DRAMA SCRIPTS
FOR PEOPLE WITH
SPECIAL NEEDS
Group members are referred to as ‘he’ and the group facilitator as ‘she’ in the text, for purposes of clarity alone.
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INTRODUCTION

This book contains a drama toolkit of adaptable scripts, workshop breakdowns and activities. Its aim is to build confidence in those wanting to use drama with their particular group of people with special needs, or, for those already experienced, to inspire them with a library of ideas designed to assist their creative lessons.

Each script has been fully worked with groups of varying ages and abilities, and often includes notes of experience — documenting sessions where the unexpected happened and how it was handled. As with any group of people with special needs, getting to know their needs is paramount in order to plan the drama for their specific requirements. However, the scripts and workshop breakdowns included in this book are guaranteed to work even at a first meeting.

A few notes before starting the drama

Begin and end each drama session with a related song, poem or activity. This "bookends" the drama nicely and is important as it helps to establish what is "playtime" and what is real. Any song or poem will do, but the Explanation of Activities chapter contains various suggestions, including Copy Mime Circle, Freeze As and a suggested Opening Meet and Greet Song or Goodbye Song. A short discussion just prior to the final song, poem or activity is also beneficial as it gives the group members a chance to discuss what they enjoyed (or didn’t) about the drama, which is useful feedback for you in planning future sessions. Preparation is vital for a successful workshop.

If visiting a group for the first time, try and arrange a preliminary meeting to discuss individual needs; look at the space to be used and talk about expectations. Limit the number of group members to between 6 and 12. Although this is not always possible, I find this bracket an ideal number as it provides both a personal and collective drama
experience. The drama sessions themselves should be no longer than one hour. Any more than this without a break and the group (not to mention the leader) can get very tired.

To start planning any drama workshop, brainstorm and write down any ideas that come to mind. These notes are a good reference point should the workshop turn out to be inappropriate, or in need of modification for another group with different needs.

When working with a group over multiple sessions, one approach is to spend the first lesson leading the group through the entire drama (although this is not always possible with longer dramas such as the ‘Macbeth’ workshop breakdown). This may feel like a whirlwind trip, but can give the group an idea of what to expect. Each future session is then spent recapping and breaking the drama down, exploring and developing each stage of the journey more deeply. Another approach is to discover the drama slowly, keeping the group in suspense as the story gains momentum.

If the group is particularly nervous or needs additional sensory guidance, introduce the props and costumes for the drama beforehand, passing them around for the participants to touch and explore while discussing what characters might use them. Spend a preliminary session dressing up as these characters and practising key phrases of dialogue, incorporating (if available) electronic communication devices or vocal aids. Aside from building confidence, this process also helps to gain group members’ permission to participate in the drama. This is important: asking a simple question, such as ‘Would you like to meet them?’ or ‘Should we go and see what they’re up to?’, and accepting the answer (see the ‘Professor Wafflepuff’ script for further advice on what to do when the answer is ‘No’) helps to empower the participants’ decision-making and places value on their choices.

Avoid wearing busy or bright clothing as it can distract the participants. Tie long hair away, wear minimal jewellery and no perfume as it can interfere with the senses you are trying to stimulate.

Start building a ‘drama box’ full of useful props and costumes. Some handy props include a mirror, feathers, confetti, a water spray bottle, soft balls, balloons, animal snap cards (see the Explanation of Activities chapter for ways to use these), different coloured scarves and music to dance to. Start to explore textures by rubbing different materials against your cheeks and the back of your hand. This helps you to discover their sensation and was how I discovered that bubble-wrap makes an ideal whale!
INTRODUCTION

Setting up the space

A circle is the traditional formation for a drama session, using either mats or chairs to define the space. This initial circle is also a safety mechanism, giving the group a visual grounding to come back to should the drama take an unexpected turn. It also provides a space for some to watch the drama, if the idea of joining in is too overwhelming.

