

Drama strategies

Drama strategies – also known as *drama techniques* or *drama conventions* – are the everyday tools of the drama teacher. They help to develop enquiry skills, to encourage negotiation, understanding and creativity. They can enhance performance skills such as character development and storytelling and be used across the curriculum to actively involve students in their own learning.

Still Images and Freeze Frames

The use of body-shapes and postures to represent characters or objects. Still images and freeze frames are both a form of tableau. With freeze-frame, the action in a play or scene is frozen, as in a photograph or video frame. Still images, on the other hand, require individuals or groups to invent body-shapes or postures, rather than freeze existing action. Groups can be asked to tell a story through a series of prepared still-images. This can be an effective method for students who are less inclined to improvise dialogue. The still images can also be brought to life through improvisation. Freeze-frames and still images can be usefully combined with Thought Tracking or Forum Theatre.

Examples of Freeze Frames and Still Images

Still images provide one of the most flexible methods of working in drama. They can easily be used across the curriculum, for example:

- Groups can tell a story by using three images to create a beginning, middle and end.
- You can help to improve students' vocabulary skills by asking them to illustrate a word or phrase in a story using a still image.
- In Science, groups can develop a series of images showing the process of metamorphosis (e.g. caterpillar to butterfly or frogspawn to frog).

Thought Tracking

A way to speak aloud the thoughts or feelings of a character in a freeze-frame. Thought tracking (also called thought tapping) is a quick fire strategy enabling children to verbally express their understanding of characters and situations without the need for rehearsal. Students gain confidence to speak in front of others, preparing the ground for them to move into extended improvisation. It is surprisingly easy for pupils to identify with a role and express their thoughts after holding a still image for a few moments. The teacher can efficiently gather feedback from all the students.

Thought tracking is a natural follow-up to still images and freeze frames. Once children have made an image, explain that when you tap them on the shoulder you would like them to speak the thoughts or feelings of their character aloud. At the beginning this may just be one or two words but children will soon gain confidence to express themselves in longer sentences. It doesn't take long to thought-track each child in a group so that you reveal a wide range of attitudes and feelings from different characters.

Students may want to be inanimate objects or animals in a still image. This is fine, as animal characters can have thoughts – such as “grrrr” or “I’m hungry” and you may find that even a lamppost can express its opinion, especially if you have used speaking objects with pupils. You can ask characters specific questions such as what they feel about another character, what they are dreaming or what they want to do next. Thought tracking can easily be employed in the classroom with children at their desks.

Bringing Freeze Frames to Life

Working with freeze-frames is a very accessible drama strategy, suitable for those new to drama as well as old hands. It is only a small step to move from still images into improvisation – just follow these simple steps.

1. Start with a still image created by a group.
2. Use thought tracking to find out what each of the characters are thinking and feeling.
3. Explain that you would like the group to bring the scene alive for a few moments with speech and movement. Initiate this by saying “Action!” or clapping your hands to start the scene.
4. Let the improvisation run for a short time – ideally before the performers run out of steam – and then end it with another signal such as “Cut!”, “Freeze!” or by clapping your hands a second time. The improvisation does not need to last longer than a minute.

The group will enjoy being able to tell the story without worrying about how to start or finish the scene and the teacher can easily control how much is shown. After a few sessions of working in this way students will become more confident about devising and presenting short scenes.

Hot Seating

What is Hot Seating?

A character is questioned by the group about his or her background, behavior and motivation. The method may be used for developing a role in the drama lesson or rehearsals, or analyzing a play post-performance. Even done without preparation, it is an excellent way of fleshing out a character. Characters may be hot-seated individually, in pairs or small groups. The technique is additionally useful for developing questioning skills with the rest of the group.

How do you do hot seating?

The traditional approach is for the pupil playing the character to sit on a chair in front of the group (arranged in a semi-circle), although characters may be hot-seated in pairs or groups. It is helpful if the teacher takes on the role of facilitator to guide the questioning in constructive directions. To help students begin you can try hot-seating children in pairs (e.g. a pair of street urchins) or in groups (e.g. environmental protesters, refugees).

If the background of the character is familiar to the pupils, then it may not be necessary for those playing the characters to do much preparation. Although some roles obviously require research you may be surprised at how much detail students can add from their own imaginations. It is important that the rest of the group is primed to ask pertinent questions. Don't get bogged down in facts during hot seating, but concentrate on personal feelings and observations instead.

Examples

Characters to hot seat include famous people such as President Kennedy or Tutankhamen as well as ordinary people like a chimney sweep, a Roman soldier or a Saxon farmer. Students can be asked to research historical characters with opposing points of view and then be hot-seated by the class as part of a debate.

Teacher in Role

Teacher in role (TiR) is an invaluable technique for shaping the dramatic process. Simply put, the teacher assumes a role in relation to the pupils. This may be as a leader, a peer, or a subservient role – whatever is useful in the development of the lesson. The teacher may ask questions to the students, perhaps putting them into role as members of a specific group and encouraging them to hot-seat her in return.

