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A Step Towards Engaging Students

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# A Step Towards Engaging Students

## Recognizing Emotions through Theatre Structures

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*Abstract: Many teachers neglect to explore one of the first steps towards engaging and motivating students: being in tune with students' emotions. By developing observational skills that theatre artists utilize on a regular basis, teachers can notice how students are feeling by the way they express themselves through body language and vocal expressions. This paper provides three theatre activities to build an awareness, a recognition, and an understanding of other people's emotions, as well as our own.*

Keywords: Teachers, Motivating, Engaging, Theatre, Activity, Students, Emotions

### Introduction

**W**HAT DOES A successful and engaging teacher look like? This question is one we grapple with in teacher education programs. Yet, the terms 'successful' and 'engaging' are value-laden, filled with bias, demonstrating extreme variation in teacher training around the country and the world. The primary goal of teacher education is often to prepare teachers for success in the classroom by providing theoretical and pedagogical tools, with an emphasis in the content area of interest. Many teacher education programs require multiple levels of student teaching placements in which novice teachers put theory into practice. A critical aspect of teacher education is often ignored: utilizing theatre structures to gain a deeper insight into our students' lives. Theatre acts as an entry point into exploring ways of recognizing emotions through body language and vocal expressions.

The term 'withitness' encompasses this ability to be aware of what is happening in the classroom (Good & Brophy, 2003), but focus tends to be placed on stopping unwanted behaviour rather than on 'reading' our students and ourselves before, during, and after each lesson. While critical observation is not the exclusive property of the acting profession, theatre equips participants to step into the shoes of another. Picking up cues from verbal expressions and body language gives teachers an insight into who their students are, providing teachers with the knowledge of how to move forward with the planned curricula of the day. If students are slouching in their chairs, arms are crossed, with backpacks still on, the teacher will need to lure the students into the lesson, rather than simply assume it's just another day at school. We are constantly in communication with

our students, and as part of teacher education programs, cultivating this critical awareness is critical.

### Theatre as an Entry Point

This paper will focus on the connection between our emotions and how our emotions are expressed through our voice and body. Additionally, a few selected theatre structures will be explicated which can heighten our ability to openly and collaboratively explore our emotional states. By investigating emotions through theatre structures, students have the opportunity to become part of the observation process, where they are not only observed, but have the opportunity to watch themselves and those around them, propelling the cycle of being wide-awake, the notion of being in the deepest state of consciousness (Greene, 1995). Theatre acts as a springboard to motivating and engaging our students. Neglecting to teach artistic structures as a way to gain a deeper understanding of our students' emotional states ignores the possibility of learning the unspoken language and power of the arts: a language that transcends not only boundaries, but also cultural divides.

To discuss this topic effectively, the term 'emotion' must be defined. I define an emotion as a response to a stimulus that occurs in the form of both a physical and cognitive reaction. My definition follows William James' theory of emotion who defines emotion as first a physical and then an emotional response to a stimulus (as cited in Soussignan, 2002). However, Paul Harris (2004) would argue physiological indicators are not enough to determine someone's feelings. An increased heart rate could be related to fear, anxiety, and love, and therefore is not as strong of an indicator of emotion as a facial expression.



In this paper, I will specifically focus on the connection between facial and vocal expressions and emotions, and how to successfully translate this research into the classroom and apply it to motivating and engaging students. Ekman's studies (Keltner & Ekman, 2000) reveal that those who are not exposed to media or outside influences, such as a particular tribe from Papua New Guinea, still display similar facial characteristics. Ekman worked with a set of photographs to compare across cultures and found six basic emotions distinguishable through facial expressions: happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust and surprise (Keltner & Ekman, 2000). Thus, we have an innate ability to recognize emotions through body language.

### Body Language

Students reveal themselves through a silent, though expressive, mode of communication: body language. For instance, if students are tired, teachers can assess this through their students' body language, and use this information to choose an activity to follow. In this circumstance, students might need a high-energy activity, followed by a focus activity, before starting a lesson. This type of 'withitness' is crucial, not just because it develops and strengthens relationships in the classroom, but because it guides the structure of the day.

