

Practical approaches to playtexts

Experiential approaches to Content Areas 4 & 5

Rationale and objective

This is basically a list and description of some practical activities that can be used to study playtexts in the topic areas in a way that ensures that studying each topic develops awareness of “the elements of performance and production” and “the social, cultural and theatrical context” (*Drama 2 Unit Syllabus*, page 16). The list is not exhaustive, and many of the activities are explained in more detail in the books listed in the bibliography.

Outcomes

Using experiential workshops, students will be able to:

- improvise around the characters, events, and issues in playtexts
- understand more about the motivations of the characters
- research and analyse characters in relation to the setting/period of the play
- use the elements of drama and the elements of production in the performance of scripted extracts and improvised scenes.

Studying a playtext

It is important that students “hear” the text as well as reading it to themselves. While it may not always be possible to study an entire text in the junior school, some of the shorter plays that are available lend themselves to improvisation and extension, and extracts from longer plays can be studied in isolation, though a summarised knowledge of the plot and the characters is necessary to put the extract in context.

In the HSC course, many of the texts are long and involved, and it is important that students understand the themes and issues, as well the development of the characters, through their reactions to the events of the play.

Less able students may need an initial guided reading to begin to achieve this. Even if they have done the right thing and read it at home, they often do not read it as a “script” but as literature. Most able students will read the play, gain insights into character and theme, and may be able to go straight into workshopping scenes in order to delve deeper into the play.

There are various ways to make a guided reading be seen as a play reading.

Use stimulus material—film, photographs, newspaper clippings, historical documents and poetry—to set the time or period or background of the play, for example, the different method of settlement of South Australia for *The Keepers*, the societal difficulties faced in Italy in the 1970s because of political policies and persecution for *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*.

If they have read the play, ask each student to write, in class, a “thumbnail” sketch of a given character and share it with the class.

As a homework activity, ask the students to study the playwright’s suggestions or directions about the setting for the play before beginning the guided reading. Ask them to sketch their interpretation of the set for an area of the drama room, using available furniture (chairs, tables, boxes).

Ask them to discuss in pairs and compare the sets they have designed, share their findings with other members of the class and choose one design which will then be set up for the play reading.

Begin a moved reading of the play, using the improvised set and the descriptive ideas of the characters. Stop at the end of a scene or event for discussion.

Set an ongoing written task that will help record and retain the action and relationships of the characters as the reading continues, for example, a column summary "Action, Characters Involved, Personal Reaction", or a character study summarising the character's action, reactions and relationship with other characters.

Ask students to research the costumes of the period, or to consider the implications for set and costumes of setting the play in another period.

Select extracts from the script for individual, pair or group performance. This will involve detailed study, which may include specific "beats", objectives and super objectives, subtext, motivation, etc. Consideration could be given to the directorial concept and related characterisation and blocking for the performance, which can be included as part of the practical component of the topic or the next examination.

Research

To extend their understanding of the play students can:

- read about historical events referred to in the play
- read about events that were occurring in the world at the time the play was set
- find pictures of houses, clothes, vehicles, tools and equipment
- listen to the music of the time
- research the social values of the time—restrictions, beliefs, morals, ethics
- find out about the philosophies of the time.

Set and costume design

Activities might include:

- sketching a set that is in keeping with the period, country and style of the play
- sketching a non-realistic set and considering how this will affect the action, the concept, the effect on the audience
- sketching the way the set would change for
 - a proscenium arch stage
 - a thrust stage
 - an arena stage
 - theatre-in-the-round.

Consider reforming scenes from the play (or the extract) in an environmental set where the scenes occur in different parts of an open space e.g. the playground, the local park, the floor of the hall.

How much would this affect the audience? How would you compensate for this?

Publicity

Activities might include:

- designing posters to be distributed around the school and in neighbouring schools and shopping centres
- designing a publicity fax to be sent to neighbouring schools and local newspapers
- preparing the layout of the program, including cover, background information and contents
- arranging interviews and publicity shots with local newspapers
- organising ticket sales and front-of-house administration.

Workshop or experiential activities

Practical exercises concentrate on plays and their characters as performance rather than as literature.

