool in engaging students, and vocal artistry is a skill that can be learned. We’ll examine pitch, pace, volume, resonance, and vocal range which includes strength, flexibility, variety, emphasis, drama and the use of silence.

Teaching takes stamina. It requires a body that is warmed up, flexible, expressive in gesture, aware of non-verbal messages given and received, and able to express itself clearly. Does your body say what you mean, and mean what you say? There are personality actors, and then those who transform themselves physically to meet the demands of the character. The former use their own persona with all its idiosyncratic expressions and mannerisms and are cast in roles that honor those expressions. Other actors approach characters by transforming themselves from the outside-in and transform their instruments into new physical embodiments for a character.

Know Your Text
An actor ACTS. An actor plays beats in a scene, based in the needs and wants of a character. An actor doesn’t play emotions, but rather performs the actions that result in the expression of emotions.

The script needs to be captivating and known inside and out by the actor for them to be responsive and available in the moment to their creative impulses. If they’re worrying about knowing their lines, they cannot tap into their creative unconscious to allow for moments of inspiration, and very little spontaneous artistry is going to occur. So too a
teacher must know their subject matter, be familiar with the content so thoroughly, that the teachable moments that arise are readily responded to spontaneously.

The reason people go to the theatre is to be reminded of their connection to others, our shared humanity, and to be surprised that another knew of their experience that they thought was theirs alone. Ancient Greeks knew people came to be moved to catharsis, recognizing themselves in the roles and situations lived by gods and mythical creatures.

What is it a teacher really wants to ignite in a student? It seems to be “curiosity,” that in turn creates life-long learners. How can they do this?

Generate Energy & Surprise Your Audience

“Feynman was an exuberant teacher in every way. His enthusiasm and curiosity spilled over onto those whom he held captive in his orbit. He thought the quest to know the laws of the universe was the most exciting adventure a person could undertake. “I’m an explorer,” he once said. “I like to find out.” The natural world was to him wonderful, beautiful, and an object of endless play.

- Kay Redfield Jamison describing Physicist Richard Feynman

Exuberance

It is energy that students respond to. Acting is a way to explore life – an expressive and meaningful way to experience the human condition. The more skillful the playwright and the actor, the more the human condition is revealed. And the more skillful the actor, the more the audience is able to connect, understand and appreciate the universal experience of being alive through the specific wants and needs of one character being portrayed.

How to develop enthusiasm?

Teaching as Performing suggests emotional recall or using your imagination.

1) Complete physical relaxation
2) Elicit an emotion similar to what is required in text, preferable something that happened a long time ago.
3) Don’t remember how you felt at that time, rather recall and recreate all the physical circumstances of the occasion. Remind yourself of the Details of the place where the event occurred, the time of day, how everything looked, who was there and how they appeared. The ability to recall, and more importantly, to re-experience the sensory impressions of the incident is of primary concern
4) Emotions should follow.

Outside-in is thinking back to a moment when you or another experienced enthusiasm. How did you or they look? What physical manifestations? Imitate them. Or look at a picture that elicits Joy/Enthusiasm.

Emotions
When teachers prepare lesson plans, they need to find those moments in the “script” where their emotional response to the lesson at hand infuses the delivery, then play the action connecting to the emotion. Your personal connection to the material is the starting point.

Great teachers always have a personal investment in what they’re teaching. It’s a given if you’re teaching your subject matter that you already possess an enthusiasm for the material. Next, how do you communicate that so that the students resonate and respond?
Actors don’t play emotions. They play needs, wants and actions that call forth emotional responses.

Spontaneity, humor, impromptu moments delight an audience and fill us with joy and wonder. A well-timed joke, humorous interchange, spontaneous interaction or unexpected connection with another provides a context in which an audience, or classroom, is opened up to new possibilities.

Create the Space

The most important thing is to create an environment where there’s an absence of fear about learning something new. Your own learning process has to continue. . . You can’t teach well unless you’re learning yourself.
Robert Alexander
Founder, Living Stage Company

You set the stage for your students’ learning – you are the producer, the director, the set designer and stage manager of your classroom. Everyday you determine what kind of atmosphere your students will walk into, and how they will act and carry out their roles as learners. You may not be able to create skylights and change the physical environment of your classroom, but you can provide the “mental windows” for students to let their imaginations explore subject matter. You create a safe space by fostering an atmosphere of trust, both externally and internally.