Therefore, my definition of 'withitness' would include the ability to read not only students individually and as a group, but also the ability to read ourselves. The need for teachers to be aware of their

own emotions and how they communicate to their students through body language and vocal expressions is crucial, as teachers' moods, thoughts, and feelings infect the classroom. For instance, if the teacher seems nervous and frightened on the first day of school, the students will read those cues through body language and vocal expressions and respond in kind. Just like a negative attitude is catching like any other disease, a positive energy in the room is just as infectious.

Through observations of themselves, their friends and their students, teachers can study the six basic recognizable emotions as described by Ekman (Keltner & Ekman, 2000) and practice recognizing them in context through a specific theatre structure called *image theatre*. *Image theatre* is putting an experience, a feeling, and a thought into your body. When we read images, we put them into our body and others interpret what they see (Boal, 1985). Master theatre teacher and critical pedagogue Augusto Boal utilizes image theatre as an entry point into exploring oppressions (Boal, 1985).

A great way to assess how students are feeling at the beginning of the school day, or at the start of a certain class period, is to ask the students to physicalize their current emotional state of being. This physicalization takes the form of a frozen statue capturing the heart of that feeling. It is called an *image* as it often looks like a still photograph. We can express deep thoughts, haunting memories, and outstanding dreams through a single gesture. Students create *images* with their bodies, providing their peers and teachers with a snapshot into their inner lives.

A simple image theatre activity can begin with students standing in a circle facing away from their peers. When asked how they are currently feeling, students embody that feeling into a single physical gesture and freeze like a photograph. Once students feel comfortable with their selections, the students will be asked to face forward. The facilitator can divide the class in half, and ask one half of the circle to strike their individual pose, while the other half observes their peers, calling out words and phrases that come to mind when they look at the images. Then, this activity can be reversed, so every participant is able to strike their image and also observe the images of their peers. By doing such an exercise, students find commonalities and are often surprised by their differences. Moreover, this type of activity encourages students to become critical observers through drama.

This activity lets students demonstrate their recognition of body language, and gives them a more connected understanding of the group dynamic as a whole. It also encourages students to be more in tune with their classmates. At the end of the day, or the class period, it might be revealing to repeat this activity and notice whether there are any changes to the images expressed. Has the learning environment made the students feel safer? Or perhaps are the students showing more stress, fear, and anxiety in their bodies? This activity, which utilizes an aspect of image theatre, is not only a way into the students' hearts, but it is a telling form of assessment of the learning experience. If students initially strike tired,

angry and frustrated images prior to the lesson, and following the lesson, their images transform into more positive expressions of joy, relaxation, and happiness, this would indicate whether or not the goal of creating a safe environment has been reached.

Cognitive psychologist Harald Walcott (1998) used actors to research how body movements and facial expressions are tied to emotions. Fourteen emotions were studied by observing actors in situations. There was a positive correlation between specific movements and certain expressions. This indicates that body movements, along with facial expressions, can be recognized and understood.

French educator Francois Delsarte (as cited in Huberman, Pope, & Ludwig, 1993) researched emotions and how they can be portrayed on stage. He invented a system of hand gestures that frequently reveal specific emotions. For instance, two hands facing each other palm to palm with the fingers loosely touching, often indicates hope. Delsarte's studies helped influence actors to mimic hand and body gestures, along with facial expressions, to portray an emotion to an audience.

These theories and research studies demonstrate strong connections between facial expressions, body movements, and emotions. They are extremely good indicators as to how someone might be feeling, especially with respect to the basic emotions. Therefore, it would behoove teachers to study and observe their own and other people's behaviors as part of their teacher training and learn how people interpret those movements. Not only do our physical movements affect our emotional state of mind, but they also inform our communication with one another and with an observer.

Facial expressions are not just a component of expressing emotions, but are also a form of communication (Keltner & Ekman, 2000). If someone expresses anger through an angry facial expression, another person might react physically and emotionally to that expression, whether they replicate that angry expression or respond to it with a fearful expression. Psychologists Graham, Hamblin & Feldstein (2001) conducted a study of English native and non-native speakers and found that voice has a large impact on the expression of emotions in interpersonal communication. Communications Professor Buck (1984) calls for the need to study the vocalization of emotion expression and to what degree it is innate.

