

An A-Z of drama conventions and techniques

This is a collection of frequently used conventions and techniques for structuring drama, simply arranged in alphabetical order. References to these techniques are frequently made in drama teaching texts, policy and curriculum documents. The conventions are not structures in themselves, they are more like the building blocks or palette that is used, alongside others, to create structures. Cookery is a useful analogy here. The list of conventions is like the list of ingredients for a recipe. It is only when the 'ingredients' are combined and subtly blended that they become a satisfying meal (montage)! I have only given here a brief definition of the most popular conventions. For further explanation of the conventions and the conventions approach to structuring see Neelands, J. (ed. Goode, T.) 1990 *Structuring Drama Work*: Cambridge University Press.

Alter-ego

This involves a student other than the one playing the character as an extension of that character. The alter-ego's main function is to express the *feelings* or 'inner speech' of the character. This convention is designed to deepen the collective understanding of how a character might be feeling about a given situation even though the character itself may not be able to express those feelings (text/sub-text). The expression of feeling may be verbal or physical. Very effective when used in conjunction with hot-seating.

Choral speak

A written text is divided up and spoken by group. Text may be dramatic or otherwise. The construction of the choral speak should comment on, or develop, the original text rather than literally follow the line divisions or allocation of lines to single characters. Particularly effective when the choral speak is part of a montage with another convention, e.g. tableau, or mime.

Circular drama

A variation on *small group drama* in which groups are given different scenes involving a central character. The groups prepare the scene and then the *teacher in role* joins each scene as the central character and improvises briefly with each group before moving on. This provides the opportunity to see the different ways in which the central character reacts in a variety of public and private contexts.

- Collective character** A character is improvised by a group of students; any one of them can speak as the character. In this way the whole class can be involved in a dialogue, for instance, by half the class taking on one of the characters involved. There doesn't need to be conformity in the responses they make; different attitudes can be given expression so that there is also dialogue between members of the collective character.
- Come on down!** Any popular game show format is used if it can either illuminate or make ironic events and characters. Chat-show formats provide an alternative form of *hot-seating*; students should identify and preserve the generic features of the game show in their work.
- Conflicting advice** Characters are offered conflicting advice as to what to do about any given situation. This can be done in character by other characters in the drama and by voices in the character's head played by other members of the group. It is possible to develop this convention by allowing the character to engage in conversation with the voices and thus challenge the advice being offered; also the voices themselves may engage in debate with the character listening in.
- Conscience alley** At a critical moment in a character's life when a dilemma, problem, or choice must be made, the character walks between two rows of students who may offer advice as the character passes. The advice may be from the students as themselves or from other characters; the advice may include lines or words spoken earlier in the drama.
- Defining space** The drama space is carefully marked out into different locations or times. A key space in the drama such as a particular room is reconstructed using available props and furniture.
- Documentary** The events of the drama are translated into a documentary format, or characters are established through documentary evidence, cf. *Citizen Kane*.
- Flashback** The relationship between the dramatic present and the past is reinforced by showing 'flashback' scenes while the present scene unfolds, or at a crucial moment a character is confronted by images of the past.
- Forum theatre** A small group act out a drama for the rest of the group as 'observers'. Both the 'performers' and the 'observers' have the right to stop the drama at any point and make suggestions as to how it might proceed; ask for it to be replayed with changes designed to bring out another point of view or focus; deepen the drama by using any of the other conventions. An important feature is that all the participants, 'performers' and 'observers', take responsibility for the crafting of the drama – the

- responsibility does not lie solely with the 'performers', in fact they are more like puppets responding to their puppeteers.
- Gestus** Students present a dramatic sequence which includes a specially loaded action or gesture – something that the audience sees which clearly relates to the broader theme or historical context of the whole performance text as well as belonging to the immediate context the students are creating. A ring that cannot be made to fit; a doll that is carelessly dropped by a negligent parent; a murderer trying to wash her hands.
- Gossip circle** The private and public behaviour of characters is commented on in the form of rumours and gossip circulating in the community; as the rumours 'spread' around the circle they become exaggerated and distorted. A useful way of identifying tensions, conflicts and contradictions for further exploration.
- Group sculpture** The group, or an individual from the group, models volunteers into a shape, usually of a non-representational nature, which expresses a particular aspect of the theme or issue being addressed. The collective creation of this 'sculpture' will force the group members to bring out their own, individual interpretation of events portrayed in the drama. This is not to be confused with *still photographs* which tend to be literal representations.
- Headlines** Statements in the style of newspaper headlines are used to focus the attention on to a particular aspect of the drama. Used with *still photographs* several headlines can be given for the same photograph in order to highlight different points of view and bias.
- Hot-seating** Characters are questioned about their values, motives, relationships and actions by other members of the group. This is a very effective rehearsal technique that helps an actor to flesh out and discover new facets of their character through the responses they make to the questions. The questioners may also be in role as witnesses, historians, detectives, etc. There can be added tension if the character is questioned at a moment of stress, or at a turning point in their lives.
- Iceberg** A reflective device in which a diagram of an iceberg is drawn. Students have to consider what is text and what is sub-text in a scene and then to note text above the waterline of the iceberg and sub-text beneath the waterline.
- Improvisation** A spontaneous acting out of a given situation in which students have to respond to the given circumstances – who, where, when, what. A prepared but unscripted performance or a situation that is prepared by one group of students which is improvised with the teacher-in-role or with volunteers from another group.