Imagine your perfect classroom – see it clearly. See/hear/smell/taste/feel – how is like the classroom you currently have? What do you need to do to create that classroom? What keeps you from having the classroom you really want?
Take Risks

I was willing to take risks (in the classroom). I took a rope and hung it from my ceiling and told them, ‘When I grab this, everybody freezes. Or I’m going to vomit all over you. Because you’re making me seasick! You get kids thinking by making them responsible for their own education. (If) you’re not making them responsible, you’re not making them be creative.

Ed Burns, Writer & Producer HBO Series “The Wire”

Model risk-taking for your students, and dare to bring in different ways to engage your students. Improvisation can help you gain and sustain students’ attention, expand their creativity, self confidence, and help them develop their emotional and social intelligences.

Many a successful person experienced many moments of failure – Edison, inventors, artists, scientists who go on to win Nobel Prizes, writers with failed novels, And how did they keep taking risks and believing in themselves?

Self confidence comes from taking risks, failing, and getting up again, so if you don’t feel unsuccessful once in the next three days you haven’t risked anything! Teachers also role model acceptance of themselves when they risk something that doesn’t quite hit the mark and admit it. You cannot create until you trust yourself and are willing to take risks and even fail. We must learn to trust our impulses.

Say “Yes-And”

Saying “Yes!” to another’s creation, and adding on your own idea is the foundation of improvisation. To say “no” to what another offers on stage is considered “blocking” and stifles all creative impulses from happening. As soon as we say “yes” to another’s gift on stage, (and every thing a fellow player says is a gift), the scene moves along.

When you “listen” with all your senses to each student, support them in their learning preferences, and encourage them to express themselves in whichever ways best reflect them, you are sending a message of acceptance and encouragement.

We all know people who think and express themselves with the words, “Yes But” or “No but” Improvisers know that those words block interaction and stifle imaginative responses, while “Yes-And” says, “Yes, I hear what you’re saying, AND here’s my idea or opinion.”

“Yes-And” invites responses that help you build a classroom of trust and acceptance, while bridging conflict at the same time. When you think, “Yes-And” you are actively engaging students with the message, “I hear what you’re saying (or asking) AND here’s an idea that might help you understand more clearly, or express what you’ve learned in a new and creative way.”
Explore & Heighten

“The professionals rated ‘most creative’ by their colleagues have the characteristic of having a ‘greater facility for play.’”
Donald W. MacKinnon
Researcher, University of California – Berkeley

Explore and Heighten is an actor’s term for “raising the stakes” by plumbing the depths of a character’s actions and creative choices, in both scripted and improvisational work.

Howard Gardener’s model of Multiple Intelligences offers a way for you to help students play to their strengths. When students improvise they are tapping into the bodily-kinesthetic, musical, linguistic, and intra- and interpersonal intelligences. And when students have multiple pathways for learning, you get greater learning results.

When you encourage students to demonstrate their mastery of material through the art of improvisational theatre, you are naturally leading a process of exploring and heightening.

Use Your Imagination

Brain studies have shown that imagining something in vivid detail can fire the same brain cells that are actually involved in that activity.
Primal Leadership: Learning to Lead with Emotional Intelligence
Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Anne McKee (2002)

Giving the audience too much is over-acting, doing too much work in the classroom can be over-teaching. Give the audience more room to imagine and let them do the work. This holds true also in the classroom. If the teacher is doing too much of the thinking and doing, the students grow more and more passive.

Use your imaginations to find new ways to access your own creativity, and then ignite your students’ imaginations to discover their hidden talents. Give them the inspiration to imagine what it is they want to be and do in their lives.

You have the power to transform them everyday. As the writer George Eliot said, “Blessed is the influence of one true, loving human soul on another.”

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.
- Mark Twain
**CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS**

**Give & Take**
Start by asking the students to walk around in silence, looking into each other’s eyes. There may be some giggles at first, but give them time to warm up to this game. You model walking around with them, explaining that when you clap your hands you want everyone to freeze and then you will be the only one who gets to continue walking and talking. They can, however, take the floor from you by simply clapping their hands and then they get to move and talk while everyone else is silent and frozen. The object of the game is to take and initiate boldly, and to give graciously.

