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TWO OLD BLACK GUYS JUST SITTING AROUND TALKING

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TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

Penumbra Theatre Company now offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes! Developed by high school teachers and curriculum consultants Kimberly Colbert and Kaye Peters, these questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12). Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact Penumbra Theatre's Education Director for more details:
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Two Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking

Overview: Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking, on the surface, is a simple play about two longtime acquaintances who meet regularly in a park. The setting is not specific; neither the park's location nor the time period is clearly established. The main characters are only vaguely identified and their relationship [swings] between friendly and adversarial. It is, therefore, up to the students to draw details out of the dialogue between the two men, rendering this play as an opportunity to explore human relationships through the lens of theater craft and its affects. It also allows students to reflect on how theater affects them personally.

The exercises in this lesson plan are designed to provoke students to consider the effects of dialogue, images and characterization in bringing the written word to life on stage. Within each theater-based strand are lessons to help students understand the play, analyze its significance and ultimately connect the text to their own lives. These are marked Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 according to Costa's Levels of Inquiry.

Unit Essential Question:

How does the craft of theater reveal and help us to understand our humanity?

Dialogue Strand:

How do words reveal a character?

Images Strand:

How do images help us understand what is not spoken?

Characterization Strand:

How is a character shaped in literature and why does it matter?

LA Standards I

C4

The student evaluates the impact of the author's decisions regarding word choice, point of view, style and literary elements.

C6

The student analyzes and evaluates the relationship between and among elements of literature: character, setting, plot, tone, rising action, climax, falling action, point of view, theme conflict and resolution.

C13

The student reads, analyzes and critiques dramatic selections by comparing and contrasting ways in which character, scene dialogue and staging contribute to the theme and dramatic effect.

Preparatory Lesson

This lesson is designed to help students establish a base for further analysis of the play. It begins with a writing exercise from the students' own experience where they know why they wrote what they did.

Guiding Question: How does dialogue help you to understand a situation?

Materials:

Students need paper and a writing utensil.

Personal Dialogue Exercise

1. Begin with a quick guided imagery exercise. Tell students to close their eyes:
2. Ask them to go back to a "typical" family dinner. There have to be at least two people present. For some students, this will be TV trays in the living room or grabbing a sandwich before heading to practice; others will visualize everyone seated around the dining room table. Any works.
3. Allow students a few seconds to get to the moment and settle in. Ask the to take a deep breath.
4. Continue the imagery. Say: Ok, someone says something. What does he or she say? Who responds? What does she or he say? Give them a moment to think. Ask students to take another deep breath to complete the exercise.
5. Students should open their eyes and write the dialogue of the dinner, building from the first exchange. Give 5-7 minutes for them to write out the dialogue. To give time to the actual dialogue, suggest that students just designate speakers by first letter of name in the left margin, followed by a colon.
6. Pair-share. Once students finish their dialogues, have them turn to someone sitting near them and share what they wrote.
 - A. Listening partner should take notes on what they think about one of the characters based on what they hear in the dialogue.
 - B. When first person has finished, partner should tell what s/he learned about the one character, citing specifics from the dialogue. The writer will take notes, but not respond. (This reduces the personal risk of the writer but gives them perspective on how their dialogue sounds to an outsider.)
7. When each student has shared her or his dialogue and gotten feedback, have students respond to what their partners said in a reflection.
 - A. Based on your writing and your partner's comments, what have you learned about yourself?

Level 2: Analyzing the effect of dialogue

1. Ask students to reflect more deeply on their experience. Write the following guiding questions on the board to include in student reflections:
 - Do you agree with partner's interpretation? Why or why not?
 - Can you see how the partner interpreted what he or she heard?
 - What was not said, but implied in the dialogue?
 - What did you as a writer learn about your family through writing the dialogue? How? (What does the language reveal?)
2. Class discussion:
 - What have students learned about dialogue?
 - What is the significance of words used? (For example, someone who talks in short sentences or uses vulgarity?)

- What is “unsaid”? What is its effect? (Students may need to first define or be given a definition of this term.)

Level 3: Personal Application

1. Give students the definition of dialogue: The lines spoken by a character or characters in a play, essay, story, or novel, especially a conversation between two characters, or a literary work that takes the form of such a discussion (http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_D.html).
 - Given this definition, what does dialogue do? Have students brainstorm as a class.
 - How does the dialogue you wrote define you as a person? How is your answer to the first question (level one) change after a deeper reflection?