NOTE: Don’t be afraid to stop the drama at any time and come back to this formation. It often helps to review the drama and reiterate that it is pretend. This can be important if the group is scared or confused by changing roles or if you feel the drama is getting too off track.

For a group with limited mobility, or in a limited space, keep the participants in a circle and bring the drama to them. If the group is used to working in a particular arrangement, for example a traditional classroom setting, there is nothing to stop you from continuing to use this formation, adapting the drama to the space available.

A large hall is wonderful to play in. It can provide space to explore the marketplace in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ (with different stands in different corners) or to create an ice-skating rink on a beautiful frozen lake. However, as a new or large space may upset some participants, still define the circle/safe area as mentioned above, possibly having it in one corner of the hall.

If you are preparing a workshop for presentation, practise in the presentation space as much as possible. Define a backstage area with chairs for participants to return to, show them the area where you can be found during the performance and mark points on the stage with tape as ‘visual cues’ for the cast to stand on to say their lines.

Presentation rather than performance

In traditional theatre, the job of the actor is to create a memorable experience for the audience. When using drama as a learning tool, the emphasis should be on creating a memorable experience for the participants. I don’t discourage the showing of work, as it is an extremely valuable way of giving a group a sense of purpose and challenge. The rewards are tremendous for those that perform; however, the sense of failure for those that can’t, can be equally immense. This is why I deliberately don’t use the words performance or actor. There should be no sense of guilt attached to those who do not wish to stand up in front of an audience.
I have substituted the word performance with presentation, and actor with participant. Group members can participate in the drama even if it is only during the rehearsal stage. Alternatively, they might feel empowered to take on the role of playing the background music or opening the curtains. All of these roles within the drama are invaluable and should be treated as such; hence, if a curtain call is required (and it invariably is), give these background participants their own acknowledgement. In presentations involving those with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), the emphasis should still be on giving participants a worthwhile experience, and there is nothing more fascinating to watch than a staged drama workshop.

Please don’t act

As mentioned, the role of the teacher or leader within the workshops is not to direct or act, but to facilitate a dramatic experience for the group. The aim is to demonstrate roles within the script, not to show off acting skills. Actually, full-blown performing is to be discouraged as it can overwhelm the group and remember, you are there for their experience, not your own!

The best way to describe this facilitating is to think of a ringleader in the circus. A ringleader has the freedom to observe the action or interact within the drama, taking on various responsibilities as necessary. Even in a presentation situation with an audience watching, there’s nothing to stop you from leading the drama in this way. During one memorable presentation we even had the audience sing the Opening Meet and Greet Song with us!

NOTE: Personally I love including the audience in drama presentations, for example, if using ‘The Operation’ script for a presentation, have the doctor ask the audience the question ‘Do we need this?’

Taking on a role

Roleplay is an extremely powerful tool. It allows participants to make choices, exploring situations and relationships with an emotional safety net. It is not them making mistakes, but their character within the drama.

The objective of taking on a role is either to move the drama forward or to demonstrate that particular role before the participants present it themselves. Demonstrating can be as simple as saying ‘I’m going to put this coat on and say “Dear me!” Would you like to have a go?’ This process of demonstration can be repeated as often as necessary.
INTRODUCTION

If casting for a presentation, add an extra role for yourself. For example, in the ‘Training Day’ script, cast the Postman from the group and have yourself as an assistant to help guide, with questions such as ‘Shall we train them up now? Shall I go and see if McHungry is ready for his/her letter now?’, etc.

Dropping role is just as simple. By removing the visual cue of the hat or coat, you can resume any needed teacher or leader duties before returning to the drama. The participants never perceive this ‘stepping outside of’ or ‘dropping role’ as wrong or inappropriate, and it is a good way to observe the group’s responses, to guide them further, or to deal with any problems as they may occur.

