

## All the World's A Stage: Using Theater Games to Enhance Library Instruction

Athena Nazario, San Francisco State University

When I first began teaching library instruction sessions, my pedagogy was quite technical: focused on in-depth knowledge of remote specialized sources, using library jargon and processes, delivered by the traditional lecture-style instructional model. But over time, I found that I was faced with a growing number of students who seem to assume they have adequate research skills because they regularly use web search tools, such as the ubiquitous Google, to look for information. I determined that I required a different pedagogical approach that went beyond the traditional “lecture followed by hands-on searching” model in order to raise student awareness of their own information seeking practices. I needed to create an engaging and effective learning environment that fostered students' curiosity and creativity, while providing the tools that would include them in their own instructional process (Hensley, 2004). While traditional methods of instruction, including lecture, continue to play an important role in delivering content, teaching methods that utilize the creative arts, particularly the use of theater and improvisation, can also be an effective pedagogical tool. Actors use theater games to help stretch the imagination and keep it flexible; to develop an organic understanding and expression of the roles they play; and to use the imagination to understand the complexity of human expression. These models can be adapted to serve information literacy instruction, as both tools to expand librarian awareness of their own teaching practices, and to provide creative strategies to woo, engage, and persuade students to learn to effectively locate and utilize library and information resources.

### Theater Games As Preparation for Instruction Librarians

Many teachers and librarians have long drawn on performance techniques to enhance presentation skills in the classroom; in particular, voice and diction techniques, and rehearsal practices have proved useful (Antonelli, 2000). While the practical application of performance techniques to a librarian's practice are beneficial, the use of theater games can go one step further: they are used as educational tools to create a transformational experience for the librarian, making them better prepared to teach in the classroom because the theater games take participants out of routine comfort zones and can create a visceral experience that can make instructors aware of practices that may otherwise have gone unnoticed.

I've used theater games in workshops and presentations geared for librarians and those studying librarianship. [All were adapted from exercises in *Improvisation for the Thea-*

*ter* (Spolin, 1999), *Theater Games for the Classroom* (Spolin, 1986) and *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (Boal, 1985)]. For example, after attending a series of instruction sessions given by colleagues and watching recordings of my own library sessions, I was struck by the specialized vocabulary that all too often shaped our language and that could potentially limit accessibility to non-specialists, particularly students new to the university and unfamiliar with library practices. I observed sessions during which students were lost because they were unfamiliar with the complex vocabulary used to describe relatively simple tasks. Initially, I asked myself "How can we hold a mirror up to our own practice, so we can better serve our students?" It is difficult to clearly see our own communication/instruction habits and patterns, and even more difficult to internalize that knowledge and allow it to directly influence practice. Modified theater games can be used to bridge the gap between thought and practice.

*Improvisation for the Theater* describes several “Gibberish Exercises” designed to help actors move away from verbal communication as the primary form of communication. Using 'gibberish' moves communication beyond the use of familiar words. For example, I've used modified gibberish games in workshops with other librarians: rather than using complete gibberish, normal speech is allowed except that nonsense words need to be used in the place of words/phrases common to librarians' vocabulary, e.g., ILL, Subject Heading, Boolean Operators. Librarians participating in the workshop were broken up into small groups and each given an instruction scenario and a list of stop words for that scenario. Each librarian took a turn playing the teacher role, instructing the rest of the group (who were playing the role of composition students) how to do an advanced search for articles in the Academic Premier database. If, while teaching, instructors wanted to use one of the stop words, they instead would have to substitute the word “red” or “yellow” or “bagel.” For example, a sentence like “Use Boolean logic to construct effective searches in library databases in order to retrieve search results with citations relevant to your topic” would be said as “Use **bagel** to construct effective searches in **bagel bagel** in order to **bagel** search results with **bagel** relevant to your topic.” The “students” are asked to note the parts of the instruction that are nonsensical without the librarian language in order to identify teaching areas in which, if students are not aware of the vocabulary, actual students could become easily lost. For some, it created a cognitive dissonance, a realization that their technique may be flawed and there was a need for an adjustment (Aronson, 1997). The theater games forced us to move out of our comfort zone and decipher the diffi-

culty of the tasks that we were trying to accomplish, and simultaneously allowed us to laugh at ourselves. This exercise offered an avenue to creatively and playfully study our behaviors, and was followed by an in-depth discussion about the experience. We talked about the discomfort and challenges the exercise posed for us, which led us to reexamine the appropriate use of specialized language in a library instruction setting.

