

Circle of Characters

This is a complicated but really fun game I invented with my advanced 7th & 8th grade class. It works with older kids and adults as well, but I wouldn't try it with much younger. It probably also wouldn't work very well with groups of more than eight or ten, unless you split them up and had one group play while the other was "audience." What makes it difficult is that players must maintain a character in an improvisational setting while at the same time carefully observing others' characters.

How to Play

Each person is given an index card (or any little slip of paper will do, as long as they are all pretty much the same) on which he or she writes the name of a famous person. (Alternatively, you could have them write the name of a literary figure, or the description of a made-up character--you can set any kind of limits or guidelines you like. I generally make them show me before passing each name--not because I think they'll write something "inappropriate," but because I think they'll name someone who won't be recognizable to the whole class. For instance, I have one student who seems to have spent all of his first ten years or so in front of the television, and is always naming obscure TV actors or MTV stars no one else knows.).

The leader collects the cards and redistributes them, so that no one receives his own. (Actually, to make the game work smoothly, it is necessary to do the distribution very carefully, but not to give away the method to the participants. I'll discuss that at the end.)

Each person reads the card given her and thinks about how to "become" that character.

The leader then names a scenario. For example: "A bunch of people are gathered together at a dinner party in honor of someone's birthday. They mingle for a while, and eventually all sit down to dine around this table here, which has precisely the right number of chairs." Or: The world is about to end, and these eight people are the only ones left alive. They have a spaceship which will carry them to another galaxy, but there is no guarantee that they will find a habitable planet there. They argue and go back and forth, but eventually decide to get in this rocket ship here, which has precisely the right number of seats, arranged in a circle, since it is a flying saucer." You can make up any scenario you want, but it must end with everyone sitting or standing in a circle. It works best if there is a prescribed physical place in the acting space for this circle, as in the examples above.

The object of the game is this: As the actors begin playing out the prescribed scenario improvisationally, each is also searching for the person who is playing the character he or she named. The idea is to end up sitting in a circle so that each person is sitting directly behind (or directly to the right of) the person who is doing that person's character. (This is why the cards must be distributed carefully.) The game is over once everyone is seated, and if the order is wrong at that point, then the team loses, so an actor who thinks someone else has made a mistake and is sitting in the wrong place must resist sitting

herself until the problem has been resolved—but she must resist in character, and appropriately to the situation.

Once everyone is seated, everyone reveals their characters and it is clear whether the group has won or lost.

Pointers

Distributing the cards: Clearly this must be done carefully, or you may end up with several small circles instead of one big one. I suppose you could create a scenario that would allow this, but as the circles might be as small as two people (what if Bob gets Betty's character and Betty gets Bob's?) it is probably easier just to cook the distribution so that you ensure one single circle. There are lots of ways to do this. Since I know everyone's handwriting, I can recognize whose card is whose, and I just make sure that whoever gets the first card, it is that person's card I hand out second, and whoever gets that card, I hand their card out third, etc. This works, but of course it won't work if I TELL the class I'm doing it, because then everyone will be able to figure out by watching me who gets their card--it's the person I come to right after them! Probably a better way would be to arrange the order ahead of time and make a list—something like "Bob get's Betty's, Betty gets Allen's, Allen gets Marigold's, Marigold gets Eunice's, Eunice gets Arvide's, Arvide gets Bob's." If you are working from such a list (and you should make a new one for each time you play the game) you can hand the cards out in random order and still be ensured of a circle. It doesn't really matter HOW you do it--the point is to make sure you don't get any closed loops inside the circle. I mention the above two methods of ensuring this for those who (like me) tend to be math-impaired.

Scenarios: Below are some suggested scenarios, in addition to the two above. You will think of others.

A group of people are at an amusement park, chatting while they wait for the carousel to stop. When it does, they each select an animal to ride and get on.

A group of people has just discovered a huge treasure chest filled with gold. They may quarrel over it. As it grows dark, they decide they must guard it against theft, and the only sure way is to sleep in a circle around the chest.

A group of people are on a jury together. They have just been sent into the jury room to deliberate. They discuss the case in a haphazard way until the foreman persuades them that they should all sit down at the table.

Variations

As mentioned above, you can set any guidelines you like on the characters people may choose to write down. For example, in an English class you could have everyone write down a character from the current reading. In a History class you could have them choose

historical figures you have been studying. An advanced acting class might be asked to write a single adjective or adverb--demented, loudly, frequently, etc.--which might generate some very interesting results, as well as pointing out how vague such words really are.

If you can trust your group not to be unnecessarily cruel, try this one: Have everyone write **THEIR OWN NAME** on their card. This way, you're looking for the person who is you! This can be extremely telling and fun for a group with the maturity to handle it!