**Variations:** The first time you play it, emphasize that the students are free to discuss whatever they feel like, and that they don’t have to follow what the student in front of them said, although they may.

Pick a theme you’re studying in class, and get the students up to review before a quiz, by saying facts they remember about the topic. You are able to interject corrections if necessary, by simply clapping as well.

Instead of clapping, let students use their imaginations in innovative ways to “take” the floor: i.e. whistling, singing, snapping their fingers, whispering, etc.

**Interview**
Seat four students in a row, and pick one moderator. The four students all represent one famous person in history, or a fictional character you’re studying in calls. The moderator interviews all four students who will speak as one, by answering one word at a time in sequence. For example: “Napoleon, it’s a pleasure to have you heard with us today. Tell is, how do you feel?” All four students answer one word at a time, “I – FEEL – FINE – THANK – YOU – VERY – MUCH.” The questions must be preplanned so a learning experience is shared by all. The answer always begin with seat #1.

**Machine**
One student starts a simple action that can be repeated for several minutes, accompanied by a simple vocal sound. Another student approaches and adds a movement and sound to the first student’s. Emphasize that each new movement must build upon a movement of another student. They are to make connections with each other, without actually touching one another. This add-on continues until you have five or six students “creating a machine.” Then one student explains how the machine works, following the logical, sequential cause and effect results. Encourage students to use different levels and planes, and to be in relationship with others.

**Variations:** Pick a topic, such as photosynthesis, and then have students demonstrate by sound and movement the process whereby photosynthesis takes place. The final student will provide the overall description.

**Freeze Tag**
Six to eight students form a semi-circle around the playing area. Two students step forward and begin a scene based on a physical activity. The activity can be suggested by the rest of the class, by the teacher, or agreed upon by the beginning players. Once they’ve established the
Classroom Applications, continued

action, any one of the standby players may call, “FREEZE!” The active players instantly freeze their physical position. The player who called “FREEZE” taps one of the frozen players. That player moves out of the tableau and the player entering takes their exact physical position. An entirely new scene begins with the entering player immediately starting a new activity suggested by the assumed position. (E.g., if one of the players is on all fours “scrubbing a floor,” the entering player may turn this position into “searching for a lost contact lens.”) As facilitator, the pitfall to watch out for is scenes that go on too long before someone yells “FREEZE!” Encourage the students to take a chance that their bodies will inform them of a new activity and scene direction.

One Word Story
Eight students are seated or standing in a circle. Each student will contribute only one word at a time in a group effort to tell a story. This is an exercise in spontaneity and a steady rhythm is to be maintained. For the first time, you may begin the story with the words “once upon a time…” Emphasize that it’s important to have the words make sense, to listen and speak loudly, to maintain eye contact, and that it’s the group that is creating the story.

Emotional Symphony
You will assign four players, plus a director. Two players are seated, two are standing. The director elicits four different emotions that students in the audience may be feeling. The director explains, “We are going to create a symphony. But as you can see, the players did not bring any instruments. That’s because this is an Emotional Symphony, and what we need from you, the audience, is a number of emotions.” Players pick emotions. Director continues, “We are now going to perform a symphony for you, and it will be in two movements. In the first movement we will hear the sounds of the emotions, and in the second part we shall use the English language. Now, let’s find out what emotions we will be hearing.” The four players say their emotions, and the director commences with a warm-up, asking players, “Will you warm up your instruments please?” This is to sound as much like a symphony as possible, and will be dependent on the players following the director (for example, if he/she gives directions to swell up in sound, go low, points to individuals, etc.) In the second part the players speak. They are to talk about the situations that would make them feel what their assigned emotions are. When the second movement is completed, the director turns and takes a bow, and the improvisation is over.

Connections
This is a sociometric exercise that shows you how your students are connected with one another. Get students up and ask each one to put their hands on the shoulder of the person they’ve known the longest. Eventually everyone will have his or her hands on someone’s shoulder. This will provide a bodily-kinesthetic image of how well we are all connected. It will also show you any participant who is isolated, or may need some special attention.