Although body language gives us a good index of others' emotions, it can also be misleading. As we get older, we acquire skills to put on 'masks' and hide our true feelings, often to protect ourselves and conceal our vulnerabilities. These masks add to the complexity of our emotional display. Yet, regardless of these masks we wear, neurophysiologist and photographer Duchenne insists that we are able to tell the difference between a fake and authentic smile (as cited in Soussignan, 2002; also cited in Keltner & Ekman, 2000). If someone were delivering a genuine smile, crow's feet wrinkles would appear around the eyes and the lips would spread into a wide smile. If the smile were not authentic, the smile would only involve the lips, making the smile look less authentic. While this seems like a minute detail, we are then equipped as teachers to recognize real smiles, and those that seem to hide or possibly mask other emotions.

Moreover, it is even more difficult to identify someone's feelings through body language if they are experiencing a mixture of feelings (Harris, 1989). When we add spoken language to our body language, it becomes easier to recognize tensions between the various emotions being expressed. Naturally, how individuals express emotion varies from person to person, so any guidelines should act only as guides, rather than universal directives.

## Vocal Expressions

Most of the research literature tends to focus on human ability to perceive and recognize basic emotions through facial expressions and body language while neglecting the spoken word. Recognizing emotion in speech is just as important in understanding, perceiving, and interpreting feelings (Bachorowski, 1999). Even though facial expressions are universal in portraying basic emotions as unveiled by Ekman and Darwin (as cited in Harris, 1989), the tone, pitch, rhythm, and sound of a person's voice is often as revealing.

Graham, Hamblin & Feldstein (2001) revealed in their study that emotions could be assessed fairly accurately across cultures. Although Second Language Learners do have a more difficult time identifying the emotional meaning of vocalizations in their second language, they are still able to recognize basic emotions, just as they might be able to recognize universal facial expressions (Graham, Hamblin & Feldstein, 2001). Laughter and crying are obvious examples of innate expressions of emotions. Usually people laugh when they are amused, and cry when they are upset. The media has revealed our common expression of feeling by showing people around the world crying in situations evoking grief. Even though, at first glance, a laugh is associated with happiness and a cry associated with hurt, there are a variety of reasons why people laugh and cry. These can be distinguished by further analysing sound, pitch, rhythm and tone of voice.

Vanderbilt Associate Professor Jo-Anne Bachorowski is currently researching why men and women differ in their types of laughs in different situations. She has found that people have the ability to understand and accurately interpret emotions just by listening to various laughs, such as a singsong laugh, a snort-like laugh, a cackle laugh, and a voiceless laugh. Moreover, we are able to picture the body language that might accompany the vocalization without having to see it (Bachorowski, 1999). This directly ties to another one of Augusto Boal's activities called the *Sound Pyramid*.

This activity calls for participants to stand in different positions around the room in a pyramid formation, with one person in the back of the room, two people in front of that person, then three people in the next row, until all students are placed in a pyramid formation. All participants face forward, so that the person at the top of the pyramid in the back of the room cannot be seen by any of the other participants. This person makes a sound accompanied by a gesture that ‘fits’ that sound. After the group in front of this person hears the sound, they repeat that sound and make the gesture that innately comes to mind.

This activity is incredibly revealing in demonstrating how often we physicalize our emotions in similar ways. Every person in the pyramid mimics the sound and gesture slightly differently, but there is a commonality that ties all *images* together.

Usually a sound that expresses sorrow has a gesture that pulls the body downwards – whether the face and eyes look down, or the body retracts – this can be seen across most images. When a sound expressing joy and happiness is made, participants tend to send their energy upward, opening wide their arms and eyes. *Sound Pyramid* is a great listening activity, demonstrating to those who watch the pyramid in action how much we have in common, and yet how we each slightly express ourselves a bit differently. This gives us further insight into people’s innate and individual reactions. Students enjoy rotating to be the top of the pyramid, giving each student the opportunity to make their own unique sound and gesture and witness how it is put into the bodies of their peers in the rows in front of them.

Since language is a large component of understanding emotions, it is important to address its ambiguity. Writers of e-mail, chats, and forums, to clarify their thoughts, often need to use more language than they might in person or on the phone. This indicates audio communication is often more effective and more efficient than relying on text-based communication. Also, an alteration in tone or emphasis changes the meaning and the feeling behind a statement. For example, the phrase “come here” will sound very different depending upon the emotion behind it. If someone were angry, it would sound like a demand and might elicit a fearful response. If someone uttered the same phrase flirtatiously and lovingly, the listener might feel happy or aroused. Even though the same exact words are used, the meaning changes, and this affects the emotional reaction of both the listener as well as the speaker.

