

YEAR NINE ENGLISH**LESSON PLAN 7****THE STEP PROCESS A PHYSICAL APPROACH
TO TEXT INTERPRETATION****DURATION: 40 minutes****CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

STRAND	Language	Literature	Literacy
SUB-STRAND	Expressing and developing ideas	Examining Literature	Interpreting, analyzing and evaluating and Interacting with Others
CURRICULUM CONTENT	(ACELA1557)	(ACELT1637)	(ACELY1744) (ACELY1811)

RATIONALE

One of the primary poetical devices employed by Shakespeare is iambic pentameter. The world renowned Royal Shakespeare Company voice coach Cicely Berry proposes that iambic pentameter then and now is rhythmically close to everyday speech patterns (Berry C 1987 P. 52).

In order to understand Shakespeare's compact, densely figurative and inverted language devices and structures it is helpful to explore each one of the components of his dramatic verse. Students have already familiarized themselves with some of his most frequently employed devices such as metaphor, simile, pun and historical/cultural associations.

Now it is time to engage in the task of interpreting the dramatic verse. As Berry says, "...you have to speak the text out loud and feel the movement of the language..." (P. 52). The Step Process is a cumulative series of

exercises which allows students to engage in a singular experiential exploration of the separate layers of Shakespeare's language, and to progress towards a sound comprehension of what the characters are saying, and a fluency in reading their dialogue.

Text cited: Berry, Cicely 1987 *The Actor and his Text* Harrap Ltd UK

REQUIREMENTS

As these exercises involve students 'walking' the words of the text desks and chairs will need to be moved in order to provide sufficient floor space.

It is possible to do this exercise tapping the hands back and forth against a desktop, but for maximum kinesthetic experience walking the text is the most effective.

If it is possible to provide students with photocopies of the text with large font and double spacing it makes reading the text while being active easier. The blank spaces on the page also clearly indicate that this is a working document requiring notations and decoding marks as a part of the cumulative process in which the student is engaged. The text for the purposes of this approach is not literature nor is it a script requiring performance. It is a working text ready for exploration.

The final Orchestration exercises work most effectively when students can rest their printed text on upright music stands. This enables them to stand straight in the room, balanced forward in a half-step braced stance to energize their work, and to freely engage their arms in 'conducting' the energy of the words. The exercise can be achieved placing printed material on desks or even on chairs – but this interrupts the ability to stand straight, 'in alignment', to use a practice-led term. If you cannot access music stands take care to encourage students, where possible, to adjust their eye-line and posture to standing straight in the space as much as possible.

LESSON EXERCISES

EXERCISE 1: STEPPING OUT THE SENSE STRESS

In the previous exercises, students have learned to speak the text in an exaggerated iambic rhythm. As they have progressed through each exercise, they have also developed a more detailed understanding of exactly what they are saying with the words. Now it is time to support that understanding with a rhythmic embodiment arising from the sense of the text.

As with previous iterations, students continue to turn back and forth on each thought change, but now, rather than simply stepping out the ‘da dum da dum da dum’ iambic stress, now they step out the stress of the meaning of the words.

Now they work through their text and again, letting their legs do the thinking, they place a stress or unstressed step on the syllables according to the sense of what they are saying.

Sometimes they may be speaking in a quite pronounced iambic rhythm; other times they may shift into trochaic, most often they will be somewhere in between. What I mean by this is that the amount of stress that they place on each syllable will vary according to the meaning of the word and the associations that underlie that word. For example, the word ‘punch’ might be expected to evoke a stronger step-stress than the word ‘feather’ or ‘touch’.

TIP: Characters who speak in trochaic stress generally tend to be in a difficult position. They are often feeling threatened, or are caught in the

act of lying or confessing, or are reluctant to speak – hence the halting, regressive energy that we have previously noted in stepping out a trochaic rhythm.

Students should seek to quicken their rate of speaking to more match the intent of their meaning. Let their legs and their stepping keep pace with their words.

At the same time, they need to remember that they are exploring, not performing, and so they always have permission to pause, go back, and work their way through alternative options where interpretive ‘where-does-the-stress-lie’ questions arise.

TIP: Remember, for every syllable, there is a step. Sometimes that means your steps have to move very quickly. Other times, quite slowly. Your feet are stamping out the shifting beat and rhythms of the sense. It is an implicit and embedded soundtrack to the meaning of the words.

The important thing is that students are engaged in a highly detailed process of interpretive decision-making. They should be encouraged, and be prepared to explore, to make mistakes, and to step by step, come into a detailed embodied and experiential understanding of the meaning of their text.

