Using theater concepts as a teaching technique, schools can creatively teach students core subject matter.

John Schultz
Teachers act out a play every day that includes soliloquies, dialogue, questions, cues, and demonstrations to evoke a response from their audiences. Learning requires that the students—or audience—see a new concept in a motivating and dynamic environment, a setting that provokes inquiry and an understanding of how new knowledge applies to real life. As students come with prior knowledge gained from other experiences, the play must contain many acts so that students can construct new knowledge. There is a finale in this play where students demonstrate what they learned from each act. In comparing teaching to acting, teachers can use theatrical skills and concepts to positively impact student learning and achievement.

Pedagogy and Acting

Each day, teachers plan and rehearse a series of lessons that create an environment where students can acquire the knowledge and skills in a school’s curriculum. These plans are essentially the script and blocking for the teacher’s performance. Whether they are giving instructions, demonstrating a skill, asking a question, or facilitating a student project, the teacher’s performance is meant to elicit a response from the audience—the students. According to Lee Shulman’s 1986 article, “Those Who Understand: A Conception of Teacher Knowledge,” a teacher’s success in the use of any classroom pedagogy is determined by his or her content knowledge, clarity of instruction, techniques in motivating students, and responding to students’ questions.

Teachers work diligently to evoke a positive response from their audience. In some cases, the response is choral, the answer to a math question, a drawing, a sculpture, a paper, a poem, a script, an invention, or the stimulation of thought and emotion. Oftentimes, like an actor on a stage, the teacher does not necessarily observe the response; rather, the response is intrinsic to each individual. Teachers can examine these intrinsic responses by creating environments where students share their responses through group discussion, performance, or writing.

In the Hopkins School District in Minnesota, our teacher performance system, known as the Hopkins Compensation, evaluates all teachers on their pedagogy to engage students. Teachers who use more acting and theater have students more engaged in the content being presented. Discrepant events and a teacher on stage in the classroom increases engagement, which in turn motivates students to achieve.

Teachers as Actors and Students as Audience

In Classroom Instruction that Works, Robert Marzano and his colleagues explain that cues and questions have been shown to increase student achievement. Like a script that leads an audience through the plot of a play or the evocation of an emotion, teachers use cues and questions to guide students through lessons. Cues involve hints about what students will be experiencing during the lesson and set expectations for students when new information is presented. Questions elicit knowledge that students have already secured. Marzano’s book indicates that cueing and questioning accounts for 80 percent of what occurs in a given classroom on a given day.
Like the actor’s timing in the delivery of a line or entrance onto the stage, teachers must also consider their timing—known as wait time—in assisting students with their response to questions. Teachers must wait to provide a cue to a question they have posed to their students. They must also wait to provide a follow-up response to a student’s answer.

There are several techniques that teachers use in their act to stimulate thinking, elicit prior knowledge, and prepare their audiences to become observers of phenomena. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, the discrepant event—a pedagogy common to the science classroom—illustrates an excellent method to motivate students.

In terms of live theater, the discrepant event serves as a “plot twist” in the script; it causes dissonance between what is physically observed to occur and what one thinks will occur. That is, the students’ prior knowledge is not consistent with what they are observing. Jean Piaget, a noted researcher on learning, writes that the “state of perplexity and doubt is a necessary first step in learning.” Like a puzzle, the discrepant event arouses strong feelings within the student, who then has a
strong urge to resolve the unexpected outcome, explains Tik Liem in the second edition of *Invitation to Science Inquiry*.

The “inverted glass of water” is an example of a discrepant event that Liem describes. In this example, a teacher fills a transparent glass with water and asks the class what would happen if the glass of water was inverted over a student’s head. The obvious answer is that the student would get wet. However, if a paper card is placed on top of the glass (a card larger than the top of the glass), what will happen when the glass and card are inverted over the student’s head? The student usually demonstrates the discrepancy by getting out of the way as the teacher inverts the glass. However, the card remains in place over the glass, and very little water is spilled. Once students are provided with a series of questions and cues related to the event, they learn that they have just witnessed the actions of atmospheric pressure. Compared to live theater, once the plot twist occurs, the audience can enjoy and remember the experience.

