

Ensemble Building for Middle Grades by Amy Penney

Credit: Many thanks to Gai Laing Jones for inspiring this unit. Her ensemble building workshop at the CETA conference, October 2018, totally changed the way I begin teaching theatre courses for seventh and eighth graders. Many of the activities contained in this unit are credited to her.

Stage 1: Identify Desired Results

National Theatre Standards:

TH:Cr2.1.8b. Share leadership and responsibilities to develop collaborative goals when preparing or devising drama/theatre work.

Program Objectives: Students will increase comprehension of the term ensemble and will develop skills to work effectively as an ensemble in an 8th grade drama classroom setting.

Learning Outcomes: Students will be able to define the word ensemble, will comprehend its importance to their work in the theatre classroom with their classmates, and will display a foundation for operating as an ensemble on a daily basis in the theater classroom.

Enduring Understandings

Students will understand that...

- What are the big ideas?

As theatre artists, students need to understand that they may have to work with anyone at any time.

They will not always get to pick and choose who they work with. Therefore, students need to learn that the entire class is an ensemble. In order for all to do their best work, all must support the ensemble.

- What specific understandings about them are desired?

Students will be asked to work with a wide variety of students in the classroom and to do their best with each interaction. Theatre requires that students learn to work with a great variety of classmates. This will challenge them in some ways but may also provide the impetus for many of them to go further with their acting than they have so far.

- What misunderstandings are predictable?

Students may feel awkward and uncomfortable at

Essential Questions

What provocative questions will foster inquiry, understanding, and transfer of learning?

What is an ensemble? Where have you heard that word before? In what context?

How can you imagine ensemble work serving to make work in a classroom or on stage better?

In theater, are we only concerned with the quality of our own performances? What happens to the play if every actor does not feel supported?

What can you do to support the ensemble?

Is there anything that you need to have happen right now to make this (shape, activity, improv, scene, play) better? You are part of the ensemble, and we want to honor you.

What are your reflections (just noticing; no judgement) of the ensemble activity?

Students will know...

What an ensemble is and how to operate as one in the theatre classroom on a daily basis.

Students will be able to...

Work with any student in the classroom effectively and will begin to take responsibility for their own learning as they internalize the idea that their own theatre classroom is an ensemble.

Stage 2: Determine Evidence for Assessing Learning

Performance Tasks:

- Through what authentic performance tasks will students demonstrate the desired understandings?

_ Student-led warm-ups followed by all the ensemble.

_ Students will devise short scenes daily with a different group of students each day; these short scenes will be performed for the entire class ensemble.

- By what criteria will performances of understanding be judged?

Classroom observations based on these questions:

_ Are students participating respectfully and fully in the student-led warm-ups?

_ Are students changing groups day by day with ease?

Do students work equally well with each group?

_ Do students grumble about their groups or do they engage and work positively?

_ Do students commit to respectfully watching other groups perform?

Other Evidence:

- Through what other evidence (e.g., quizzes, tests, academic prompts, observations, homework, journals) will students demonstrate achievement of the desired results?

_ Verbal checks for understanding - whole class discussion

_ Exit Tickets

_ Monitoring of group work

_ Written reflection

- How will students reflect upon and self-assess their learning?

_ Whole class and group discussions

_ Written Reflection

Stage 3: Build Learning Plan

Learning Activities:

What learning experiences and instruction will enable students to achieve the desired results? How will the design...

- Help students know **Where** the unit is going and **What** is expected? Help teachers know **Where** the students are coming from (prior knowledge, interests)?

Day 1: Teacher will start using vocabulary right away: “In a moment I will ask you to get a chair and create a perfectly shaped ensemble circle. What does that mean? It means that the circle is perfectly placed in the center of the room with enough room for all of you to get up and move in the center of the circle if asked. It also means that there is equal space between each chair and that everyone is equal in the circle. Now look around. What are your obstacles?” (take student volunteers for answers - responses will vary but may include things like chairs desks, other students, talking, people not paying attention, etc.). After obstacles have been identified, ask students how long they think it will take them. Garner a few responses. Settle for one in the middle and ask the students to try to stick to that time.

Once students are in the circle, ask if anyone would like to see any changes. Honor every request, even if they are silly. Model for the students the way you want them to respond to others: “So, you think the circle should be bigger? I want to honor that request because you are a member of the ensemble. Can you make that request happen for her?”