Making Reports-Speaker’s Bureau
Get four students in front of the classroom. One of them will act as the Moderator or Presenter of the panel. You can decide beforehand which topic you want them to act as “experts” on—something they’ve been studying in class, or a topic they need to review before a test—or you can improvise with having the class give suggestions on topics they want to discuss. In the latter case, the Moderator will
need to choose one. Next the Moderator will get an occupation from the class for each expert; e.g., President, rock star, plumber, etc. Before introducing each “expert,” the Moderator will think of a characteristic for each character presented; e.g., “Our next expert, as you well know, is President of the United States and he/she has come to speak to us about _______________. Please forgive him/her because he/she caught a cold right before coming here, and sometimes goes on sneezing jags.” The purpose of the ‘lay-on’ for each character is that it gives them a task to do that reduces self-consciousness and keeps a focus. Then each “expert” will present on a topic from the viewpoint of the occupation with the character quality.

**Review for an Exam or Quiz-Man on the Street**
One player acts as a TV news anchor, who is out on the street interviewing passers-by. This is an excellent opportunity for students to play different characters they imagine might be on the street. The moderator may have a series of preplanned question, or may simply ask students to tell him/her all they know regarding a certain topic.

**Yes-And**
Eight to 12 students get into a circle. The only direction is that before you say anything, you must say, “Yes/And.” One way “yes-and” is used is to “brainstorm” a new product, as though everyone is in an advertising agency and they need to come up with a new product. Everyone builds on others’ creations by always accepting ideas, saying “yes-and” before their contribution, and by the end, a jingle is improvised for the product, which hadn’t existed moments before.

For classroom purposes, you may toss out a series of concepts or topics, and ask everyone to say what they know about it, always saying “yes/and” before each statement. If someone makes a false statement, see if another student can creatively correct him/her by saying “yes/and” first, and stating the facts correctly. Note: “Yes/And” creates possibilities, while “yes/but” inhibits communication and destroys possibilities. See “Give & Take” in the Warm-Up Exercises as another way to review or summarize a lesson.

**What do we have in common?**
Determine beforehand how many teams you want. Have students count off by that number. For example, if you want six teams, count off by sixes. Next you ask students to walk around the room and shake hands with others, and say their numbers. When they find another with the same number they pair up, and go look for another person with that number. Now you have groups of students who are asked to:

1) Find out what they all have in common;
2) List the positive characteristics of the members of the team;
3) Write a poem, create a song, or silently act out what’s great about their group

**Counseling Activities & Conflict Resolution-Alter-Egos**
If there’s a conflict situation, seat two or three students in a semi-circle, and allow each student to state his/her position. Let the scene continue and after a few minutes, ask if anyone in the audience thinks they know how any of the students are feeling. Invite these students up to be “Alter-Egos.”
The alter-egos' main task is to say what the students are not saying; that is, the feelings beneath the words. How they do this is by standing behind one student each and tapping the shoulder of the person for whom they're expressing feelings when they have something to say.

Players A, B and C (the original students) do not acknowledge what the other student's alter-egos say. They are, however, aware of what their own alter-egos say. The alter-egos are to help facilitate resolution of the situation by accurately reflecting the true feelings of each student.

This sounds more difficult than it actually is. You, the teacher, will be needed to facilitate smooth operation of this format as sometimes it may be confusing, especially when more than two students are involved. Emphasize that they do not even hear the other alter-egos when they speak, only their own.

**Variation:** Once the scene has progressed, call out “role-reverse.” Players A, B and C plus their respective alter-egos are asked to physically move into one another’s chairs, and continue the scene from these new perspectives. Role reversals offer an opportunity for further understanding of another’s point of view. End the scene with everyone returning to their original chair and position, but hopefully with deeper understanding and clarity about the conflict.

**Counseling Activities & Conflict Resolution-Role Modeling**

*Role Modeling* is a simple variation of *Alter-Egos* where once the original players have discussed the problem (only two students are suggested for this exercise), you ask if anyone has any ideas on how to resolve the situation. They are invited to come up and take someone’s place, even before they begin to explain what they would do. They have a few minutes to role model behavior and communication. Then you ask if anyone else has any ideas. This is a series of role-model demonstrations, and it culminates when the original students resume their seats, trying to incorporate new ways of communicating what they’ve seen role-modeled. Have the original two students stay up front, close to the action, so they can jump in after everyone who has any ideas that might help, has had a chance to participate.

**Playing Characters & Conflict Resolution/Role Wheels**

Role wheels are very simple to construct and offer a myriad of creative possibilities and situations for everyone to experience.

