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Introduction

Remember when you were a kid, sitting in class listening to the teacher talk about this or that, her voice a little too monotone to maintain your interest? In the meantime, you entertained yourself by watching the hands on the clock slowly tick their way around the face. They seemed to tease the students with their rhythmic clicking dance, and at one point seemed to stop altogether for a hearty yawn and a taunting stretch. Or maybe you were one of the lucky students whose creative teacher broke the monotony of the daily lecture by showing a movie, and again, the hypnotic click, click, click of the filmstrip put you to sleep.

Some classes require that students sit in their desks each day and endure countless hours of lecturing and listening, but not the drama class. Some classes have so much data that taking notes from start to finish is — well, is almost imperative, but not the drama class. And some classes need the structure and quiet of a well-managed library, but not the drama class. The truth is, in middle and high school, there are very few lessons in theatre that require students to take notes at great length. Even those that do require the onset of writers' cramp can benefit from a balance of both intellect and action. Even at the more intense college level, good instructors recognize the necessity of creativity and action in lessons.

At some point in history, an actor — or perhaps a director — made a comparison between what children thought was fun and what actors do on stage. He must have realized that the more fun the actors were having, the more energy they seemed to have for their acting. Thus, the recipe for successfully training actors with games and fun activities was likely born. After all, what do we call that thing we perform? Oh, yes. A play.

As children, we play dress up, we sneak into our mothers' makeup drawers and draw grotesquely beautiful smiles on our faces, and we act like grownups. Later in life we begin hearing phrases like "Act your age" and "Grow up." So we do, and when we do, we forget the one element that makes learning stick. We forget to have fun. The newly born "grownup" does not see this as a handicap, for everyone else is acting grownup, too.

Then, one day you see a play performance. The actors are running up and down the stairs, in one door, out the next, speaking in wonderful

British accents. The play is *Noises Off* by Michael Frayn, and the title fits. For a short while, you forget you are watching a performance and get caught up in the antics. You laugh until your side hurts, and when the curtain comes down at the end, you clap heartily and think to yourself, “Well, that looked like fun. I wish I could be an actor.” And as you leave the theatre, you have an energetic bounce in your step that was not there before.

The Top Ten Reasons to Use Theatre Games in Your Program:

10. You or your students are burned out and need to refuel
9. Your class or cast is in a rut, no longer taking risks, stuck on a boring plane; you need a way to tap into their creativity again
8. You have a new skill you want to teach them and a game would either teach the skill or serve as a transition to the new lesson
7. The students have just learned a new skill, and now they need a way to practice it without taking the time to find, memorize, and rehearse a scene
6. Students are timid, shy, self-conscious; if you don’t loosen them up a little, they will never feel free to explore characterization, movement, expression, levels, intensity, and voice
5. Students have worked hard on a production, studying for a test, or on scenes, and they deserve a day of no-holds-barred FUN!
4. One class is getting ahead of the others and needs a way to slow down while waiting for the others to catch up
3. A number of students are absent, and to proceed with the lesson would leave them behind and cause a lengthy repetition of the same material upon their return
2. There are only a few minutes of class remaining — too little to begin a new lesson and too much for free time

And the Number 1 reason to use theatre games and other fun activities in class is ...

You are being observed by your principal or educational evaluator and need a fun, energetic, hands-on activity that will impress even the stuffiest red pen and make you look an awful lot like the next “Teacher of the Year!” (So don’t forget to use the discussion circle followed by a *Game Evaluation*.)

Many different types of people are drawn to the theatre for a countless number of reasons. Shy people act because they can boldly

become the bad guy, the vixen, or the evil stepmother. Funny people act because they can get away with acting silly, being devilish, or playing tricks on others without someone telling them to “grow up.” Those with handicaps act because there is a place for everyone on stage, and production casts are like warm, safe, tight-knit families. The class clown with too much energy acts because on stage there is rarely such a thing as “too much energy,” and his director will appreciate him. And the angry kid — you know, the one with the big chip on his shoulder — acts because the stage offers him a kind of therapy that even the best money cannot buy. Even the most grounded, level-headed, normal people act because it’s challenging, rewarding, and most of all — FUN!

Yes, acting is fun. It is energetic, and dynamic. It really is not conducive to a typical classroom filled with desks and chairs, nor will a truly active drama class fit well in the same hall as the quiet school library. Your average, everyday lecturer cannot teach theatre any more than a band teacher could teach a student to play without having a musical instrument in his hands. Granted, there are a number of facts that students of the stage must learn, so I cannot condone never taking notes. What I am saying is that every note should be balanced with a little lab work — some hands-on learning.

According to Bloom’s Taxonomy, the most basic levels of learning are knowledge and comprehension. This means students can remember and understand the information the teacher is relaying. These are basically the only two levels of learning that are being exercised when students take notes and then take a test. The higher levels of learning include application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation; in other words, students can use the knowledge (apply it), break it down into parts (analyze it) and also build from it (use it to synthesize a new whole), and lastly, they can assess its value (evaluate it). It is our job as teachers to ensure that these loftier levels of learning are taking place in our classrooms. It means our jobs will be more difficult and our creativity will be working overtime, but the rewards will be priceless.

Take theatre history, for example. It was the one unit I dreaded as a student because I knew we would have to take notes from bell to bell. Oh, and there was always that big test at the end, too. How could a teacher possibly make that fun and offer the kids some hands-on learning? Scene work and improvisation are just a couple of ways, and there are always research projects, videos, demonstrations, and more.

For the sake of this book, however, let’s talk about just the gaming end of the spectrum. Later in this book, you will read about an activity

called *Not Just Another Board Game*, that will help you teach theatre history. The students will create a life-sized board game using materials that can be found on most campuses. Not only will they learn the facts of theatre history, you can set up your game so that they actually move through “time.” You can increase the level of learning by having them take on characters, learn lines from plays, and even have cards that require them to act out scenes. In the end, they will have learned the same facts they would have using traditional note taking, plus they will have also taken advantage of their intrinsic creativity and higher thinking skills.

So you see, even those units that are not typically exciting can be fun, and learning can occur on a more advanced level than just intake. But you probably purchased this book for a different reason. More than likely, you wanted to learn about those other theatre games, right? The ones often associated with improvisation? Well, you still came to the right place. Within the covers of this guide to fun are dozens of the best-loved games, the most useful activities, and the exercises most often employed to tackle various obstacles. Each and every one is designed to make learning more exciting and to make taking the stage less intimidating. So put on your seatbelts, because this is going to be an adventure that will completely alter the geography of your lesson plans.