

Lighting the Match

An introduction to teaching TheatreSports™ in the classroom

TheatreSports is, and always has been, about teams of people working together in order to entertain and to build on each other's creativity. Individuals must respect each other, be willing to listen to others, to risk-take, to let go of control and to build on each other's ideas. If a player holds the mantra "Yes Let's" in their head, they will be able to achieve all of this without even trying.

We believe this simple phrase is the key not only to TheatreSports but to being a valued person in all aspects of life: work, social, personal and spiritual.

From pre-primary schools through to universities, and from juvenile justice centres to remote outback towns, the Australian Institute of TheatreSports has been exploring the uses of improvised theatre as an educational tool for over sixteen years.

Over that time we have worked with vast numbers of students of varying ages, backgrounds, skill levels, developmental levels, abilities and disabilities. Working with all these students has taught us a great deal about teaching and challenged the way we facilitate learning. The students that are seen as being at educational risk—those with behavioural problems, learning difficulties, developmental delays and so on—are the students that have taught and shaped our programme the most. Their feedback has been clear and immediate: Aboriginal students in the North-West will tend to get up and walk out of the class if they don't like what you are doing; students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder will accelerate behaviours if you do not engage them; other students will simply tell us we are boring.

If you can adjust the way you deliver the activities to retain those students, the rest of the group will gain from the learning experience. We use a variety of activities to cater for a variety of needs. The important aspect is not to take the activities as final, but to use a process of adaptation to engage all students.

Central to any student's education are the core values of commitment, respect and concern for both self and others. Working cooperatively is an essential component of these values. We must also acknowledge the importance of active and interactive learning coupled with a supportive environment that identifies different learning styles and rates. Using fun and lively activities can motivate and build skills. The wonderful thing about contemporary approaches to education is that you can, in theory, be teaching Science and meet outcomes in Maths, English, Arts, Society and Environment and Health just by the way the lesson is structured.

To address differing learning styles and varied levels of skill and intelligence, you need to start by

examining your environment and its dynamic effect on the learning process. Most teachers are well aware of the need to adjust the environment and spend a considerable amount of effort doing so. The environment of the classroom is set in many ways: the way desks are set out, the type of paraphernalia on the walls, the temperature, the lighting, who sits next to whom, the rules, the way you speak to people and the discipline system. This is great for your preferred style of teaching but if you want to step out of that style (and to meet curricular requirements with students of varying needs, you do need to vary styles), the environment you set can become your biggest barrier. Flexibility is essential to meet varied needs. This is often seen when teachers either attend our Professional Development sessions or watch us work with their students and then attempt the activities back in their classrooms. They often remark that the students did not respond in the same way—this is primarily because of the environment. You need to spend time setting the environment up to change the student’s expectations.



As we work in schools for a limited time, we will not often have complete control of the physical environment. We try to clear the area, removing desks and only using chairs occasionally when needed. We set the space up to be friendly by being in the space as students come in—for young children, we will sit on the floor, or for older students, we will be casually seated. Beyond the basics of the classroom, we do have control of the rest of the environment, including the teaching tools and the activities. We get the students to address us as Michael and Angela, we dress in casual clothes, and most importantly we undertake activities that create an ethos of risk-taking in a cooperative and caring environment.

All teachers are aware of learning styles and multiple intelligences but in reality, how much do we adjust to the differing needs and strengths of our students? Working with fringe students forces us to adjust. Aboriginal students in remote areas, on the whole, have little time for chalk and talk learning. Their lack of interest is expressed through absenteeism and misbehaviour. When we initially taught in these schools we taught in our usual manner. We quickly learnt that this was only going to be

marginally successful as the student felt “Shame” (a deeply felt and culturally specific expression of embarrassment), demonstrated in a number of forms: verbally saying, “No, this is Shame”; refusal to participate, aggression and avoidance of eye contact. A solution we have found to work well is for one of us to be a participant in each activity and to never let the student fail in the first session, although this worked against our usual methodology—we do not want students to simply mimic us. Failure and risk-taking are cornerstones of improvisation yet we needed to adapt to ensure these students were engaged; we then had to find alternative methods to develop these skills.

Teaching TheatreSports is very much like playing—it requires you to have a full understanding of the skills and basic game formats; you must listen to the participants and go with the group’s needs. It is not the kind of subject that can be taught in a strict curriculum; while we have provided outlines for how activities may work well to develop particular skills, we would stress that there is no set course; the key to successful teaching is the ability to adapt. Look at your classroom, look at how your students are reacting to the tasks before them, and decide what follows accordingly.

‘Yes Let’s’ collects many of the activities we have developed over our sixteen years of work into more than just a collection of loose-leaf folders and the vaults of our minds. In the following pages, we will explore some of the ways that TheatreSports can be used within particular social and developmental groups, and how the process of play can be used to ignite learning.