Practical exercises which, through improvisation, extend understanding of the action, motivations of the characters, understanding and skill in the form or style are intrinsic to the preparations that are undertaken as part of the rehearsal process in productions. It is essential that they be employed as tools in bringing to life any playscript or extract being studied.

There are many improvisation activities and games that can be used as "workshops". Many of those outlined below have been defined or used in the texts listed in the bibliography, all of which are extremely user-friendly.

Out scenes are scenes which are not part of the "seen" action of the play but are referred to by one or more characters during the course of the play, e.g. the situation on the train in *Can't Play? Won't Pay!*

In scenes are scenes which are part of the scripted action but can be explored further by improvisation to enhance the dramatic action and enable students to find out more about the motivations of the characters.

Methods may include:

- changing the setting to a different place or period
- replaying the scene using gibberish and concentrating on action, tone, expression
- replaying the scene using only mime
- replaying the scene using only movement to appropriate music

- changing the personality of one or more characters.

Take for example the Melbourne Theatre Company's 1996 production of *Julius Caesar*, which was set in the present day, with Mark Antony, Casca and Marcellus played by women. The eulogy speeches of Brutus and Mark Antony were set as if at a press conference, with reporters with flash cameras, video cameras, boom microphones etc.

Off stage events are events that occur off-stage during the course of the play, and

- affect the scene that is occurring in a particular way, e.g. characters react, the mood is changed, tension is added (or broken)
- affect the audience's perceptions of the events.

Consider what would happen if these events didn't occur. Improvise the possibilities. Consider what happened to make them occur. Improvise the suggestions.

In *Antigone*, for example, improvise Antigone burying her brother's body, or Haemon finding Antigone and killing himself, or finding Antigone alive and running away with her. Improvise the different ending to the play that might result from this.

Hot seating is where a group of students question the character about her/his likes, dislikes, experiences, childhood feelings, reactions, to broaden understanding and information about the character. Questions should not be too threatening or confronting and should require more than a 'yes/no' answer.

Alter ego uses monologues or dialogues from the script to explore the 'real' person beneath the character and the subtext. One person plays the role, saying the real dialogue and pausing after each line or sentence. A second person stands behind the actor as the 'alter ego' and says what the character is really thinking. (This exercise is explained very clearly on page 34 in Wendy Michael's book, *Played Upon a Stage*).

Objectives involves taking a particular scene and working out the objective of each speech by each character. Discuss this in the group then perform, with one part of the group as the actors and the other as audience who evaluate whether the objective was achieved.

Post scenes are scenes that might occur after the play, either immediately or at a later time.

- Put characters into a position where they meet after the action—next day, 10 years later—or where they recall the events for a grandchild.
- Put the characters in a situation where they discuss the final event of the play.
- Ask characters to reminisce about the decisions they made.

Interviews are when characters are interviewed by persons relevant to their status in a play. For example:

- reporters or students about their reactions to an event (or events) in the play
- a lawyer or social worker about the actions or decisions in the play
- students researching events of the past
- descendants interested in family history.

Freeze frames are used to illustrate the key moments of a scene or act:

- to re-tell the plot
- to revise key moments of scenes/act/plot.

Bibliography

The books listed below, along with many others, have lots of ideas that can be used or adapted in studying playtexts or extracts from texts with junior or senior classes.

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| <i>Played Upon a Stage</i> | Wendy Michaels (Nelson) |
| <i>Exits and Entrances</i> | Brian Keyte and Richard Baines (Nelson) |
| <i>Enter the Players</i> | Brian Keyte and Richard Baines (Nelson) |
| <i>You're On</i> | Rob Galbraith (Longman Cheshire) |
| <i>Living Drama</i> | Bruce Burton (Longman Cheshire) |
| <i>Drama Studies</i> | Mark Gauntlett and Barry O'Connor (Longman Cheshire) |
| <i>Building Plays</i> | Carole Tarlington and Wendy Michaels (Pembroke) |
| <i>The Ultimate Scene and Monologue Source Book</i> | Ed Hooks (Back Stage Books) |
| <i>Impro</i> | Keith Johnstone (Methuen) |
| <i>Acting in Person and in Style</i> | Crawford, Hurst and Lugerig (Brown & Benchmark). |

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