How to do it

Teacher in Role does not require great acting skills. A role can be adopted quite simply to communicate the key attitudes and emotions of a particular character. A token piece of costume, a hand prop or special chair can be useful to denote when the teacher steps into and out of role.

If you are unsure how to begin, try hot-seating first. This will give you valuable experience of assuming a role in relation to the students and responding to their comments and questions. You can progress to teacher in role by encouraging the students to participate and becoming more active as the character. Reply to their questions as though they are also in role and encourage them to become involved in occupational mime activities.

Conscience Alley



Also known as **Decision Alley** or **Thought Tunnel**. A useful technique for exploring any kind of dilemma faced by a character, providing an opportunity to analyze a decisive moment in greater detail. The class forms two lines facing each other. One person (the teacher or a participant) walks between the lines as each member of the group speaks their advice. It can be organized so that those on one side give opposing advice to those on the other. When the character reaches the end of the alley, she makes her decision.

This drama technique can easily be applied to a range of subjects across the curriculum, whenever a character is faced with a decision. It may be that you reach a certain point in your drama lesson, or while reading a story aloud, or describing an historical event, when such a moment occurs. Turn the situation round on the children/students so that they have to consider the issues involved. Then in role as Abraham Lincoln, or Oliver Twist, or Red Riding Hood, you walk down the Conscience Alley as members of the group whisper their advice to you.





Marking the Moment

Marking the Moment is a dramatic technique used to highlight a key moment in a scene or improvisation. This can be done in a number of different ways: for example through slow-motion, a freeze-frame, narration, thought-tracking or music. It has a similar effect to using a spotlight to focus attention on one area of the stage at a particular moment during a performance.

Marking the moment can happen when a scene has been created, and the group decides it's a significant moment in the drama, and they want to show this in some way.

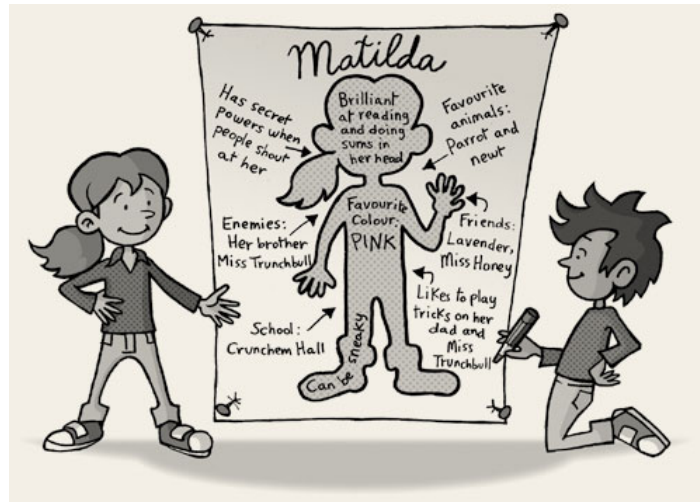
Why mark the moment? What can this add to a drama?

At times things happen in a scene very quickly - and yet we know these moments can change the whole direction of a drama. This is when something is needed to emphasize the moment.

-  We could use a spotlight to literally 'highlight' the moment.
-  We could insert a thought-track.
-  We could slow down time, or use a still image/freeze-frame.
-  We could use narrating by another actor, or self-narrating, to draw the audience's attention to this moment.

Role on the Wall

The outline of a body is drawn on a large sheet of paper, which is later stuck onto the wall. This can be done by carefully drawing around one of the participants. Words or phrases describing the character are then written directly onto the drawing or stuck on with post-its. This drama technique can be carried out as a group activity or by individuals writing about their own character. You can include known facts such as physical appearance, age, gender, location and occupation, as well as subjective ideas such as likes/dislikes, friends/enemies, attitudes, motivations, secrets and dreams.



- You can vary the approach, for example known facts can be written around the silhouette, and thoughts and feelings inside. Key lines spoken by the character can be added.
- The class can return to add more ideas, thoughts and feelings as they discover more about the character over time.
- Role on the wall can be used as a way to develop ideas for improvisation or rehearsal.

The approach can be used for historical characters too.

Open and Close

This is a simple and effective way for using still images to tell a story. It also mimics the technique of blackouts on stage – with no technical equipment required! Divide the class into small groups and give them the task of telling a story using a specific number of still images – between three and five images is a good number. Now they must work out the story and practice moving from image to image. When the time comes for sharing the work, the teacher, or one person in each group, should take responsibility for saying ‘Open’ and ‘Close’.

The audience should close their eyes while the first group gets into position. When the group has its first image ready, the designated person says ‘Open’. The audience open their eyes for a few moments and look at the scene. Now the same person says ‘Close’ and the audience close their eyes again. Quickly, the group moves into the second position and the audience are asked to open their eyes when the group is ready. The process is repeated until all the still images have been shown. The technique has a similar effect to watching a series of photographs or a flickering film.

