Teaching Drama to a Group Online

By Samantha Marsden, author of 100 Acting Exercises for 8 – 18 Year Olds

With COVID19 many teachers are trying to take their drama classes into online chat room services. Below are five acting exercises from my book, 100 Acting Exercises for 8 – 18 Year Olds, that can be taught to a drama group online. But first, here's a few tips to get you through some of the common teething problems of online teaching.

Get to know your platform

Whichever video communication service you use, get to know it first. Play around with break-out rooms, and mute buttons, and investigate all the functions. One function drama teachers have found useful is when a student wants to show work, make sure everyone clicks "hide other participant when video turned off". Without this you end up looking at a grid of all participants at all times. But when it's on you can make sure that only the people you want to see are on screen. It's a way to create on stage and off stage, which is perfect when you want students to show a piece of work to the rest of the class.

Set class standards

Explain to students before the class that you expect them to dress appropriately, to be professional in the lesson despite them being at home, and also ask them to create a physical space for them to participate in the class, and state there is no sitting on beds.

Immediately get people up and moving

Students tend to lean toward using the class like a conference call, leaning into the camera, only showing their face. Break this notion straight away and get the group up on their feet and away from the camera.

Semus Allem head of acting at Read College, often starts with a game called, "Entrance/Exit," where he says "Exit" and students have to find an interesting way to leave the screen picture. When he says, "Enter" they find an interesting way to get back. He asks them to keep doing this without repeating themselves. This helps students realise the creative potential of this medium instead of focusing on the restrictions.

Encourage students to engage with the environment.

Now students are in a space with lots of random objects and clothes, they can take advantage and use this. Games can be played where students grab objects and use them. Get students moving and exploring the space, instead of sitting in-front of the camera.

Make it a safe space

Treat the online class like you would an in person class. Explain the rules and boundaries like you would in the drama class, such as treating everyone with respect, zero tolerance with bullying, and that the drama class is a safe and supportive environment where every individual is encouraged to shine.

Use breakout rooms

You can put students into smaller groups in 'breakout rooms', this way students can rehearse pieces together, either scripts, or improvisation exercises. Once students are in smaller groups (breakout rooms), they can chat, rehearse, connect with each other, and devise. As the host you can drop into breakout rooms and see how they are getting on.

Use the mute facility

Mute everyone when they join the class. If you don't, the time lag means that you can get lots of out-of-time versions of your voice coming back at you. That can be confusing and disorientating for everyone. Participants can use the "raise hand" button, or just unmute themselves if they want to speak.

Keep positive

Jenny Cameron, director at Stage door learning, explains, "In these strange times the main thing I have discovered is that young people are incredibly resilient, and if something is presented to them in a positive way, they'll go with it. I've done tutorials, 1-2-1 meetings, and fun active group sessions, and the students have embraced them wholeheartedly. It's nothing like it *should* be, but it's definitely better than not continuing!"

Ensure you have a safeguarding policy

Firstly, take all the necessary precautions to ensure your online group chat service is private, some services have better security measures than others! After this, online classes should abide by the same child protection, and safeguarding, policies you have for your in-person teaching. For example, you should have an up to date DBS check, insurance, and a written child protection policy in place. The same as you would for in person teaching.

Five Acting Exercises for the online classroom

Releasing tension while lying down

A simple relaxation exercise where students relax each body part, one body part at a time, while lying down.

Skills: Concentration, awareness, focus, relaxation, and mindfulness.

How to: Ask the students to lie on the floor with their eyes closed. If the actor starts to feel sleepy during this exercise, they should open their eyes and try to bring the energy back into the body without moving. If they really need to, they can wiggle their toes or fingers to try and wake up. Students need to try and bring their energy inwards, reclaiming it from others and different spaces, bringing their circle of attention in. Ask the students to notice their breath: is it slow, fast, steady, scattered? Is the breath in the chest, stomach or pelvic area? If it's up in the chest, or even the throat, bring the breath down so that it's lower in the body. The stomach, not the chest, should move up and down with each in- and out-breath.

Once the breath is stable, the actor can start relaxing each part of the body, one part at a time. They can start with softening the muscles in the forehead and then the eyebrows, the eyelids, the temples, the cheeks, the lips, the jaw, the tongue and any other parts of the face. It is important to spend a long time on the face as it's one of the main areas people hold tension. Once the actor has relaxed every part of the face, they can make very gentle 'blah blah' sounds, being careful to keep the tongue relaxed, as well as the face, as the sound is released.

Once the actor has finished relaxing the face, they can move onto the body. Ask the students to start with the neck, allowing it to sink into the floor. Then they should drop the shoulders, noticing where the shoulders are in contact with the floor. Ask students to try and increase the contact with the floor by loosening into the ground: imagine the upper part of the body is melting into the floor. Next ask students to bring the attention to the hands, letting the fingers, thumbs, palms and wrists melt into the ground. Talk then through working the attention up into the arms, releasing the tension from the forearm, elbow and upper arm. Now ask them to work the attention down the body, releasing the mid back and lower back, relaxing the abdominal muscles and then moving onto the lower body.