Lesson Plan

LA Standards I

C4 The student evaluates the impact of the author’s decisions regarding word choice, point of view, style and literary elements.

C6 The student analyzes and evaluates the relationship between and among elements of literature: character, setting, plot, tone, rising action, climax, falling action, point of view, theme conflict and resolution.

C13 The student reads, analyzes and critiques dramatic selections by comparing and contrasting ways in which character, scene dialogue and staging contribute to the theme and dramatic effect.

Guiding Questions:

1. How do words reveal a character?
2. How do words reveal the relationship between Henry and Abe?

Warm-up Exercise: Human Atom (artslit.org)

(For those who are new to this kind of kinesthetic activity, it is helpful to test it with friends or colleagues before you introduce it to the students.)

Description: Students walk around a space and inhabit different physicalities and emotions. There are many variations of this activity – some are designed to build community, and some to enter text. Often, teachers begin with the community-building variations to warm students up before starting to add in themes, characters, and quotes from the text. Thus, Human Atom can help you to achieve multiple purposes.

Duration: About 20 min.

Procedure: The basic movement of this activity is simple. Students should walk around the space and keep the room balanced. Choose a point at the center of the room and point out that it is the “Nucleus.” All of the students in the room are the “electrons;” they will walk around the center of the nucleus, walk to a far point in the room, back to the nucleus, and then back out to another far point in the room. If the room is large and there are only a few participants, delineate a smaller space with chairs or tape.

Another option for walking around the room is for participants to picture a shape in their head and to imagine that shape is taped onto the floor around the entire room. They can trace the shape as they walk throughout the room.

During the activity it is important that none of the students talk to each other or make physical contact unless instructed. Ask the students to move around the room in random patterns, they often want to move in a continuous circle. The teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

Once the activity begins, and the students are walking around the room, you can mix any of the following activities in:

Preparation: Mapping out the various phrases you will use throughout this activity is important. Read through the text and think of different themes and/or situations you can take the students through that give a feel for the characters and their dilemmas. The following are specific phrases from the text you can use to coach the students:

Friendship: "When I say "friendship" everyone should introduce themselves to each other." Try it also in slow motion and fast forward, with the participants introducing themselves to new people each time.

Situations: Walk the participants through situations related to the text, both physical and emotional. For instance, you are an old man arriving at a park. As you enter the park you notice a group of teenagers watching you. You stop, look at them, greet them. Then you find a bench and sit down. Now get up and start walking around the room again.

Statues: "When I say a word, form a statue of that word." (Select words from the text or use the theme words above.) As the group forms statues, push them to make their statues "twice as big, now as big as you can make it" to "add levels to the room," to "increase commitment or energy."

Themes: (As students walk around the room have theme continue to move according to these instructions.)

1. Walk as someone who has love for a friend.
2. Walk as someone who has lost trust in someone close.
3. Walk as someone who has been betrayed.
4. Walk as someone who is worried about a loved one.
5. Walk as someone who is lonely.
6. Walk as someone who is prideful.

Lines: (As students move around the room, ask them to react to these lines while they continue to walk.)

1. "I loved her, you know. Loved her a whole lot."
2. "You can't tell me to leave my own bench. I was here first. This bench is mine."
3. "Yes. I was laughing at how a person could be one thing when the sun is shining and something else completely when the moon comes out."
4. "You have no idea what love or any kind of tender feeling is."
5. "We've known each other for a longtime but you never liked me."

Debrief: (It is very important for students to have the chance to reflect on what they have experienced. This can be done verbally or in written form.)

- Based on all of the experiences you had and the words you created with statues, what do you think this text might be about? How did people interpret the text differently in their statues?
- Which situation made you feel the best? Which was the most painful?
- Which words were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult? Why?

Dialogue Strand

Guiding Question: How do words reveal a character?

Level 1: Understanding dialogue:

This lesson is designed to help students understand the effects of dialogue and establish a base for further analysis of the play.

Materials: Excerpts from the play, highlighters or colored pencils, pens and paper.

Preparatory Set: Re-define dialogue. Define sub-text. Define what it means to be a friend. Next, have students should read some or all of the following pages and reflect in a journal answering the following questions:

1. What kind of people are Abe and Henry? Describe each character in detail using textual evidence to support your answer.
2. What kind of relationship do Abe and Henry have? Describe their relationship in detail using textual evidence to support your answer.

