The Elements of Drama

The seven ‘Elements of Drama’ used in this section are drawn from the Creative Arts K-6: Syllabus (Board of Studies, NSW, 2000) and are used to enhance the drama experience across all forms. They give us a ‘Sense of Drama’ (Poston-Anderson, 2012) and provide the tools to manipulate our engagement and approach to various drama activities and skills.

• Space
• Focus
• Contrast
• Mood
• Time
• Symbol
• Tension

A brief overview of each element and some activities to explore them individually is provided under each of the sub-sections. Activities often engage more than one element so this distinction is primarily to assist student engagement with each. Once they have gained an understanding of what the element entails, combining them in various activities is preferable.

Space
Space can be thought of in different ways. These are briefly outlined below with an example activity to assist student exploration.

**Personal Space (Individual)**
*Bubbles* – students are to find a space where they are not touching others and then crouch in a ball. They need to imagine they are in a bubble that slowly grows to a size they choose. They then need to feel all around them visualising the bubble with its shape, texture and colour. On a count from the teacher students feel their bubble grow until they have reached as far above, and to each side as possible without moving from their spot. At that point their bubble pops; this could be done in their own time or on a count from the teacher.

**Common Space (Group)**
*Exploring Space* – As the name implies, this activity encourages students to move around a defined drama space. You can vary the pace and level. Using a drum to keep the beat is beneficial as you can change the tempo retaining more control on movement.
It is important when considering this activity for common space that students are reminded to be aware of each other as they move around as well as the boundaries of the space itself.

**Shared Space (Group)**
*Playdough Pals* – in this activity, students work in pairs to ‘mould’ each other like playdough. This can be done as a charade style activity or by giving students specific characters to mould. Both students should be given a turn to mould each other.
As with the common space activity, it is crucial that students respect each other as they work together in this shared capacity. Reflecting on their feelings about the activity before and after is important for ensuring they understand this element.

**Focus**

Focus, as an element of drama, refers to the exploration of ways the attention of an audience can be drawn to certain elements of what is happening in a performance space.

*Running race* – students need to stand as if they are spectators at a running race. They need to imagine the race moves from their left to right. Students should be encouraged to show their emotion to the race progressing as well as shifting their vision. A horse race, final of a tennis match etc could also be used depending on the interest, age and experiences of the students.

Shared space is also being engaged through this activity, as students are required to move together as a cohesive group.

**Contrast**

Contrast is best introduced to students through opposites although it does not need to be limited to them. Forms such as movement, puppetry and mime can be drawn on to explore this element effectively.

*Opposites* – Students should be encouraged to move in opposite ways e.g. up/down, fast/slow. They should also be encourage to work in a shared space with another student showing opposite emotions e.g. happy/sad, excited/bored

**Literacy Hint** – Using opposites is an effective way to engage language skills and challenge older students to stretch their knowledge and understanding of adjectives.

*In the middle* – What happens in the middle should also be explored to show a more subtle understanding of contrast. Students work in small groups (minimum 3). They are asked to mime a common activity such as cleaning the house, but for each student to take a different level showing the contrast between them.

**Mood**

In drama, mood reflects our common understanding through the inclusion of a range of feelings, however they are applied to the moments in the drama experience rather than to individuals. The mood might be described as scary, light-hearted, funny etc and drama activities can be used to explore how these can be created as well as what they might entail. Soundscape is a powerful tool to assist in the creation of mood as music is often used in film and television.

*Soundscape holidays* – students work in small groups (5-6) and select or are allocated a holiday destination e.g. cruise ship, camping ground, caravan park, fancy hotel, zoo etc. As a group they have to decide on the kind of sounds that you would hear in that location as well as the mood of the holiday they wish to represent. They may, for example, choose a serene camp ground with a river bubbling and birds chirping or a camp ground with children riding bikes and a noisy highway next door. The soundscapes should go for no more than 30 seconds and be performed for their peers.
who would listen with their eyes closed. Students should be encouraged to use body percussion, their voices and everyday objects around them to make their sounds.

**Time**
We think of time primarily as time 'passing' with this concept crucial for students to understand. Activities such as estimating how long 30 seconds is are helpful in engaging students with the concept. Working with students to generate a series of three still images is an effective way to explore time and its representation through drama.

*Still Image Series (Tableaux)* – Students work in groups of 4-5 and should be given a specific focus for developing a series of three still images e.g. running race, birthday party (as if someone had taken three separate photographs). Each of the images should represent the scene at three separate points in time. For example with the running race this might be the start, an incident in the middle where a runner falls over, and the remaining runners going over the finish line. When viewing still images/tableaux, students should be asked to close their eyes between images being set to maintain the illusion of a 'photograph' series.

NB The use of tableaux is particularly good for engaging and manipulating multiple elements of drama simultaneously including focus, mood, contrast and space as well as time.

**Symbol**
Symbol in drama can refer to anything that is being used to stand for something else. This might be an object, action, event or place. It is important to remember that symbols can mean different things to different people so while using symbol as an element within drama work, it can also provide students with a greater understanding of how symbols can be interpreted and used more broadly in society.

Discussions of different objects or events and what they mean to the different students in the class is an effective way to introduce this element to students. Using images of a clown preparing themselves for performance and the associated transformation is a symbolic act, which may challenge the understanding of older students.

*Symbol central* – Students should work in groups of 3-4. All groups could work on the same symbol, or different ones could be given to each group. Nominate a symbol such as a crown (beginning with more concrete and slowly moving toward abstract symbols is advised). The group needs to improvise around that symbol.

NB Brainstorming some symbols and possible scenarios before beginning may help students to begin the improvisations more smoothly.

**Tension**
Tension is a crucial part of drama work and one of the key elements to be considered with students. Tension arises in drama when a problem is faced, by differences between characters or when other elements such as mood and focus are drawn on to create a sense of the unknown. Tension can be represented physically through movement such as tug-o-war (mimed or real) or through emotional responses.

*Lucky box Tension tableaux* – Tableaux or still images can be drawn on to show tension through reactions to certain situations. You need to prepare a number of scenarios where things aren’t what they seem (these can be in words or images) and place them
in a box. A student needs to select one of these and as in Charades show the two scenarios and their reaction. Still images should be used to allow the audience to see the reaction clearly. Examples: Pick up a stick, but realise it is a snake; find a waterhole in the desert, but find it is an illusion.

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