



Setting the Stage for a DIVERSE Audience

by Rosemary Battalio

The classroom environment is like a microcosm of the world, where students bring diverse qualities and participate in interactive improvisation.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.
—Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (II, vii, 139–43)

If, as Shakespeare said, the world is a stage, then a classroom is a microcosm of that world, with all its diversity, strife, and joy. Students—who are both audience members and actors—look to their teacher for guidance, direction, and applause each day. With words, actions, and feelings, a teacher must create and direct a story that is understandable to each student. Students enter and exit, producing a constantly changing dynamic in the daily play. Their individual characteristics, when blended together, create the soul of the play, the soul of the classroom.

The metaphor of the play is meant to be fluid, not a stagnant image in which actors are confined to the scripted word. The actors are interactive participants who improvise reactions to various situations that arise outside the script. This interactive improvisation encourages creative responses, yet honors the essence of the classroom script.

The diversity of the participants challenges the teacher to offer a script that authenticates each student as a unique human being. Some come prepared to understand the script and improvise, some can't understand the language of the play and miss subtleties of improvisational responses, some are not interested in the play at a specific moment, and some would rather act than sit in the audience. By embracing these differences, a teacher can create an atmosphere, a daily play, within which all students can receive applause for their unique performances.

Though a teacher does not know precisely what the script will be on any given day, the teacher does know his or her classroom—the stage. The classroom environment is the setting for instruction. Just as a director must set the stage for a play, a teacher must lay a strong foundation for the classroom environment. On this foundation lies some important elements: the *script*, the written basis from which directorial guidance and expectations emerge; the *production*, the play's action, the interactions among the participants and the director; and the *final soliloquy*, the play's final scene where reflection of the day's scenes are brought together to some conclusion. These elements, when combined with various techniques, help set up the classroom stage so that teachers can deal effectively with the diverse needs that arise.

Act I: The Script

Every play or production has a guiding force, such as a script or an author's vision. How does a teacher manage the different interpretations of the daily script? What can enhance understanding while allowing diversity to blossom in the classroom?

A classroom teacher, like a director, can direct students so that they have opportunities to participate in ways that provide them with spotlight moments. Unless the production is ad lib, participants expect clear and concise direction. Some participants can memorize lines and know exactly when to enter, when to say their lines, and when to wait. However, other participants need prompts or lots of practice to get it right. A teacher in the role of classroom director benefits from having a script that gives general directions to all students.

Environment of acceptance. Creating a class dynamic that is welcoming and supportive is one of the responsibilities of a teacher. This supportive atmosphere sets the groundwork for the script to include all the diverse audience members. The teacher guides the group development so that norms support the opportunity for all students to succeed.

During the first days of the school year, teachers are in an extraordinary position to set the tone for the class. They have the chance to create an atmosphere of acceptance and support (Schmuck and Schmuck 1997). Embracing audience differences through the use of gender, racial, or culturally sensitive language helps to create a welcoming atmosphere. Acceptance allows all students to take risks, try something new, or create their own roles so that they can flourish within the environment.

Rules. Every student comes from a different and personal play. Within their individual plays, potentially varying directions for performance guide their daily behaviors. With the merging of individual plays, a teacher needs to define rules and expectations for the classroom that guide student performance. Often, class expectations are vague and unspoken, but a command performance still is demanded. Established rules provide clear and concise directions for students to partake in the daily classroom script.

Having a few rules that are written in a positive manner tells students what to do and what not to do (Latham 1998; Mastropieri and Scruggs 2004; Rhode, Jenson, and Reavis 1993). Rules teach students what behaviors will gain the greatest applause. Practicing and explaining the rules the first week of school, or when any new member of the class arrives, communicates the importance of this foundational component of class functioning—the class script. Giving students positive directions eliminates any guessing on the part of the

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students as to what is acceptable. They can follow the script with fewer errors.

Consequences. Rules, in and of themselves, will not elicit positive responses in a classroom. Students need to understand that both positive and negative academic and behavioral performances have consequences. For a diverse student audience, a particular consequence can be negative for one student and positive for another. Moreover, what the teacher views as positive or negative may differ from what a particular student believes. Applause for one student may be embarrassing to another. Good grades may be celebrated or trivialized at home. Providing verbal praise may be necessary for one, but not for another. Being expelled from class may support an unwanted behavior and not punish it. Recognizing diversity among students requires an appreciation for how each student defines his or her personal standing ovation or public boo.

Routines and procedures. Stage right. Stage left. Center stage. Students can be confused, bored, inattentive, or captivated in any classroom. While some students flourish in organized commotion, others may get lost in the shuffle, frustrated by lack of structure, or bored from not knowing what to do next. At times, the demands of managing a diverse group of students can overwhelm even a master teacher.

Setting the stage for routines, such as transitioning between activities, handing in homework, retrieving books, and moving from one location to another in the classroom, provides direction that all students can follow. Practicing these required routines increases the likelihood that students will meet expectations and diminishes the chances for classroom chaos. When the level and frequency of activities increase, routines become even more imperative for maximizing academic time. Developing a routine can enhance the goal of instruction by eliminating unnecessary confusion and providing a context from which students can achieve their best (Walker, Shea, and Bauer 2004).