Get 10 to 12 students in a circle. Ask every other student to step inside, and then turn to face a partner on the outside. There is now an inner and an outer circle. You, the teacher, will now set up different roles, situations and relationships for the students to discuss, according to the class and subject you teach. For example, an English teacher might have all the characters in an assigned novel on role-cards. Then set up situations where the characters relate to one another. A history teacher may set up conversations between different historical figures, re-enacting different periods of time in history and set up roles in which students will interact.

In Wavelength’s role wheel for teachers in our Communications Workshop, we set up situations for teachers to experience themselves as administrators, students, parents, and state legislators.
Give a couple of minutes to each role wheel and then move on to another situation. As may be obvious by now, the only limitation in this format is our imaginations, for it is a flexible structure that can be adapted in many ways. It also affords students opportunities to work with many different students, perhaps some with whom they wouldn’t normally socialize or relate to.

**Four Corners**

Four participants stand in a square; each person represents a corner of that square or box. The “caller” (participant #5) will ask the class for four topics for four different scenes. The two people in the front of the box formation will be responsible for doing a scene based on the first suggestion. The “caller” will then have the box formation shift left, and give the second suggestion to the next two people forming the front of the box. This continues until all four suggestions are doled out. To be clear, each participant will be involved in two different scenes. For audience clarity, the caller should repeat the shifting process one more time, and have each pair review (call out) what their scene is about. It is then the caller’s responsibility to ask one of the pairs to begin a scene. The caller watches the scene intently, waiting for a good time to shift the box and move on to another scene. The shift can be either left or right, so the scene pairs must be prepared to move accordingly. The second (and/or third or fourth) time your scene is front and center, it should continue from where it left off the last time it was shifted out of play. Don’t begin a brand new scene about your topic, but move the action forward in time. Suggestions for the scenes can include: relationships, locations, hot topics or issues, or anything else deemed of interest or concern for the class.

**Historical Recall**

Before beginning this scene, the class is asked to provide four suggestions. The first suggestion is for an historical event. The next three suggestions are for an emotion, a movie genre (for eg. Film Noir) and a musical style. (for eg. Opera). The cast will then do a very simple and short “base” scene about the historical event, with no more than two to three lines per person. They will then repeat the same short scene as closely as possible three more times using each of the suggested styles. The suggested styles don’t have to be these three, and can be tailored to your group, but should be broad enough to have a wide variety of possibilities.

**Good/Bad/Worst Advice**

For this scene you will need three characters and a “host.” The premise of the “show” is that one character will give good advice, one will give bad advice, and the third will give the worst advice imaginable. The host should have the panel members introduce themselves. They can use a “character” name, tell a little about themselves, and establish which kind of advice they will be giving. “The good advice” is usually thoughtful and honest and to the point of the question asked. The “bad” advice is questionable at best, and the “worst” advice is, of course, outrageous and utterly ridiculous. The host can request the questions all relate to a theme important to the audience, or can get free form questions on any topic.

**Bring It To Life**

Invite students to get up in front of the class, and act out events using the basic concepts of creating a space/environment, creating characters and engaging in activities while they reenact the scenes from history or literature. You will need to be clear in assigning roles, setting the scene(s) with a beginning, middle and end, and stepping into the scenes as needed to narrate and keep the scene(s) on track.


CLASS
ASSIGNMENT
COMMERCIAL FORMATS

Over-the-top Infomercial
Heavy sell
Overly sincere charity appeal
Domestic Scene
Happy Fast Food Jingle
Has this ever happened to you?
Silent with a voice-over
Personal testimonial
Hip Visual/Dancing/Music
Pharmaceutical Scene with side effects listed
Embarrassing Personal Problem
Problem Solving: “Has this ever happened to you?”
Holiday Specific Spot
Travel Vacation
Movie trailer of coming attraction
50’s style with Music Jingle
## Blooms Taxonomy Verbs

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CHARACTER QUESTIONNAIRE

1. My first childhood memory is __________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

2. My hobbies are ______________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________

3. Breakfast this morning consisted of ______________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________.

4. My favorite color is ___________________________.
   My favorite song is ________________________, and I love ________ music.
   The last book I read was ________________________________.
   The last vacation I took was to ________________________________.

5. My idea of a great weekend is _________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________.

6. The people that really turn me on are ____________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________.

7. I really can’t stand people who _______________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________.

8. Before I die I want to make sure I _________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________________.