Liem states that discrepant events should be delivered with joy, enthusiasm, a sense of humor, and with simple materials. The event should be presented with questions that display wonderment, arouse curiosity, and evoke emotion. It is the teacher’s acting ability during the event that distinguishes it from a mere demonstration of concept. The teacher’s role is to magnify the dissonance, which stimulates the learners to inquire, investigate, and experience discomfort with the unexpected result. The students’ strong desire to resolve the discrepancy, and the teacher’s act of not describing the science behind the event, translate into an effective learning experience.

**Actors as Teachers**

Sometimes, the teacher can come in the form of an authentic actor. For example, when actors from The National Theatre for Children demonstrate to students the oversized portions of today’s diets during the obesity prevention show *All’s Well That Eats Well*, it is the actors’ exaggeration of horror and emotional timing that leads to measurable learning.

In another instance from 2005-2006, students in 10 Chicago-area middle schools attended a live production of **“Teachers who use more acting and theater have students more engaged in the content being presented.”**

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a play designed to teach them why it’s a good idea to save money. The play, featuring two professional actors who interacted with students, contained financial literacy concepts such as differentiating between needs and wants. It also illustrated some of the problems caused by not saving—all done in a fun, nonthreatening way that made the students laugh.

A total of 1,880 students took a test before they saw the play, and 1,384 students took a post-test. The overall results of the study showed that the performance significantly increased the students’ knowledge about saving money. “Given the total time requirement of less than an hour, the improvisational play seems to have been remarkably effective in improving knowledge,” said Lewis Mandell, professor of finance at the University of Buffalo. In other words, by engaging students with participatory theater techniques, long-term knowledge and behavior change was achieved.

**Students as Actors**

Roles on the classroom stage can be reversed. Giving students the opportunity to share their work allows them to act, display their efforts, and receive recognition, all of which, Marzano reveals, are shown to increase student achievement.

Teachers across many grade levels can reverse roles by using role-playing to demonstrate processes that are not tangible or easily observable. In science education, there are many opportunities for students to participate in acting that demonstrate and teach natural phenomena. For example, students can be assigned the roles of positive and negative ions and act out how a negative ion and a positive ion combine in a chemical reaction, thereby creating stories about each ion’s bonding. The students’ acting gives them a direct experience with the rule of opposition and creates knowledge for future reference in subsequent chemistry experiences.

Other examples of students as actors include speeches or presentations of their research and inventions, which provide the opportunity to teach acting techniques. In *Magic and Showmanship for Teachers*, Alan J. McCormack writes that teaching students presentation styles builds confidence and a means by which they can describe their own knowledge.

McCormack states that students should have a stage presence, which is the degree to which your existence in a given setting commands interest and attention. Voice becomes important as every sentence should be worded correctly and each word spoken distinctly. Timing is important in the pause before and after key messages, like the wait time described earlier. McCormack concludes that humor is a great asset, and that students and teachers should consider using novelty, the unexpected, and the bizarre. Teaching these four elements of acting gives students confidence and demonstrates how acting and style make knowledge interesting to others.

**Curtain Call**

The classroom is a theater of learning that contains many actors and actresses, each with its own character and motives.
The teacher can take on the role of actor, who motivates inquiry, represents a concept, displays knowledge, elicits students’ prior knowledge, or demonstrates appropriate classroom behavior. The teacher can also take on the director’s role, which uses student acting to demonstrate concepts that are less tangible and tactile. Teachers can work with their theater colleagues to set expectations for student presentation, ensuring that they have a stage presence and develop an ability to present knowledge to their peers.

Acting and other theater art skills—cues, questioning, timing, and setting contexts—have been shown in educational research to positively impact student achievement. Having a teacher trained in theater—or providing live educational theatrical performances designed to teach academic concepts—will give learners a dynamic and fun place to learn, especially when the concepts are difficult to see or understand.

John Schultz is superintendent of the Hopkins School District in Hopkins, Minnesota. His e-mail address is john_schultz@hopkins.k12.mn.us.

WEB RESOURCES

The NTC Research Foundation’s research projects seek to understand the power of live theater events in schools as an educational catalyst for behavior change and awareness. Read published research at www.nationaltheatre.com.

Meet Me at the Corner, Virtual Field Trips for Kids, is a dynamic, interactive site that encourages individual expression and participation through video submissions from children worldwide. www.meetmeatthecorner.org