

Stage Picture

Introducing the Tableau to Students

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Making mental images is a strong skill that helps readers increase their understanding of a text that they read. Good readers are able to make a “mental movie” that plays in their minds as they read and visualize what the words on the page described.

Tableau Drama Strategy

One arts-integrated teaching strategy that drama teaching artists use to help students make mental images is Tableau. Tableau is the theatrical technique in which actors freeze in poses that create a picture of one important moment in the play. Sometimes, in the theatre, the curtain rises and all the actors onstage are frozen in poses that create a compelling stage picture. Then, on cue, the picture—the Tableau—“comes to life” with movement and sound.

Stillness and silence are the hallmarks of Tableau, making it understandable as to why it appeals to teachers for classroom use. But to really get the most out of this drama strategy in conjunction with the reading of a story, novel, or play, student actors have to do a deeper reading, thinking, and rehearsing. They need to work like actors who explore the text and experiment with a variety of alternatives before they choose their final poses. They need to practice focus and commitment so that they pose with an expression on their faces and energy in their bodies.

The best Tableaux show evidence of comprehension of text combined with strong acting skills. The best Tableaux go far beyond mere silence and stillness.

Introducing Tableau to Students

The following is one way to introduce the drama strategy Tableau to students and increase the likelihood that they will participate productively in frozen, silent, concentrated posing.

Whole Group Tableau

Begin by engaging all students simultaneously in agreeing to pretend to be in a situation in which they will take responsibility for creating their roles.

1. With students seated at their desks or in chairs, describe a particular fictional circumstance and setting (preferably a dramatic one) that they might find themselves in. Example: Would you agree to pretend that the setting for our drama is the schoolyard and while we are out there, we sight an alien spaceship?
2. Discuss with students the possible feelings and reactions of people having this experience: If this really, truly was happening, think about how you would feel. Raise your hand if you can give me one adjective to describe how you would feel.

3. Point out to students that the kind of thinking they are doing is precisely the kind of thinking that actors have to do. They must imagine that they are in a particular pretend situation and then figure out how their characters would likely react.
4. Then ask the students to agree to pretend that a photographer snaps a photo of them in that circumstance: Would you now also agree to pretend that a photographer just happened to be there and took a photo the moment you spotted that alien spaceship?
5. Explain how you will cue the students to strike and hold their poses: "I will say 'Action - 2 - 3 - Freeze!' You freeze in your pose and hold it until I say 'Relax.'" (Note: Eventually, you all will want to improve this first Tableau by allowing students to leave the confines of their seats, but for now, do not give them permission to do so unless one of them asks specifically.)
6. Once you feel that the students are ready, cue them with "Action - 2 - 3 - Freeze!"
7. View the Tableau and then call "Relax."

Discuss the Whole Group Tableau

In that first draft of the Tableau, the students usually participate well, but they usually remain seated. Compliment them for their cooperation. But, just like actors who rehearse and rehearse their scenes, students need to work now on increasing the dramatic value of the Tableau:

1. Remind students what photographers may do to people in their photographs who do not look too interesting—crop them out.
2. Then coach the students dramatically. Explain (and demonstrate) how they can create a more interesting stage picture by
 - a. ...putting more energy into their bodies and more expression in their faces.
 - b. ...incorporating levels—posing close to the floor, mid-level, or reaching higher.
 - c. ...interacting with one another to increase the dramatic effect of the Tableau.
3. Invite the students to incorporate your dramatic coaching points and re-create the Tableau so that it is theatrically more powerful.
4. Share the following list of Tableau Excellence with students. (Reproduce it on a chart or on a whiteboard or chalkboard.)

Tableau Excellence

Actors...

...remain still or frozen.

...remain silent.

...pose with energy.

...pose with expression.

...keep their concentration.

...pose at different levels.

...choose poses that communicate the tone and mood of the text.

Revise the Whole Group Tableau

1. Once you feel that the students are ready to revise the same Tableau, cue them with “Action - 2 - 3 - Freeze!”
2. View the Tableau and then call “Relax.” (The second draft is always much stronger than the first draft.)

Reflect on the Whole Group Tableau

Refer back to the chart on Tableau Excellence and ask students to reflect on the effectiveness of their second Tableau. They can always recognize the big differences between the first one and the second one that received theatrical coaching.

This introductory Tableau activity prepares students to use this drama strategy with significant moments in the literature that they read and the historical episodes that they study. It provides them with a foundation for using Tableau productively in small groups.

Whole Group Tableau Possibilities

- People sighting an alien spaceship
- Reporters and photographers who sight a big celebrity
- Fans—both happy and angry—at a sporting event
- Tourists looking at a famous site
- People watching fireworks