### Theater Games As a Tool in the Classroom

When I first began teaching library sessions, I was focused on delivering content rather than developing environments conducive to learning. I soon learned, however, that words or subject matter couldn't take the place of process, for it is in experiencing process that learning happens (Spolin, 1999). When I began including hands-on activities to familiarize students with library tools and information resources, I still wanted to find a process driven approach to help students grasp library concepts and information structures. I used a creative means because many of the concepts were, on the surface, self-evident, and in order to coax students at the undergraduate level to engage with the material, I wanted to have them experience it from a different vantage point. A creative approach through theater games can help to create an atmosphere in which students are willing to listen and engage, and in which the focus is switched from reluctant passive listener to active learner.

For example, I've used a theater concentration exercise to help illustrate and discuss tracing sources of information. One student is sent out of the room, while the remaining students are asked to form a circle and follow a leader through a series of movements. The movements are simple, e.g., moving hands from your side up to your shoulders or marching in place. The leader changes the movement and the group tries to match the leader's movements as quickly as they can without revealing who is leading the circle; it should be done so well that it is unclear which student is leading. When the student sent out of the room returns, he/she is asked to identify the source (the person leading the movements). If wrong, the group proceeds to follow the movements again and the individual is given several additional guesses. The game is a tricky one, requiring attention to detail and careful observation -- when there are so many possible sources, how can we trace the provenance, so we can properly evaluate the original source's authority? After a few rounds of the game, I lead the class through a series of questions about what was difficult about the game and, in parallel, what is difficult about news sources, verifying information, and identifying appropriate sources. The game raises the questions about the way we determine source. After the game we do some database searches on a current controversial topic. Students are asked to investigate the relationships between the articles. Are they using the same sources, or differing sources? Who is producing the infor-

mation and what is their intention? Beginning with the game is a playful way of encouraging attention to detail and careful observation. If students get lost in the article comparisons, as an instructor I can refer back to the shared experience of the game to re-engage students in the investigative process. The game acts as a common language for further discussion, as well as a conceptual representation of the ideas of authoritative sources and reporting.

### Conclusion

Theater games can be adapted as pedagogical tools to impact learning. Using creative arts techniques, like theater games, engage learners' reasoning skills and emotions, leading to a visceral understanding and a greater engagement with information seeking and evaluating practices. There are limitations to their use, particularly since they aren't ideal vehicles for content delivery and because the leap between the creative activities and concepts are often somewhat abstract, and thus they may require additional lecture and hands-on activity to fully develop the abstract idea engaged through theater games. But the theater games draw student interest and participation, preparing them to actively engage in learning. I'll continue to incorporate them because a collaborative creative process creates a unique shared language between instructors and students.

### References

- Antonelli, M., Kempe, J., & Sidberry, G. (2000). And now for something completely different . . . theatrical techniques for library instruction. *Research Strategies*, 17, 177-185.
- Aronson, E. (1997) Review: Back to the future retrospective review of Festinger's "A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance." *The American Journal of Psychology*, 110(1), 127-137.
- Boal, A. translated by Adrian Jackson (2002) *Games for actors and non-actors*. London: Routledge.
- Hensley, R.B. (2004). Curiosity and creativity as attributes of information literacy. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 44(1), 31-36.
- Spolin, V (1999). *Improvisation for the theater*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Spolin, V. (1986) *Theater games for the classroom: a teacher's handbook*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Further Reading**
- Boal, Augusto translated by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. (1985) *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.
- Green, M. (1995). *Releasing the imagination*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Jackson, T. (Ed.). (1993). *Learning through theatre*. London: Routledge.
- Timpson, W. M., & Burgoyne, S. (2002). *Teaching & performing: Ideas for energizing your classes*. Madison, WI: Atwood.