A theatre activity to explore the concept of vocal expressions combined with body language is *open scenes*.

Within an open scene structure, students pair up and receive two lines of text, one line per student. Students decide who will say what line and then create a story around those two lines. The two lines might be as follows:  
 Person 1: I’m sorry.  
 Person 2: I know.

It is incredible to see the multiple possibilities for these two lines, as students create completely different scenarios. Within each story, the lines will be said differently: different inflection, pitch, pace, tone and emotions are attached to the lines accordingly. For instance, one student pair may select to create a scene in a hospital, where person 2 might be dying, and person 1 feels blamed. Or, even in the same setting, person 1 might utter their line on a hospital bed, pass away, and person 2 might say the line at the end of the scene. While both scenes are in the same setting, the lines would be delivered completely differently as the story has shifted and intentions have changed. The scene could also be set in a school yard, where person 1, a young girl, accidentally bumps into person 2, a young boy. This scene is more of a flirtatious nature. Beyond the vocal expressions shifting, the body language and actions communicate an entirely different scenario as well. These examples demonstrate the multiplicity of this activity, underlining how verbal expressions and body language play a vital component in communicating our emotions, which feed off of our underlying stories.

I have implemented these three theatre structures in a variety of community and educational settings. It is incredible how six year olds through eighty year olds have the ability to express emotions in similar ways. From my observations, participants across age, gender, and cultural background express emotions in similar ways, while still making every gesture unique. Naturally, variances in each exercise will occur depending upon the population, however the similarities in the end result are quite striking.

Creative Director of Interface Design for Speech Works International Blade Kotelly focuses on manipulating actors’ vocal sound, pitch, rhythm, and tone to create a human and sincerely inviting voice on automated phone recordings (Perry, 2003). Speech recognition technology has drastically improved as Kotelly has brought attention to our ability to identify emotions through vocalizations. When he wants to make customers feel cared about while calling to confirm a flight, he asks his actors to read with various speed, inflection, and tone to help persuade the user to continue listening to the various automated phone options. He also notes that those

who are smiling often sound happier on the telephone, and are more engaging to a listener. Finally, a customer might be more willing to purchase an item, if he or she is made to feel happy and excited due to the interaction with the automated system (Perry, 2003).

By studying the listener's point of view toward vocal emotional expression, Blade argues that we are able to enhance speech recognition technology to make users more eager to participate due to the emotional reaction to the voice. If the recording is humorous, interactive, fun, and engaging, the customer will want to engage with the voice, and is more prone to buy. As people around the world would prefer to call a friendly and fun recording, this near-universal preference might lead customers to become loyal, spurring more business (Perry, 2003). This selling and buying notion is applicable to education. By engaging and motivating students through inviting body language and vocal expressions, we are selling education. We are inviting the students to learn and buy into the notion that learning can be extraordinary.

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Desiree Hamburger is a trained actress and K-12 certified teacher who has taught acting, playwriting and design. She was awarded her BFA in Theatre, her M.A. in Elementary Education, her Ed.M. in Arts in Education from Harvard, and is now pursuing her PhD at New York University. Her main research interests lie in infusing

## Conclusion

This research demonstrates the inherent link between vocal expressions, body language, and our ability to perceive emotional states through keen observation. Combining images, sounds, and words that we associate with emotional states helps us understand who we are individually and as a community. The ability for teachers to recognize emotions through theatre structures encourages teachers to be more critical observers and therefore help to develop their 'witnessness'. Additionally, students' 'witnessness' can be fostered through theatre structures, empowering students to be more aware of others and themselves. There is still a need for more research investigating how theatre can be used as a tool for teachers to gain deeper insight into their own lives and the lives of their students by observing the power of gesture and sound. This is just one step towards becoming a successful and engaging teacher by addressing critical awareness in the classroom, demonstrating a 'witnessness' that embraces theatre structures as a lens into the emotional states of our students.

theatre arts into teacher education programs, motivating teachers of all subject areas to use theatre structures in order to create an exciting and engaging classroom community of learners.



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