Explain that people vary – some tend to carry most of their tension in the lower body, others in the upper body, and others in isolated areas such as the eyelids or jaw. Ask students to reflect on where they hold their tension. For the relaxation of the lower body, the actor can start by wiggling their toes and then relax the toes, the feet, the calf muscles, quad muscles, hamstrings, pelvis and buttocks.

Once every part of the body has been relaxed, ask the actor to imagine energy flowing in through the feet, up the legs, through the hips, up into the upper body and face. Allow this energy to move freely through the body with no blockages of tension. Allow a good few minutes for this sensation to arise, and when it is time to stand up, make sure the students really take their time; firstly, you don't want them to get dizzy. But secondly, it's important to keep the relaxation that was just achieved in the body while standing up.

Variation: It's also possible to do this exercise standing up with the back against a wall, or standing with no support, or sitting down. If practising this exercise standing up, it's important to keep the feet hip-width apart.

The aim: For the actor to become more aware of their body and face, exploring where it is they are prone to holding tension and then releasing this.

Quess the leader

A fun warm-up game where one student leads the movement and the rest of the group follow, while another student has to guess which person is the leader.

Skills: Confidence, group awareness, and trust.

How to: Make sure all of the students are on mute as you explain the game to them. One volunteer will walk away from their camera and not look at their screen for 30 seconds. Let's call this volunteer Yulia. Once Yulia cannot see, or hear, what the group is doing, another volunteer is chosen by the teacher. Let's call him Brad, Brad will wave at the camera, so everyone is familiar with who he is. The whole class must know that Brad is now the leader and they will have to follow his movements, but in a way that means Yulia cannot detect who the leader is.

Once Yulia returns, she watches everyone on the screen. Brad will very slowly and carefully start moving, perhaps bringing one arm up or tilting his head. The whole group will copy his movement, and the whole group will hopefully appear as if they are moving as one. Yulia has to try and guess who the leader is; she only gets three guesses. Brad can move as he likes, but he will find that the slower the movements, the less likely he is to get found out by Yulia.

The aim: For students to become aware of their own movements and the movements of the group.

8 Hot-seating

An exploratory exercise to help students create characters.

Skills: Communicative skills, intuition, listening, spontaneity, creating a character, imagination and character building.

How to: Ask for a volunteer who will be on the hot seat. They can either sit on a chair, or on the floor, as their hot seat. If you are working on a play, or scripts, in the class, these characters can be used in this exercise. If you're not working on anything in class, students can choose any character they want. This could be a character from a book, a film, or a made-up character.

Ask the student in the hot seat to think about their character and all of their given circumstances, including their age, name, job (if they have one), place that they live, their friends, family, likes, dislikes, fears and wants. Explain that the actor can make up all of this information and that there is no right or wrong in this exercise. The volunteer in the hot seat then answers questions from the audience in character. Explain that they are not to come out of character and that if they don't know the answer to a question, they can either make an answer up or say while still in character that they don't know. The audience can ask any questions they like to try and get to know the character. Standard questions are great, such as 'Do you have any brothers or sisters?' 'What's your favourite food?' and 'Where do you live?'. Also encourage students to ask a wider set of questions. For example, they could ask, 'Where did you grow up?' 'How would you describe yourself in three words?' and 'What are your weaknesses?' Ask students to avoid saying 'I don't know', and instead encourage them to quickly make up an answer.

Variation: It's also possible to play this game in pairs instead of putting students on a hot seat in front of the whole class. Pair work is more suited to a timid class. This can be done online by breaking students out into rooms.

The aim: To encourage students to think about the many different sides to the character they are playing and to build up a background, backstory and deeper understanding of who their character is.

4 Sharing videos

Ask students to film themselves performing a monologue, poem, sonnet, or a piece they may have even written themselves. Have them email it to you and provide feedback. This may be a good option for students (or whose parents), don't feel comfortable with them using online group chat services. You can ask students to get creative with their short films. Ask them to experiment with camera ankles, editing, sound effects, music underscores, and costumes. Perhaps they might even want to share their work with the class.

6 Adding tension to create character

An exercise where students add tension to the body to create a character through physicalization.

Skills: Creating a character, awareness and movement.

How to: First, do a short relaxation exercise. Then, once students have cleared their bodies of tension and are as neutral as possible, ask them to walk slowly around their room. If it's only a small space that's ok, walking in tiny circles is fine. Ask them to become aware of their bodies and if there is any tension, ask them to release that tension. The students should be aiming for a neutral walk free from tension and mannerisms. Now ask the students to add tension to one part of their body, or face, and to walk around maintaining that tension. The shoulders might be a good place to begin. There's no need to overact this and for students to instantly lift their shoulders up to their ears; the imagined tension can be subtle.