Suggested excerpts:

- Act 1, scene 1 (pp. 11-12) from Abe: “You can’t tell me . . .” to Henry: “Good. Then maybe I can read my paper in peace.”
- Act 1, scene 2 (p. 13) from beginning to Abe: “No sir, not me.”
- Act 1, scene 4 (p. 37) from Henry: “So? That’s what makes it quiet “. . . to Abe: “You’re wrong.”
- Act 2, scene 5 (p. 46) from top of the page (Henry) to Abe: “how we categorize ourselves.”
- Act 2, scene 5 (pp. 51-52) from Abe: “A while ago you said” . . . to end of scene.
- Act 2, scene 6 (pp. 60-61) from Henry: “And I’m going to let you” . . . to end of scene. (Delete stage directions for an extra challenge.)

Level 2: Analyzing the effects of dialogue:

Using their understanding of what dialogue and sub-text is and what it can reveal, students will analyze a short excerpt from the play, Two Old Black Guys Just Sitting Around Talking for what its dialogue develops with in the excerpt. This exercise should help students be more critically thoughtful in reading and hearing literature.

Preparatory Set:

Review the definitions of dialogue and subtext. Discuss the significance of dialogue and what it helps to develop in a play (character, plot).

Materials: Suggested excerpts listed above, highlighters or colored pencils, pen and paper.

Lesson:

1. (10 min) Number the excerpts from one to six (chronologically within the play) and hand out an excerpt to each student, distributing the numbers around the room.
2. Students will mark up their assigned excerpt with highlighters or pencils and note what they think the highlighted text reveals about (write on board):
 - a. character
 - b. the character’s relationship
 - c. the plot of the story
3. Have students group by number, assigning different areas of the room for each number.

4. (10 min) Once in groups, students should share their responses to the three effects of dialogue set out in #2.
5. Each group will report to the class, beginning with group one. Everyone should take notes to record the evolution of the characters.
6. Once everyone has reported, discuss how the characters developed throughout the excerpts. Guiding questions for discussion:
 - a. What is the progression of the plot revealed through the excerpts?
 - b. Do Henry and Abe care about each other? How do you know?
 - c. Why do or don't they care about each other?
 - d. How does the dialogue reveal or mask their feelings for each other?
 - e. What is the effect of what is not said (subtext)?
 - f. Where do you see in your excerpt that something is not said but implied?
7. Students will write a short reflection on what they learned about the effects of dialogue.

Level 3: Personal application

This lesson requires students to draw on what they learned about the characters and their dialogue in Level 2 and create their own written piece that utilizes some of the devices they identified in the text by adopting the personal of one of the two men in the play.

Materials: Paper and pen, excerpt from level two.

Lesson:

1. Students will choose to be either Henry or Abe and review the lines in the excerpt (Level two lesson not required but helpful).
2. Students will write a short (1-2 pages) letter in the character of Abe or Henry and addressed to themselves, the students explain why he acted as he did in the play. The writing should try to capture the character's personality, as the student interpreted it, through particular word choice and sentence structure.
3. Students will share their compositions with the class on a volunteer basis.
4. Class will discuss similarities and differences in the language and substance of the letter.
5. Finally, students will write a short explanation of the choices they made in writing the letter and why.

Character Strand

Guiding Questions:

Level 1

1. After listening and reading the dialogues, how would you describe Henry and Abe?
2. Describe some things that the two characters don't say directly but are implied in the dialogue (subtext).

Level 2

1. How does dialogue help define character in general?
2. What do we learn about the way Henry and Abe are developed through words? Through subtext?
3. How is a character shaped in literature and why does it matter?

Level 3

1. How do the words we use define our identity and/or our relationships with others?
2. Discuss the way you communicate with a person who is close to you (a relative, friend, teacher). How does what you say or don't say to each other define your relationship?

Warm-up Exercise: Character Walk (artslit.org)

(For those who are new to this kind of kinesthetic activity, it is helpful to test it with friends or colleagues before you introduce it to the students.)

Description: Students create characters by exaggerating their own movements and emotions in the way they walk around the room.