Occasionally members of the group can get very nervous at the thought of meeting a new character. Before introducing the role, return to the circle and ask them to choose the character’s costume. Add a bit of humour by getting confused about how the costume should be worn, for example, if they suggest wearing a cape around your neck, put it around your waist asking ‘Is this my neck? No? So where is my neck then?’ Repeat this process with other parts of the body. Get them to continue building the character by deciding if the voice should be loud or quiet. Ask them what sort of things your character might say before telling them you are going to practise. Having the group make each character decision will usually stop any apprehension. Return to the drama by reiterating that it is pretend and asking them if they’d like to pretend with you.

NOTE: For a full breakdown on introducing a scary character, see the ‘Dragon Sleep’ script.

A note on using puppets

Groups respond very well to puppets. Participants who have difficulty in making eye contact will often engage fully with a puppet. They are also a good way to explore cause and effect. For example, putting a finger in the puppet’s eye will hurt the puppet and therefore demonstrate safely that it’s not a good thing to do. Even the sound of a puppet’s speech gagging when fingers are shoved into its mouth helps to illustrate this. Another benefit is that it allows you to continue the drama while keeping one eye focused on the group.

Time often needs to be spent introducing the concept of a puppet. Don’t worry if the drama stops while the group members explore where the hand goes, how the mouth moves, even passing the puppet around for them all to explore. If the puppet is too much of a distraction first time around, put it away and carry on with the drama as another character. When I first introduced the Goosey puppet in ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’, there was a lot of excitement and
some participants were even scared of him. However, over the four weeks of workshops, I gradually reintroduced him and the group became very protective of both the character and the actual puppet.

Puppets don’t have to be elaborate. Finger puppets, a simple sock with stuck-on eyes, or even a picture on a stick can be used. In fact, picture sticks are great to give to each participant playing a particular character. Best of all, you don’t need to be a master puppeteer to use them.

And finally

None of these scripts or workshop breakdowns need to be learnt word-perfect, and they can be worked through with the pages in front of you. However, any text or story presented in a bland way will be uninspiring for the pupils, not to mention yourself. Energy and fun are the key to any drama session.

Continually repeat dialogue and use the participants’ names as often as possible to help personalise the drama. Don’t rush, as individuals with special needs often have slower reaction times. Repeat key phrases, their names, any sensory stimulus and allow time for participants to respond.

Learn to adapt your vocabulary. Replacing phrases such as ‘No, that’s wrong’ with ‘That’s an interesting choice’ or ‘I’ve never seen it done like that before’ will help to value their decisions and may even develop drama possibilities not even considered!

Sometimes the group will want to discuss things that are not related to the workshop. Stopping them from doing so could make them feel as if their ideas in general are not valued, but at the same time, they shouldn’t get too distracted from the drama. Therefore, other stock phrases can include ‘Thanks for telling me’ or ‘Can you remember that and tell me later?’ Alternatively, if the distraction is too major for them to be able to participate fully, give the problem over to a helper. (This also applies for any traumas related to taking on a role, as mentioned earlier.)

Over the years, when leading drama workshops, having helpers to keep an eye on the participants for any problems or to join in and encourage individuals has been my most valuable resource. Discuss with regular carers or helpers what they would like their role within the drama to be (passive observer or fully interactive participant) and ask their advice on the best way of informing you of potential problems during the workshop. (I have often been unaware of a participant needing changing or having a seizure because the carer has handled it perfectly.) When visiting a group, conflicts do sometimes arise.
Occasionally I have had altercations with people who have had very specific ideas about what drama should be and how a group should be managed. Try and commit them to your way of leading the workshop and allow for a feedback or follow-up time, as no contradictions should occur during the drama session.

Lastly, don’t panic if all goes disastrously wrong. One very memorable catastrophe of my own involved a group of autistic boys: I was assured they were very capable and I discovered the opposite to be true. They were unprepared for a new environment and I was just unprepared. All I remember is coming away from that session with future knowledge of what not to do!

It is all a learning curve, and remember, there are no absolutes in drama. No right or wrong. Just endless choices. So have fun!