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ALTSPACEEDITOR

Creative Listening | Elise May

In many classrooms sitting still and being quiet is the expectation but, to me, it is the death of a class. Certainly, there are times when I need my students to engage in listening behavior, but the key word here is 'engage'. Hearing is easy – listening takes engagement and practice.

Recently, I was teaching a storytelling unit to a class of third grade students. Each student had to retell a folktale in a minute. I needed to hear all their stories as a baseline. To try to keep them engaged as listeners, I gave them each a simple rubric to fill out; they were to tally how many storytellers they could hear, understand, smiled, etc. It quickly became apparent that these adorable children weren't listening to each other.

Some would randomly check boxes on the rubric, while others creatively doodled. Some started off with good intentions but, after the third or fourth storyteller, would start drifting off. And there were over 25 storytellers in each class! As it became increasingly apparent that these children had no idea how to engage a live audience, I shortened the time each child had for their initial presentation. I was there to teach these students the art of oral storytelling. I realized I couldn't do this without first working on listening skills.

I needed a plan. I had to get the students invested in each other's stories. I separated the class into groups of four or five. Each group had to learn all of their stories. The narrator for each story had to direct a set of three tableaux illustrating the beginning, middle and end of their folktale. All of the students in the group had to be involved in all the tableaux, even if they were part of the scenery.

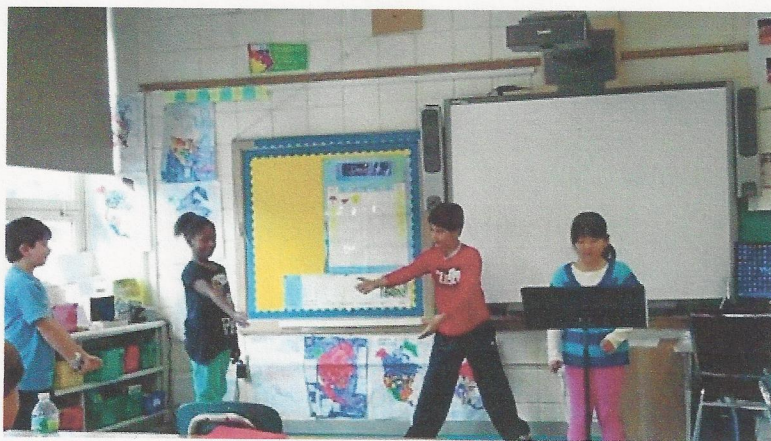
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All of a sudden, creative juices were flowing. It was empowering for each storyteller to share their story with new purpose. They had to explain the characters, emotions and actions so their classmates would help them create the tableau they wanted to see. They each had to work on a cue so their group knew when to change from one tableau to the next. This also insured their peers were listening during their narration. They didn't want their classmates just standing there unengaged. It was clear their stories meant a lot to them. Now they had a way they could express that to an audience.



During the residency, we worked on other aspects of storytelling and engaging an audience; the hook, character voices, projection and more. Rehearsals incorporated these new tools, while each group of students practiced engaged listening.


After the final presentations for parents and classmates, one of the classroom teachers shared with me how worried she was with the depth of the task I was asking her students to tackle. She bit her tongue at the time because we had worked together before and shared a lovely trust. She was amazed with the results. It enabled her to see how her students could collaborate, command attention, engage each other and really, really listen.




Elise May is a Teaching Artist who has performed and taught in the U.S., Canada, Bermuda and England. With degrees in Theatre and Communicative Disorders and Sciences, Elise has developed many educational programs using theater arts for vocal empowerment with mainstream, Special Education and ESL students. Creating interactive, multisensory programs with curricular and thematic connections allows Elise to work with school districts, libraries and corporations on performance, communications skills and community development. Her mission is for all to be heard, be understood and be confident. www.expressive-elocution.com

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