Act II: The Production

Entrance. As you enter the theater, an usher will ask for your ticket and perhaps guide you to your seat. Entering the classroom, students merge into a social group where their membership is acknowledged daily. At the door, the

teacher welcomes students into the classroom, reminding them that they are wanted there and providing them with a chance to share important news.

The teacher can use this opportunity to “read” each student’s mood, attitude, or demeanor, and to gain invaluable information. By “reading” students as they enter the classroom, a teacher can recognize the need for subtle changes in his or her interactions. A particular student may need more time to respond to requests, a little more personal space, or a bit more attention from the teacher. The teacher can adjust the script to meet these diverse needs, making subtle changes in directions that potentially can enhance students’ beliefs that being different creates solutions, not problems.

Movement. The director establishes the play’s movement to draw the audience into the action and the play’s meaning. A teacher can use this same technique to draw students into an academic task. Moving around the classroom, monitoring student progress, and pulling students back to the task are techniques the teacher uses to guide the action. Proximity control allows a teacher to reinforce rules, acknowledge student efforts, deliver consequences, and monitor student progress in a more personal and respectful way (Latham 1998). A teacher’s constant vigilance lets all students know that they can succeed and are not left to fend for themselves.

Applause. Every director wants the participants to receive applause for their performances. From a rousing standing ovation to a polite acknowledgment of efforts, students need recognition for their accomplishments, efforts, and successes. This recognition comes in many forms and needs to be based on each student’s unique needs. Some students may need only a teacher’s smile, others may need verbal recognition, while others may need more tangible evidence. Still others may need little beyond normal classroom feedback.

If a teacher wants students to behave in a specific way, then he or she should respond explicitly to their positive behavior. For some students, a teacher may need to acknowledge that their efforts are as important as receiving high grades. A teacher’s personal realization that applause comes in all forms and that fairness is defined by what each student needs helps create a classroom that is accepting and supportive of that teacher’s responses to student performances.

Unfortunately, too often teachers rely on reprimands or redirections to guide those who are disruptive, off-task, or inattentive. This approach puts an immediate stop to the behavior, but doesn't provide students with direction on how to modify their behavior so that it is more acceptable. Reprimands may diminish students' willingness to participate and put forth the effort to succeed in school. Therefore, finding measures that diminish these negative results is prudent.

Over the long-term, teacher praise is more effective than teacher reprimands in increasing desired behaviors (Latham 1998). These desired behaviors make the play a success for all. Think about the students who have been given the part of the "fool." They may never receive applause for positive actions, but only for those behaviors that enhance the image of the fool. Attention is attention, and if the applause they receive is for these unwanted behaviors, they will continue to behave in this fashion. Changing their role will take time, but ultimately the applause they receive will be elicited from their unique positive qualities. No one wants to be the fool all the time!

Barometer. As the audience engages in this daily play, they reveal their emotions on their faces. Their confusion, frustration, joy, dislike, and happiness are palpably displayed. Teachers can use student expressions as their barometer, as their guide to student understanding. Faces provide the clues as to whether or not instruction or expectations are being understood. Too often the audience can be so silent that a teacher may not know whether or not understanding is occurring or if confusion reigns. By watching faces that show what students are thinking or feeling, teachers are given a powerful mirror from which to gauge their instruction.

Act III: The Closing Soliloquy

As the curtain closes, teachers can write their own reviews of how well the day went. As teachers reflect on their day, they need to determine whether their direction was adequate for the day's production. They can reflect on whether students gained what they needed, who was lost, who was bored, and who was overwhelmed. For example: Did I deal with the argument between Mila and Sally evenhandedly? Did I provide Peter the support he needed from the crushing news of his parents' impending divorce? Did I explain the math concept well enough so that Juan

could solve problems on his own? Did I challenge Katasha when she looked bored? Did I give Sammy the opportunity to practice his new behavioral skill?

The process of reflecting provides teachers with opportunities to go beyond reactive modes of interaction and allows them to be systematic and thoughtful in their approaches to teaching (Glazer 2004). Reflection allows them to see each student as a separate character, a star ready to emerge. The process provides them with an opportunity to embrace the uniqueness of students and merge them into a wonderful play.

The End

Dealing with a diverse group of students takes a masterful director, one who can establish a solid foundation from which the play can arise. Setting the stage allows for diversity to flourish, for instruction to be effective, and for all students to be successful. Setting the stage also provides a solid backdrop for all students to delight in their diversity while receiving acceptance for their differences.

Teachers need to accept that the script changes subtly every day. Having a solid foundation from which the script is developed gives teachers the flexibility to deal with the action, including students' improvisations of the script. The daily production of the play is enhanced by the teacher's use of the entrance, movement, applause, and barometer so that every student, regardless of the unique and diverse qualities he or she brings to the play, has a moment in the spotlight.

Ultimately, at the end of the day, teachers evaluate their teaching and its impact on their students. They determine whether the day was a standing ovation, a polite applause, or a downright flop. Teachers have a tough job, which requires them to become insightful practitioners and reflect upon how their directions create a production of which all members can be proud. ■

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