

Cresence Birder's Students in Ninth Grade English Class Using Diagrams to Visualize Stage Action While Reading a Play

I teach at a suburban independent school where the ninth grade English curriculum dives headfirst into teaching writing as a process. During a unit on reading and writing drama, after reading a few short plays, my freshman students were each assigned to write their own ten minute play. This is no easy task! The brainstorming alone requires significant time and thought, followed by a dedicated period of writing and revision.



As my students were developing ideas for plot and characters in their plays, I was inspired by a note taking strategy in the “Reading, Performing, and Writing Drama” chapter, which suggested that students, when reading a play, “draw a diagram of the set, or create charts with arrows, boxes, and circles” (215). As a visual learner, I imagined how much easier it would be for me to understand the action of a play through incorporating this type of activity into my reading, drawing the stage itself, and adding in the blocking with arrows, symbols, and other appropriate drawings. Tapping into this sensibility, I generated a new, related assignment, providing students with a visual component to their playwriting process. Using basic printer paper, I created a handout with four simple, large boxes meant to represent the stage over the course of each student’s play from beginning to end. After writing a bit about their ideas for characters and conflict, students were asked to draw the blocking of the key moments in their plot into the boxes as a homework assignment.

Though the concept was initially tricky, my students caught on quickly, and had a lot of fun with the drawings. Students considered use of stage space and props as they further developed their plot, and worked through the logistics of blocking as they created their drawings. The assignment, though small, was an effective way for students not only to consider what happens in the storyline of their play, but how those events take place physically. Drawing the blocking ahead of the writing also helped to ensure that the plot was based in action rather than stillness, which has the potential to feel stagnant and uninteresting on stage.

One student even commented, “Blocking the scenes in our plays helped me envision each scene. This enabled me to find ways of producing more action in the play.” For many students, including this type of activity in the brainstorming process dynamically shaped the idea of the plot in their heads to fit the stage; drawing some of the more significant moments of blocking helped to reveal what ideas were most realistic and doable in a theatre space, and which ideas would be far-fetched or perhaps better suited for film. Also, this assignment provided students with an opportunity to process their thoughts visually. The drawing element of the blocking assignment - even if students just sketched boxes, arrows, and stick figures - catered towards those with a more visual or kinesthetic learning style. One student was particularly grateful for this, stating, “As an extremely visual learner, drawing and illustrating specific details allow me to both enhance and project an image from my head onto my paper.”

Given that this assignment was designed to give students another platform for brainstorming the writing of their plays, I did not formally evaluate the work. I view the assignment as a success, acknowledging that it was a vehicle towards the completion of a much larger project. Student

feedback for the activity was largely positive, and the kids seemed to enjoy the process of generating the drawings.

If I were to replicate this type of assignment in the future, I would approach the process similarly, but first give students a few samples to analyze before creating their own blocking drawings. I also could have students complete a practice round together on the board, talking through how to visually represent movement, props, and other elements of the assignment as a class. In addition, students could even discuss ideas in pairs, deciding how many boxes they need for the assignment together (maybe three instead of four, for example). This would also give students an opportunity to bounce ideas off one another, giving suggestions and asking questions as needed. There are endless ways in which I could customize this assignment again for future classes, and I look forward to exploring this activity further.

Cresence Birder
The Bishop's School
January 14, 2018