EXERCISE 2: FINDING THE MOVEMENT WITHIN THE SENSE.

Now that students are more familiar with the notion and activity of stepping out the sense of what they are saying – now they can turn their focus to the shifting rhythms and energy of that sense. Basically, what this means is that they need to go looking for the words or syllables that

seem to soar or lift them up onto their toes. They need to find the moments of stamping heavily into the floor. They need to find when they speed up or slow down. When the energy from the end of one thought propels them through a thought change and whips them into the next spoken thought – or when that energy from the previous thought causes a hiatus; causes them to float and pause through the thought change and meander into the next spoken thought. All of these shifts in energy are driven by the meaning coming from the words.

There are no ‘right’ answers to what can be found in this exercise. It is like putting on a simple piece of music and asking everyone to dance. As many people as there are in the room are as many different dance styles to be had in response to the same piece of music. The students must rely on their ‘feeling’ of the meaning of what they are saying; responding to the words from their own associations – and searching out the ‘dance’ of energy from the sense of those words.

The only ‘right’ answer is to explore.

Keep using the change of direction on thought changes to break the text into bite-sized phrases of energy. There is a kinetic energy that accumulates through the thought changes and which we will discover becomes irrevocably powerful when we progress to ‘sense blocks’.

EXERCISE 3: THE STEP PROCESS: LEARNING ORCHESTRATION

From the moment students began breaking their text into thoughts they were engaged in the step process.

Now we are approaching the final stages of this system for exploring a full bodied experience of Shakespeare's textual meaning.

But before we progress onto that final stage we need to learn a technique which I have called 'Orchestration'.

This is where students will need the music stands if they are available.

The music stand assists in the idea of playing the music of Shakespeare's words. Of conducting the movement of those words as though they were notes - musical notes that just happen to be spoken language.

Have the students choose any random favourite song of their choice.

Again, for the purposes of personalization, it is important that the student choose a song that has some meaning to them.

By having everyone explore the exercise at once, the group noise and experience helps to obviate self-consciousness.

Orchestration simply requires that students 'conduct' the words of their chosen song as they sing, or speak it, in the rhythm or melody of that song.

Students should be encouraged to involve not just their arms, but their hands and fingers in a full-bodied passionate conducting of the words and syllables and movement of their song. The lifts and soars and hovers; the crashes and charges and swoops; the pitch changes and rhythm changes.

TIP: Sometimes to assist them to grow in size and confidence it helps to have students sing or speak the song in 'hissper' – that is a hissed whisper – no vocal vibrations. Because the hissper does not have the

energy of the song, the body tries to compensate by increasing the commitment and size of conducting. If hisser is used, and once students actions have become more bold, it is a good idea to then call out “Go back onto full voice” to enable an unchecked transition of energy into the voiced version of the exercise. In many institutional situations, students have to learn that it is OK to be loud and robust.

EXERCISE 4: ORCHESTRATING THE TEXT

The final stage of the Step Process has the students conduct the speaking of their text. Now they have within their bodies a sense of the thought changes; of the stressed syllables arising from the sense of what the words are saying; of the changing energy arising from those stresses – the rises and falls; the speed-ups and slow-downs; the soars and hiatuses; and the charges and poundings. Now they conduct all of that as they read out loud their text.

TIP: At this point students may well want to change the position of thought changes; do away with some thought changes and add in new ones. They should be encouraged to do so. They are in an ongoing exploratory process – not performing.

TIP: It helps to have students stand with their preferred leg forward in a step-stance. This brings their energy forward and helps to commit to a robust engagement with the energy of the text.

TIP: It is a useful game to have students work in pairs, facing each other across the music stands, and reading out loud alternative lines of the text. Both students continue conducting even when they are not

speaking. This helps build a confidence, but also begins to discover a style called ‘single voice’ – which will be explained in later lessons.

For the moment, it is enough that students feel they can read the text and make sense of it. They have broken it up into very small interdependent components. They have identified and explored unfamiliar words and definitions, and made them more familiar. They have found and voiced their own associations to unfamiliar historical and cultural references. They have broken the text up into single thoughts; discovered and embodied the iambic pulse that beats under all of Shakespeare’s verse; and then they have used that rhythmic stress process to bring the sense of the words up out of that backbeat. And in so doing they have discovered the physical energy of the words.

Now they need to conduct that energy as if they were conducting a huge heavy metal (or whatever music genre they prefer) orchestra of their choice. Conducting the music of the meaning of Shakespeare’s text.

Let them be loud enough to be heard across the other side of the school.