Procedure:

1. While students walk around in the Human Atom, instruct them to "Pay attention to what you do when you walk. What movements do you make? How do your hips move? Your knees? Your arms?"
2. "So, walk how you normally walk. That's a 5. Now, exaggerate something about how you normally walk. Take it up to an 8. Make it big."
3. "Now down to a 1. Do a real teeny version of what you do." Again, have students exaggerate their walk. "Take it to a 10 this time."
4. As students walk around with their exaggerated walks, encourage them now to "borrow somebody's walk. If you like their walk, steal it. Follow them around the room."
5. "Ok, now let it go and just walk. Move around the space as yourself.... I want you to think about a feeling that's going on inside of you that you're not showing right now, and I want you to walk, letting that feeling come out through your walk. It's right under the skin, whatever it is. There's something else going on that we don't know about. Move around and notice the difference. There's something else that we don't know about; there's layers of character."
6. "Take it down to a 1. Same feeling, but it's down to a 1. It's not very big; it's real tiny. But that feeling inside, it's still motivating you. Now, take it up to a 5 – more painful, more exuberant, whatever it is."
7. Have students experiment walking with different emotions. Ask them to walk the way in which certain characters in the play (Henry, Abe, and others mentioned) would walk. They can base their walks on what they have read. You can also use lines from the play to prompt the students.

Reflection: "I just want to talk for a minute about characters. There are different layers and levels of characters. There are feelings we can bring up from ourselves which bring more authenticity to the characters – emotions buried inside of us and the characters we create."

Lesson: Neutral Dialogue

In this exercise, students will use dialogue to experience the characters, Henry and Abe, in order to understand how characters are shaped by what they say.

Materials: Neutral dialogue excerpts

Procedure: Print neutral dialogues below. Remove act, scene and page numbers. Ask for 12 student volunteers to read six short dialogues in front of the class. Each pair should read their dialogue, alternating lines between each other. Students should feel free to experiment with emotions and gender. For example, students might read the dialogue as two men, then read it as a man and a woman. Or the teacher can give them emotions to consider or assign genders. After each dialogue, students should discuss the text and the subtext. Finally, return to each scene and discuss the actual context of the dialogue. Ask students to reflect in a written journal on the guiding questions.

Neutral Dialogues

Act one

scene one, pg. 5

I loved her, you know.
Loved who?
Loved her more'n I ever loved anybody in my whole life.
I still don't know what the hell it is you're talking about.
She was a good looking woman
Who?
And she loved me too.
What was that?
They were in capable of love.
What do you know about it?

scene one, pg. 7

I don't mind being all that.
I just been thinking.
It has been said more than once, but nevertheless, it bears repeating.
Is that so?
Yes.
I have another idea.
And you don't talk to me either.

scene two, pg. 16

That's right.
see.
I hope so.
I do.
Good.
May I ask you something?
Sure, go ahead, what?

Act Two

scene five, pg. 47

You're a damn liar.
I was doing business that couldn't be interrupted.
Sure. Of course.
I'm fine. I'm settled.
I don't even know why I'm talking to you like this.
Where?
Oh you'd be surprised.

pg. 49

Why?
You're just going to miss me.
Why?
You're going to miss me when I'm gone.
What you planning to do kill yourself?
No, I'm not planning to kill myself.
So what then?
You have no idea, do you . . .
Like hell you are.
Like hell I ain't.
You lying.
That's where you're wrong.

Act 2, Scene 6, pg. 53

I thought you had gone.
I went but I came back.
Why, for God's sake?
Found out I didn't like it.
What didn't you like about it?
The place.
Really?
Yeah.

Images Strand

Guiding Questions:

Level 1:

1. Where in the play do you see specific images? What are they?
2. What ideas do these images communicate?

Level 2:

1. How do images help us understand what is not spoken?
2. How do images reveal the relationship between Henry and Abe?
3. How do the interaction of images and dialogue help to establish character? Theme?

Level 3:

1. What are some symbols or images that you relate to in your own life?
2. How do these symbols or images effect or reflect personal relationships you have with others?

Warm-up exercise: Handshake Transformation (artslit.org)

(For those who are new to this kind of kinesthetic activity, it is helpful to test it with friends or colleagues before you introduce it to the students.)

Description: A great way to incorporate physicality in storytelling, creating images onstage. Partners create sculptures with their bodies in relationship to each other. This activity is an effective lead in to other body sculpture work including Entering Text activities like Sculpture Garden and the Human Atom.

Duration: 15 - 20 minutes.

