

Snapshots: A Week in the Life of a Teaching Artist, Part 1 | Elise May

FEBRUARY 6, 2015 BY [ELISE MAY](#) TEACHING ARTIST JOURNAL ALTSPACE

Sunday: NYSTEA Conference



I'm at the New York State Theatre Educators Association's 2015 Conference. My first of four sessions. Thirty eager faces saying, "Teach me, I want to learn." What a joy it is to teach high school students who choose to be in my class! I am here to teach dialects; Standard British, Cockney, Scottish and Irish. The first session is Standard British, which I maintain from the start. It is a dialect I am very comfortable with, having taught and lived in England (and having an English husband.) I have performed using all of these dialects as well.

I find that speaking in a Standard British dialect in the classroom means instant engagement with all those attending. They want to learn how to sound like me. I give them the tools to do so. I am not maintaining my stiff upper lip to deceive them; rather to prove a point. If you can maintain a dialect in conversation for two hours, you can do it in a show. It is a technique that all are capable of learning with a lot of dedication and hard work. I teach the students warm ups and sound changes. Then we work on monologues. Everyone volunteers and does really well! Near the end of the session one student asks where I was born. I drop the dialect and say Queens, New York. The

positive, boisterous reaction shows me the level of engagement the students have had. What a great way to start the year!

Monday: Different Classrooms, Different Learning?



I visit schools and classrooms that I have been teaching in for many years. The changes I see year to year and how those changes impact learning never cease to amaze me. This Monday, I was in a school where I taught four 5th grade classes. They couldn't be more different behaviorally, socially and academically. So instead of getting through my entire lesson plan in each class, I only completed my objectives in one, got through 85% in two others and really fell short in the last. The teachers didn't seem to mind. They seem to have changed what they expect to accomplish each year with their new mix of students and constant demands from the State. I really try to keep an entire grade level on the same page. I like to feel as if I am giving all students the same experience, but it doesn't always happen.

Tuesday: Pullouts and Revolving Doors

More and more, the classrooms I visit are interrupted by pull-outs. I am teaching a Bill of Rights debate unit to fifth grade classes using theatrical voice techniques, once a week

for three weeks. The teachers change the order in which I see the classes so the same students won't miss each session. Students come and go for remedial reading and/or math, OT, PT, ESL, instrument lessons, and enrichment (as if what I do isn't!) I feel as if there is a revolving door in the classroom. The teachers apologize, as if they have any control over the matter. They have mandates to deal with. Sometimes a specialist will push in to my lesson so the students can benefit. Today, I have three students enter 15 minutes after I have started and two constantly looking at the clock so they don't miss when they have to leave. Every time a student enters or exits mid-lesson, I find myself trying to figure out how I can get them up to speed. I deal with this in a fairly limited capacity; the classroom teachers deal with this all the time. I honestly don't know how they get through their curriculum.

Wednesday: Multicultural Mentors



“Sarita won’t be in class today,” I am told as I enter the classroom, “she moved back to Nicaragua.” In Multicultural Mentors, a program where high school and elementary school students create theatre through cultural exchange, students come and go. Some students come to the country and join the program already in progress; others leave the country during the year. As the program runs the course of the year, we (the ESL teachers and me) never know how many students we will have in a final production.

This is yet another lesson for me in flexibility. Today is the first session since the holiday break. Emotions are raw. Those that could went to see family and friends in their country of origin. All shared their stories. Stories of special relationships, foods and traditions bring smiles and warm understanding for some; jealousy for others.

I start an emotional recognition exercise where students have to match their faces with pictures I give them and see if they can guess what happened right before the picture was taken and try to put it into words. I call on one of the first grade students and she starts to cry. Maybe she’s crying because she is the first of the younger student called on. Maybe she can’t handle transitions well. Maybe she is worried her high school buddy will leave. Maybe she has jet lag. There are many more maybes I don’t have time to think of. One of the ESL teachers talks with the student and her high school buddy as I move on to the next student. Fortunately, none of the other students need reassuring follow the first and the rest of the exercise goes very well. When the upset student rejoins us, she is fine. I hope she will be in the program for the rest of the year.

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Thursday: Skyping Lessons



Last Spring, I received an email from a teacher in Nigeria who saw my website and wanted to teach my program in Lagos. He had no money to bring me over for a residency. I didn't have time to go or I would have looked for a grant to get there. The more he told me about his culture and how he saw the program benefitting his students, the more I knew I had to find a way to make it happen. Enter technology!

Understand that this was quite a shock for me. I am the 'anti-tech!' I don't use a lot of technology for my lessons which are experiential and tactile by nature. While we started corresponding via email, it wasn't the same as face to face contact. We started having Skype sessions where I taught him professional development and the tools and lessons for my elocution program.

Today's Skype session lasts 40 minutes (only as long as his internet minutes allow.) The school he teaches in does not have any technology which would permit me to have direct contact with his students. It has been a wonderful lesson for me in letting go. He is so passionate and respectful about the program. While I can understand and respect his culture, I haven't lived it. He has to infuse his experience and adapt my program so it meets his students' needs. I know he is doing a wonderful job! The program is now in its second term.

Friday: Character Education



So many elementary educators are asking for character education units. Today, I am in a fourth grade class using an acting exercise to get the students to feel what it is like to be on both sides of the bullying and peer pressure equation. There are four different scenarios. For each one, there is one student in the center of a circle of students.

The students in the circle start verbally trying to persuade the person in the center to join the group by doing something wrong. The person in the center has to start by listening to the group. Then they have to stand up for what's right by speaking up. With scenarios centering on hurtful words, stealing dares, returning a wallet, etc., these students were stellar. Some of the boys were far too comfortable with their role in the outer circle so when the tables were turned on them it was good to see them react with thought and care.

When the class was back in their seats, a short demonstration by one group was watched by all. The central boy spoke with a speech impediment where he swapped an “r” sound for a “w”. Eric became Ewic. A girl I was near in the audience instantly rolled her eyes and chuckled under her breath repeating “Ewic” very softly to herself. I don’t think anyone else heard or caught her reaction with what was going on so I didn’t want to bring this to the group’s attention. It was a gut level reaction on her part which left me wondering if she understood the lesson.

Saturday: Creative Readers



Saturday morning I teach an inclusive multi-sensory literacy program at my local library which I created for SEPTA (Special Education PTA.) It was hoped that children whose needs could only be met by being schooled outside the district would have an opportunity to experience a class in their community with some of their peers.

We have elementary students with physical challenges, learning challenges, some on the autism spectrum, some non-verbal and then, as it is an inclusion program, we have some whose only challenge may be to accept being in a class with special needs children. The

elementary students, for the most part, approach their theatrical tasks with abandon as they have very few inhibitions. Their high school volunteer buddies, who are there to support and model all activities, however, have a much harder time not looking at themselves or worrying what their peers may think. I am there to focus on and serve the needs of the younger students. Each week, I find myself wondering if I have done enough to address the needs of the older students as well.