Forum Theatre

A technique pioneered by Brazilian activist Augusto Boal. A play or scene, usually indicating some kind of oppression, is shown twice. During the replay, any member of the audience (‘spect-actor’) is allowed to shout ‘Stop!’, step forward and take the place of one of the oppressed characters, showing how they could change the situation to enable a different outcome. Several alternatives may be explored by different spect-actors. The other actors remain in character, improvising their

responses. A facilitator (Joker) is necessary to enable communication between the players and the audience.

The strategy breaks through the barrier between performers and audience, putting them on an equal footing. It enables participants to try out courses of action which could be applicable to their everyday lives. Originally the technique was developed by Boal as a political tool for change (part of the Theatre of the Oppressed), but has been widely adapted for use in educational contexts.

Image Theatre

In Image Theatre, still images are used to explore abstract concepts such as relationships and emotions, as well as realistic situations. This technique was developed by Augusto Boal and is described fully in his book *The Rainbow of Desire*.

Participants rapidly sculpt their own or each other's' bodies to express attitudes and emotions. These images are then placed together and 'dynamised' or brought to life. The method is often used to explore internal or external oppression, unconscious thoughts and feelings.

Why use it?

Image theatre is a flexible tool for exploring issues, attitudes and emotions both with groups who are confident with drama and those with little or no experience. No one has lines to learn or has to 'act' in front of others. Imaging can enable students to explore their own feelings and experiences in a less forbidding way than that offered by improvisational techniques.

How to do it

In a circle, students create physical images in response to a given theme, for example, bullying. They should do this quickly, without pre-thought. They are then invited to step into the centre of the circle and remake their image. Other students can now add in their own still images. This could lead to an abstract group image or a tableau that is "dynamised" or brought alive through thought tracking or by adding sound or movement.

Pairs or small groups can also create their own images, where they take it in turns to "sculpt" each other into a shape and then find a way to put these shapes together. This is most effective if done without talking.

Mantle of the Expert

Mantle of the Expert involves the **creation of a fictional world** where students assume the **roles of experts in a designated field**.

Mantle of the Expert is based on the premise that **treating children as responsible experts increases their engagement and confidence**. They can perceive a real purpose for learning and discovering together in an interactive and proactive way – providing them with skills and knowledge they can

apply to their everyday lives. MoE encourages creativity, improves teamwork, communication skills, critical thought and decision-making.

The approach was devised and developed by British drama guru Dorothy Heathcote from the 1960's onwards. **A problem or task is established** and the **pupils are** contracted-in or "**framed**" as an enterprise – **a team of experts** using imaginative role-play to **explore the issue**. Usually an imaginary client such as a museum commissions the team – for example as a team of archaeologists to excavate a newly discovered tomb in Egypt. The children may be involved in mimed activities, improvisation, research or discussion. While the focus is on the enquiry process, it can often lead to **real outcomes** such as writing letters, printing leaflets or selling products. The teacher's role is to guide the drama, stepping in and out of role as necessary, providing encouragement and motivation to the experts.

Why use it?

The technique can be used to actively **explore issues across the curriculum through drama, empowering pupils** by giving them an opportunity to assume **responsible roles** and **make decisions** in **guiding the outcomes**. In the UK, many schools are adopting Mantle of the Expert as a cross-curricular approach.

Process drama

What is Process Drama?

Process drama is a dynamic teaching method in which the teacher and the students work together to create an imaginary dramatic world and work within that world to explore a particular problem, situation, theme, or series of related themes, not for a separate audience, but for the benefit of the participants themselves.

Process drama in school settings usually involves **the whole class** working with the teacher-**in-role** in a **made-up scenario**. When they are working in process drama, the students and teachers work together to create an **imaginary dramatic world** within which issues are considered and **problems can be solved**.

In this world they work together to explore problems and issues such as, "How do communities deal with change?", "How do we accept other people into our community?" or themes such as environmental sustainability, betrayal, truth and other ethical and moral issues.

In a process drama, students **play a range of roles** and engage in a variety of **reflective out-of-role activities**, requiring them **to think beyond their own points of view** and consider the topic from **multiple perspectives**.

For instance, if the issue being discussed is logging a forest, they may play the loggers, people who live in the forest community and environmentalists. Playing a range of positions encourages them to be able to recast themselves as the "other" and to consider life from that viewpoint, thereby creating complexity and enabling us to explore multiple dimensions of the topic.

“the ability to work for social justice comes from the ability to understand another perspective”

Process drama allows us to "try on" other people's shoes, to walk the paths they tread and to see how the world looks from their point of view.

Students not only explore the dynamics, relationships, and conflicts that shape a given situation, but also to acquire factual knowledge related to the topic of the drama.