Keep encouraging students to follow requests. After the circle meets everyone’s expectations, explain to the students that what they just did is ensemble work. Let them know that we are going to be working on building an ensemble in the next several days. Let them know that this work can be challenging at times but also rewarding. Explain that strong ensembles usually create better theatrical work and that you desire that for each of them. Let them know that you will talk more about the meaning of ensemble a bit later in the lesson.

- **Hook** all students and **Hold** their interest?

Birthday Activity: Tell students that they are going to arrange themselves in birthday order, by order of month and day (not year). They will arrange themselves starting at a seat in the circle that is pointed out as Jan. 1st. They will put themselves in birthday order going clockwise. They cannot talk in order to do this. Set norms: Ask students what norms should be and discuss. Some will ask “Can we mouth?” Others, “Can we use fingers/hands?” Make sure to ask students and have all agree to norms. Ask the students how long they think it will take them. Do the activity.

Birthday Circle: Tell students they will now go around the circle and say their birthday like it is the best day in the world (because it is!) and to do some sort of movement as they say their birthday. Explain to the class that we will all repeat their movement and vocal quality with the same enthusiasm as the person who’s turn it is. Impress upon the students that there is no opting out and that we all have each other’s backs. “Don’t leave anybody hanging.”

- **Equip** students, help them **Experience** the key ideas and **Explore** the issues?

Whole Class Discussion: What is an ensemble? Where have you heard that word before? Allow students to have their thoughts and express them, even if they seem to be going off course. Students may point out groups of musical instruments or fashionable outfits. Some of them may give examples from TV shows or movies that have ensemble casts. Lead them to the question “What is a theatre ensemble then?” Listen to all ideas until the class comes to a working definition of ensemble for their class. It may end up being something like:

Ensemble: a group of actors viewed as a whole instead of as individuals.

Provide opportunities to **Rethink** and **Revise** their understandings and work?

Let the students know that they will be given opportunities to rethink and revise their working definition of ensemble as the unit progresses. If they ever want to add something/change something, we will discuss it as an ensemble.

Day 2:

Physical and Vocal Warm-up - ask for student volunteers to lead each part. Explain that they are all part of the ensemble and that they have all already learned how to do a physical and vocal warm-up from the teacher.

Tell them that you will take volunteers for the next few class periods and that eventually you will draw equity sticks to see who leads. Explain that by the end of the course, every student will have led part of the warm-up at least once. Ask students what they expect when they are leading or following the student-led warm-up. Discuss as the ensemble. Honor all voices. Garner respect.

Finger Shake, Elbow Shake, Toe Shake, Head Shake - Draw equity sticks for first partners. Explain this is by design - random partners. Tell students to meet with partners face to face. One person shares something about themselves for 30 seconds while first partner listens. Let students know to pay attention because they will need to remember something about their partners later. After 30 seconds, switch who is sharing and who is listening. Then tell students to create a “finger shake” with their partners. Demonstrate that it can be with or without contact; they just use their fingers to create a gesture. Ask students to quickly find a second partner. Same sharing and listening process. This time they create an elbow shake. Next partner, same process. Toe shake (shoes on). Finally, 4th partner, same process, Head Shake (no contact!). Then have students go back to partner 1 and repeat something they learned about each other to each other. Then do their finger shake. Let students go through all partnerships always ending with the shake. Finally, start quickly calling all partner numbers in different orders. Students will have to find their partners quickly, recall

information, and remember physical gesture. Keep repeating and make changes faster. This is a high energy activity. There is usually a ton of laughter

Reflections - Tell students to come back to the seated ensemble circle. Ask students to comment on the activity. Anything they noticed (no judgments). Let students know they will next be discussing the idea of an ensemble with small groups that they will be assigned. Ask whole group to establish norms before getting into groups. Write norms on chart paper or board.

Small Group Discussions - Divide ensemble into teacher-created heterogeneous groups. Supply students handout with essential questions. Teacher will monitor small group discussions.

1. What is an ensemble? Besides the definition we came up with in class, what have you learned about it? What else do you need to know?
2. Do you think working as an ensemble is important in the theatre? Why or why not? Back your opinion up with examples/evidence.
2. How can you imagine ensemble work serving to make work in a classroom or on stage better?
3. In theater, are we only concerned with the quality of our own performances? What happens to the play if every actor does not feel supported?
4. What can you personally do to support the ensemble?
5. Is there anything that you need to make our ensemble work better? What other reflections do you have on this work?

Day 3:

Student-led physical and vocal warm-up - take volunteers or pull equity sticks. Keep a running list of who has led part of the warm-up in the upcoming lessons.