Procedure: Everyone gets a partner. Tell students to shake hands, make eye contact with their partner, and freeze. Next, coach one person to slip out of the handshake while the other remains in a freeze. The person who has moved has to find a way to re-connect with the person in the freeze without altering that person's shape. The object is to change the picture of the person in the freeze by changing your shape in RELATIONSHIP to his/hers. Once you have made your shape, you freeze and the other person moves and creates a new "picture" in relationship to you. Ruth Zaporah in *Action Theater* offers ideas for side-coaching this activity, including: Make your shapes:

- spacious
- constricted, tight
- angular, twisted, knotted
- circular, round, arched
- complex, detailed

Also you might ask the participants to speed up, slow down, vary the quality of the shapes, vary the timing, increase speed "until you are moving percussively from shape to shape, responding impulsively to each other's shapes and meanings."

Music in the background can help to create a mood for the movement. You can also use lines from the play as prompts. Be sure to give students time to "digest" the images they are seeing.

Reflection:

1. How did your relation to your partner change? When were you most connected to your partner?
2. Was your shape making conscious or unconscious? What was challenging about the exercise?

3. Was there ever a point where you didn't have any ideas? What did you do in those instances?
4. How do you believe your sculptures were telling a "story?"

Variation: Apply a theme to the activity like "injustice" and ask for participants to respond to each other with this theme in mind. It's still important to get them to move quickly, responding to each other, and not think too much, even though a theme is introduced.

Stage Picture

Divide the class into three teams. Two teams will participate; one will observe. Assign an area of the room to each of the participating teams.

1. Begin by giving the group a theme, word, character or line from the play.
2. Ask players to move around each other in their space.
3. While coaching them to move, continue to remind them of the prompt.
4. Coach should randomly call, "stage picture!" At this call, players should instantly become visible to the spectators and assume a pose that reflects the prompt from the play. Players should hold their stage picture for a few seconds and move when coached to "continue." Players should always work together to make sure not only that everyone is seen, but to have their group reflect the prompt.
5. Groups should do this several times in a row then break and allow another group to become spectators.

Variations:

1. While groups are holding their stage picture, spectators can respond to it by talking about what they see or discuss how the picture reflects the text and subtext of the play.
2. Moving Stage Picture: groups stay in constant movement, keeping "visible" at all times.
3. Framing Single Player: players move in and out around each other. Coach calls the name of a single player. All other players follow this one player, keeping him or her "framed" in the picture. Coach calls, "Hold! Stage Picture!"

Reflect using guiding questions.

Word Scenes from Images

1. Students should take detailed notes on each stage picture, recording what they see and what theme or meaning they believe it might express.
2. Combine all of the words to create a "word wall."
3. Ask each student to choose their three favorite words from the wall and write them down.
4. Ask students to reflect in writing on the following:
 - a. (level 1) Rewrite the description of one stage picture using the three words in that description. How do you think that scene helps us to understand the relationship between Henry and Abe?
 - b. (level 2) Use your three words to analyze one of the scenes from stage picture. What theme or central idea was communicated? Use your specific description to support your answer. Explain how images help us to understand the relationships between characters.
 - c. (level 3) Choose one of the stage pictures about which you wrote. How does that scene represent a personal relationship you have right now. Describe that relationship and how the images you recorded represent the interaction between you and the person about whom you are thinking. Use your three words in your reflection.

Final Reflection

Paideia Seminar

Preparation

Students should answer the following questions as homework. Their answers should be in full sentences and use text as evidence to back up their opinions.

1. How does the craft of theater reveal and help us to understand our humanity?
2. How does the interaction between Abe and Henry demonstrate the way theater helps us to understand our humanity? Find a quote that supports your answer.
3. Reflect on the letter you wrote earlier in the unit. How does your letter reflect the interaction between Abe and Henry? What about your letter might you change?
4. Discuss how the play might be different if the two characters were women.
5. What is the one lesson this play can teach humankind? Explain.

Lesson:

1. Establish rules of Paideia Seminar:
 - a. Each student must have written responses to guiding questions.
 - b. Students will respect each others' opinions.
 - c. Sitting in a circle, if possible, students will self-facilitate, with the current speaker calling on the next.
 - d. Responses must remain connected to the guiding questions or in response to a point made by another student.

Teachers may require participation or offer points for participation.

At conclusion of the seminar, allow 10 minutes for students to write a reflection that summarizes their interpretation of what the play tells them about love

Sources:

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_D.html

<http://artslit.org>

Zaporah Ruth, *Action Theater, The Improvisation of Presence*

Boal Augusto *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* by Augusto Boal

Spolin Viola, *Theater Game File*