The actor walks around with tension in the shoulders and imagines a character who has tension in this part of the body. Perhaps the character is someone who works at a computer all day. If so what does this character do at the computer: accounts, testing video games, or something else? After a few minutes of creating this character, ask the students to shake it out and walk around in a neutral position again.

Now add tension to another part of the body, perhaps the jaw, lips, neck, fists, forehead, hips or eyebrows. If it's the jaw, for example, then ask why this character holds tension there; is it because they are frustrated with life? Or are they someone who feels they have to keep quiet when really they want to speak out. Once some experimenting has happened, ask the students to shake it out, walk in neutral and then try another place of tension.

Variation one: It can be fun to add a tension to a character. Give out a short scene before the class and ask students to apply one tension to one part of the body for the character they are playing. If the below script from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* were used, the person playing Alice, for example, may want to play her with the tension in the hands. The person playing the hatter could play him with tension in the shoulders. The person playing the hare could play him with tension in the lips. And the person playing the dormouse could play him with tension in the nose. These are just examples; it's up to the actor to decide where, or if, they play any tension in the body. Put students into break out rooms so that they can work on the below script while experimenting with tensions.

Alice in Wonderland

Written by Lewis Carroll, adapted by Samantha Marsden.

Hare and Hatter: No room, no room!

Alice: There is room!

Hare: Have some lemonade ... Oh, there isn't any! (Laughs)

Alice: Then it wasn't very polite of you to offer it.

Hare: It wasn't very polite of you to sit down without being invited.

Hatter: Your hair wants cutting!

Alice: You shouldn't make personal remarks. It's very rude.

Hatter: Why is a raven like a writing-desk?

Alice: I believe I can guess that.

Hare: Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?

Alice: Yes.

Hare: Then you should say what you mean.

Alice: I do! At least I mean what I say. That's the same thing you know.

Hatter: Not the same thing a bit! You might as well say that I see what I eat is the same thing as I eat what I see.

Hare: You might as well say I like what I get is the same as I get what I like.

Dormouse: (In his sleep) You might as well say that I breathe when I sleep is the same as I sleep when I breathe!

Hatter: What day of the month is it?

Alice: The fourth.

Hatter: (Looks at his pocket watch) Two days wrong! (Angry at Hare) I told you butter wouldn't suit the works.

Hare: It was the best butter. (Mumbles)

Hatter: Yes, but some crumbs must have got in as well, you shouldn't have put it in with the bread knife.

Hatter takes a look at his watch and dips it into his tea.

Hare: It was the best butter you know.

Hatter: The dormouse is asleep again. Have you guessed the riddle yet?

Alice: No, have you got the answer?

Hatter: I haven't the slightest idea!

Hare: Nor I.

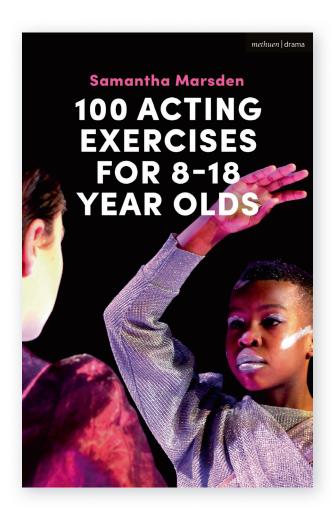
Hatter: (Sings) Twinkle, twinkle, little bat! How I wonder what you're at! Up above the world you fly like a tea tray in the sky.

Twinkle, twinkle ...

Dormouse: (In his sleep) Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle ...

Once the students have had about ten to fifteen minutes to rehearse the script in break out rooms, have them show their work to the rest of the class. The audience can guess where each actor has chosen to place the tension.

Tip: When adding a tension to the body, encourage students to isolate that area and to try to only allow that one area to become tense. This can take some practice!



The exercises have been adapted from the book 100 Acting Exercises for 8 – 18 Year Olds for the online classroom. There are many more exercises in the book that can be used to teach online too.

Thank you so much to the drama teachers who spoke to me about their experience of teaching drama online so that I was better able to put this feature together. With gratitude and thanks to:

- Seamus Allen, Head of Acting at Read College.
- Toby Clarke Director, Writer, Acting Coach, and Olivier Award Nominated for "Wait, what?".
- Michelle Smith, Artistic Director, Theatre for Life.
- · Andrew Whyment, Artistic Director, Squint.
- Jenny Cameron, Director at Stagedoor Learning.
- David Lloyd, Founder and Co-Artistic Director for Next Generation Youth Theatre.

About the author

Samantha Marsden studied method acting at The Method Studio in London. She went on to study Drama, Applied Theatre and Education at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. She worked as a freelance drama teacher for eleven years at theatre companies, youth theatres, private schools, state schools, special schools and weekend theatre schools. In 2012 she set up her own youth theatre, which quickly grew into one of the largest regional youth theatres in the country.

She also writes for The Stage and is the author of the recent 100 Acting Exercises for 8-18 Year Olds, which you can purchase from Bloomsbury.