Tell Me Something Terrific About You -

- Be **Tailored** (personalized) to the different needs, interests, and abilities of learners?

Either assign partners or draw equity sticks for partners. It will best to assign partners, especially if you have EL students or SPED students in the class. Pair different abilities and levels with students who will participate appropriately and effectively with the higher needs student. Explain to students that they should sit either on chairs or on the floor, but they should both do the same thing, so that they are eye to eye with each other. Tell students that one person will be interviewed first, and the other next. Explain that the interviewer will call their partner by name and then say "Tell me something terrific about you." For example, "Sienna, tell me something terrific about you." Sienna will tell her partner something about herself. Today, it might just be, "Well, I brushed my teeth this morning." Whatever Sienna says, her partner simply says "Thank you. Tell me something terrific about you." This continues for 2 minutes. Repeat to the students that each time they address their partners they should say their name. This is very important. Also, let students know that they should listen and remember things about their partners. One person interviews the other for 2 minutes. The teacher will keep up with the time. After 2 minutes the roles switch, same process.

Agent/Client Circle: Tell students to get into the ensemble circle with chairs and sit next to their partners. Ask students how long they think it will take them to do this properly. Allow students to make changes to the circle if they need that. Explain that now each of them will introduce their partners to the ensemble circle.

They should introduce their partner, sharing one thing they learned about them, as if they are an agent representing a client. They should be very enthused by the client and the terrific thing they learned about them. Model what you mean for the students. Let the ensemble know that they will all be listening to each introduction and will react with sincere enthusiasm - oohing and ahing, perhaps some applause. Remind students that everyone in the ensemble is equal, so all introductions should receive equal amounts of attention.

Reflection: Allow students to share impressions (not judgments) of the activity. What did they notice?

Ten Second Plays: Draw equity sticks to create groups of 4 or 5 students. Let students know you are doing this. Explain that they have worked with a greater number of students in the class than ever before in the past three days. Remind them that we all just met and learned something about each other. Remind them that this is ensemble work and that they all have demonstrated they have the ability to work well with anyone in the class. To start the activity, have the 4 or 5 students go around in a circle and do the "Tell me Something Terrific About You" interview. They will not do the whole activity. They are just dialoging and gaining more knowledge of a wider range of students. In this round they go around one to one. Someone asks the question, and the student next to them says one terrific thing. This keeps going around their small circle.

- Be **Organized** to maximize initial and sustained engagement as well as effective learning?

As they are doing this, the teacher visits each group and gives them a movie name to remember: The Wizard of Oz, Willy Wonka, Ghostbusters, Star Wars, Avengers...movies that are big and recognizable.

Next, interrupt the discussions. Tell the groups that they will have 2 minutes to devise a 10 second play based on the movie you gave them. They should not share the movie with other groups. They should all work together. Remind them that it is a ten second play only - very quick. They can use sound, movement, dialogue, music, choreography, etc.

Give students plenty of warnings about the time. Perhaps set a timer. When the 2 minutes are up. Have students sit on the floor to view each group who will be performing from a specific section of the room. Ask students, as an ensemble, how they can support the other groups. Take feedback. Explain that we are watching an entire show, a series of 10 seconds plays. We want the whole show to be good, not just our scene. After each group performs their scene ask the students “Name that movie!” Students will yell it out. Ask the other groups to offer comments of praise for the group that just performed. Take volunteers to provide praise.

- Be **Tailored** (personalized) to the different needs, interests, and abilities of learners?
If time permits and student interest is there (it often is), allow another round of plays. You can extend the time if you want to 30 seconds or even a minute. Provide the names of more movies or allow the group to come up with their own. You can also provide more time for creating/devising - perhaps 3 minutes instead of 2 minutes.

- Allow students to **Evaluate** their work and its implications?

Exit Ticket - Written Reflection: Provide handout, project prompt on the screen, or write prompt on board - **Prompt:** Reflect upon your experience with ensemble work so far. How is it going for you? Are you getting to know more of your classmates? Has this work been difficult or easy for you? How so? Have you found yourself coming up with new ideas while working with someone new? Were you surprised by anyone in the class this week, either by working with them or watching them perform? Do you think working as an ensemble in the theatre is important? Why or why not? Back up your opinion with reasons, examples, and/or evidence.

Work Cited

Jones, Gai Liang. “Theatre Ensemble Building.” California Educational Theatre Association. 13 Oct. 2018, Asilomar, CA.

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