

Three Words

This game teaches improvisation, pantomime, and clear communication. It also works as an introduction to the skill of giving constructive criticism. Plus it's fun.

I invented this game on the spur of the moment, after I was prevented by circumstances from teaching the lesson I had planned for my seventh-graders. It worked so well that it is now part of my regular lesson sequence. It comes in two parts, and the first part would work perfectly well without the second.

Part One

Break the class into groups of two or three.

Each group is given the same three words. (I use "why," "sorry" and "oh." Any three words would work.)

Each group, working independently, comes up with two different short scenes, in each of which the only spoken words are the three given. The scenes can include other pantomimed communication--implying that other words are spoken, but the only audible words are those three. These are very short scenes. The two scenes should use the three words in different ways.

Here are three scenes I've seen in my class--just for example:

A man walked down the street, until he bumped into another man. "Oh, sorry," he said. The second man beat up the first man, who then looked up to heaven and cried, "Why?"

A boy was painting graffiti on a wall. A girl (It was really a boy, but he made it clear) bumped into him, saying, "Sorry." The boy looked the beautiful girl up and down and said, "Why?"--implying that he was glad she bumped into him and she needn't apologize. She understood his meaning, and said suggestively, "Oh."

One man borrowed another's watch, then accidentally dropped it. "Sorry," he said. The other man, who hadn't seen the watch drop, said, "Why?" Then when his broken watch was shown to him, he said, "Oh."

After the groups have planned their scenes, they share them with the group.

Part Two

The purpose of this part of the exercise is to give each group completely objective feedback as to how well they have communicated their scene.

Each group selects one of another group's scenes.

Each group, working independently, practices enacting their new scene, but this time they are allowed to speak as much as necessary, rather than pantomiming.

When the groups have finished rehearsing, they share their borrowed scenes.

Each group is enabled to see exactly how much of their scene was understood.

Usually I get a lot of, "No, stupid, that's not what it was about!" but I coach the students to understand that if their scene was not understood, the responsibility lies with the performers, not the audience. I use this as an introduction to talking about feedback, and the importance of communication in the theatre.

If there is time, I have the students re-create their original scenes, trying to clarify where they have learned that the scenes are not clear.

I think you could use this second part to evaluate almost any pantomime exercise.