**Interviews,
interrogations**

Characters are interviewed by 'reporters' or interrogated by an authority figure in order to question their motives, values, beliefs or to elicit more facts about a given situation.

Letters

Delivered by the teacher/leader to either the whole group or to small sub-groups in order to introduce a new idea, focus or tension to the existing drama. The participants can write them both in and out of character as a means of crystallising thought or reflecting on past action.

Mantle of the expert

The major feature of this convention is that the pupils are in role as characters with specialist knowledge relevant to the situation they find themselves in. In its purest form mantle of the expert requires an approach to teaching and learning that is holistic and therefore cross-curricular; however, I have found that endowing pupils with expertise is in itself extremely powerful, motivating and empowering.

**Marking the
moment**

Allows the participants to reflect on a time within the drama in which strong reactions, emotions or feelings were felt by the individuals within the group. They are reflecting out of character and so the reactions identified are those of the participants themselves, not the characters they were playing. They use any of the other conventions suitable for sharing their moment with the rest of the group.

Meetings

The group get together in order to address some problem or to discuss information within the format of a formal meeting which may be further controlled by the local cultural circumstances of the fiction: power and status of characters, for instance. This is also very useful for the teacher to input information, create atmosphere or inject tension within the fiction rather than stopping the drama in order to do so.

Moment of truth

A technique in which the group must devise a final scene for the drama. They must engage in reflective discussion of the major events and tensions in order to create a sharp focus for the final scene.

Narration

One of the participants tells the story while the others 'act it out', or a series of scenes are linked by narrative which can either simply tell the story or, more importantly, comment on the action from a particular point of view.

**Overheard
conversations**

The group 'listen in' to 'private' conversations between characters in the drama. An interesting and challenging development of this is for the group to agree whether or not the information gained from listening in can be used in the subsequent drama or is it something they must pretend not to know. By enabling the participants to listen into a private conversation the teacher/leader can introduce a new idea, or a

- threat or problem, by creating rumour that will be interpreted in a variety of ways.
- Private property** A character is introduced, or constructed, through carefully chosen personal belongings – objects, letters, reports, costume, toys, medals, etc. The intimacy of the information gleaned from these objects may be contrasted with a character who reveals very little about themselves or who presents a contradictory self-image from that suggested by the objects – the private property forms a sub-text to the character's words and actions.
- Re-enactments** In order to examine a situation in more detail, a scene or an event that has 'already happened' may be re-enacted. If this is linked into the idea of clarification of fact or confirmation of the source of a rumour it can provide a very powerful focus for checking and confirming the whole group's growing understanding of a given situation.
- Reportage** Participants report on a situation in the style of a journalist either from within the drama in character or outside of it out of character. The journalist can work in any media form.
- Ritual and ceremony** Students create appropriate rituals and ceremonies that might be celebrated or endured by characters to mark anniversaries, cycles, initiations, belief systems, etc.
- Role on the wall** A record of a character is kept in the form of a large outline of a figure in which students might write key lines, phrases, ideas or feelings about the character. The outline is kept and re-edited as students discover more about the character.
- Small-group drama** Sub-groups of the whole class work on separate but related interpretations or developments of the major theme.
- Soundtracking** Sounds are used to create the atmosphere of the 'place' in which the drama takes place. These can be prerecorded or live and are usually, though not always, created by the participants.
- Space between** Students arrange characters so that the space between them represents the distance in their relationship to each other (how near and far apart, who is close to whom). The students can also consider the change in the space over time – will characters draw closer together or further apart? They can also try to name the distance – betrayal, fear, power, etc.
- Split-screen** Students plan two or more scenes which occur in different times and places; they then work on cutting backwards and forwards between the two scenes as in film/TV. The edit of the two scenes should be carefully prepared to maximise the links, analogies or irony between the two.
- Still photographs/ video pause** The still photo is developed to include the convention of a freeze frame or pause in the action, as if on a video recorder. This allows the group to examine a particular moment in more detail.

- Tableau** Participants create a physical image using their own bodies to represent a moment from the drama. Combined with *sound-tracking*, *thought tracking*, this convention can be used in a variety of different circumstances. Try linking two or more together as a way of developing a narrative sequence or predicting possible outcomes.
- Teacher in role** Expressed in its simplest form the teacher/leader takes part in the drama along with the other participants. Teachers often feel extremely reticent, for a variety of reasons, about joining in alongside the children but there is no doubt at all that children respond very positively indeed to their teacher becoming part of the shared act of creating a drama.
- Telephone conversations** The listeners hear either one side of the conversation only or both sides depending on the intention of their using the convention. The teacher leader can also use this to add information, develop the narrative or inject tension from within the fiction.
- This way – that way** The same scene or events can be played with different narrators; the playing of the scene will be subtly altered according to the narrator's interests and perspective.
- Thought tracking** The inner thoughts of a character are revealed either by the person adopting that role or by the others in the group. This is a particularly useful way of slowing down and deepening a drama especially if used in conjunction with *still photographs* or *tableaux*.
- Unfinished materials** The group is presented with a piece of writing, drawing, diagram, audio or video tape which is incomplete. Their task is to complete it or solve the problem of why it has not been finished.
- Venting** A variation on *thought tracking* in which students can come up and vent the feelings, emotions, confusions, ambiguities in the character's mind at that moment. Several students can vent simultaneously to create a 'dialogue' or to demonstrate different views of the character's state of mind.
- Whole-group drama** All of the participants, including, usually, the teacher/leader, are engaged in the same drama at the same time (see also *meetings*).