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PRACTICE

Scenes from a Crowded Classroom: Teaching Theatrical Blocking in English Language Arts

LEAH A. ZUIDEMA

One of the greatest challenges of teaching plays in English language arts courses is the fact that scripts are intended for the stage, not the page. While the plots, themes, and dialogue of the best scripts are ripe for intensive literary study, careful attention to dramatic elements—including casting, costuming, lighting, and blocking—can further enhance students' understanding and engagement. But English language arts courses are not theatre courses, and often, resources for bringing plays to life through performance are severely limited. It is the rare English language arts class that has access to a full stage, costumes, props, and lights—let alone time for staging activities and an instructor with the training and confidence to engage a room full of non-actors in a theatrical performance.

Despite these challenges, it is essential to help students gain a basic understanding of blocking (i.e., the positioning and movement of actors): what it is, how it is guided by the script, and how it can advance the plot and intensify the experience of the play for the audience. These lessons are especially important in introductory courses, as it is often the case that students will have seen and read few plays, and some will not have had any experiences as theatre goers. Because of their lack of familiarity with plays as a genre, these students often overlook important textual cues

that could help them in visualizing the action of the play. This is problematic, as the cognitive work of visualization is a stepping stone to comprehension: practiced readers use visualization to help them understand, make connections with, and interpret literary texts (Wilhelm, 2008). Teaching about blocking is an effective way to help students visualize the action of the play as they read. Ultimately, visualization lessons focused on blocking can help readers to be more skilled in independently understanding, interpreting, and responding to plays.

The short lesson series shared in this article takes into account these contextual considerations. Additionally, teachers aligning curriculum with the Common Core State Standards may be interested to note that this lesson sequence can also help students to achieve CCSS targets for reading literature in grades 6-12, which call at each level for students to “read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems...[in their appropriate grade level’s] text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range” (2014). I have used variations on this lesson sequence with high school students in grades 9-12, and more recently this sequence has played an important role in my introductory literature course for college students. As might be expected, these lessons have

taken place in somewhat crowded classrooms, typically with about 35 students per section and little room to move about. The lesson sequence continues to evolve each year with small changes and additions, often inspired by students' suggestions about “what else” we should do in our study of blocking.

Setting the Stage: Curricular Context

Most recently, I have taught these lessons in conjunction with class study of Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice* (trans. 2009). However, I have also used variations on the sequence with more contemporary plays. These lessons on blocking are not the sole focus of our study of any play; rather, they are interspersed with the other activities and discussions that also unfold our understanding of and response to the text. The lessons work best when they focus on scenes from the play in which attention to blocking helps to illuminate the characters' actions and motives.

Identifying these scenes takes a bit of imagination: I read the play in advance with my students' eyes, watching for the moments where the words themselves are easy to understand, and yet the conversation is tricky to follow unless the reader visualizes how the actors are arranged on the stage and interact physically with one another.

These lessons emphasize how blocking functions as a dramatic convention—that is, how the actors’ positioning and movement across the stage function as signifiers that the audience is meant to read in “agreed upon” ways. Since the idea of convention is foundational, it is helpful if the lessons build from prior discussions of the form and function of other conventions in literature and drama.

During the class period before students begin reading the play independently, we explore several conventions for writing and reading scripts. We examine the list of *dramatis personae* together, and I ask questions that prompt students to note characters’ roles, determine their relationships, and make predictions about possible conflicts that could arise in the play. We look at the system for numbering acts and scenes, and I show students how to quote and cite excerpts from the script in their written commentaries. We note the playwright’s description of the setting and, as appropriate, consult maps and timelines as we hypothesize about how the setting might affect characters’ attitudes, beliefs, and actions.

Students learn to identify stage directions, and those class who have worked from scripts before explain terms like *exeunt*. We find examples of stage directions in the script and think aloud together about the degree to which the playwright does or does not provide direction for blocking and action. (For more regarding conventions in plays and how to read them, see Hayman, 1999.) Taken together, this discussion about conventions in the script helps to prepare the class for study of blocking as dramatic convention.

Taking the Stage: The Lesson Sequence

An outline of the blocking-focused segments from each of our five acts of study for *Othello* is offered here as an illustration of how a lesson sequence on blocking can work (perhaps with other plays) in an English language arts course. For this unit, class periods were 75 minutes long and, as noted previously, also included other discussions and activities.

Prologue: Blocking as Interpretation for Directors and Readers

Following brief class discussion of students’ prior knowledge of Shakespeare and *Othello*, we delve into the exploration of script conventions, as described previously. Our first look at conventions for blocking is a viewing of a performance, and it works concurrently with students’ first look at the plot: in class, we watch the opening of director Oliver Parker’s (1995) film interpretation of *Othello*, starring Laurence Fishburne, Kenneth Branagh, and Irene Jacob. Our class viewing occurs before we start reading, and it corresponds roughly to the first two scenes from the play (though Parker also incorporates glimpses from later scenes in his screening of 1.1-1.2).

Posing questions that guide the class in understanding the plot, characters’ motivations, and conflicts, I also offer observations and ask questions that draw students’ attention to the director’s choices about blocking. For example, near the beginning of the film, Iago and Roderigo walk together until they pause under Brabantio’s window—where Iago (but not Roderigo) is obscured from Brabantio’s view by a wide pole and the cover of darkness. We examine the same passage in the text (1.1), and I think aloud about how Parker as

a director has already made some interpretive choices where other options were possible. Although there is no specific stage direction to indicate that Iago and Roderigo are walking as they speak the first 75 lines, Parker’s choice to have them walk while talking seems consistent with the note about the setting (a street) and with the stage direction for the two to enter. Furthermore, the dialogue also guides Parker’s choice: Roderigo observes, “Here is her father’s house; I’ll call aloud” (1.1.76). It seems likely that his reason for saying aloud that the house is “here” is because the two characters have just come upon the house—not because they have been standing outside of it throughout and Iago has failed to notice it. Drawing students into the conversation, I help them to notice that both the stage directions and the dialogue guide the actors’ movement and positioning.

Additionally, the director’s discretion plays a role: although there is no indication in the stage directions or dialogue that Iago should be hidden behind a pole, Parker’s choice works with the dialogue and helps to draw attention to Iago’s control and manipulation of Roderigo for his own purposes. Of course, understanding Iago’s manipulative control of Roderigo is easier to see after one has already read or seen the full play—and I note this to students as well so that they understand that I noticed this not because I am the teacher or an expert reader, but because I am “reading against memory” from a prior viewing/reading of the play (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998).

Near the end of this first lesson, students are asked to reflect on our reading for the day and to note what it suggests about how they should read independently. Through guided discussion, they come to see that theirs is an

active role: as readers, they will need not only to attend carefully to the dialogue, but also to use their imagination to visualize the scenes. In essence, to better understand the play and appreciate how it works, they will need to read like directors, using their skills in inference-making, visualization, and interpretation to bring the play to life in their minds' eyes.

Acts I-III: Rules of Notice for Directors, Actors, and Readers

Because so much of the first lesson centers on blocking and occurs before students begin reading the play independently, the focus changes following students' reading of Acts I-III. Much more time during these lessons is devoted to teaching students to identify "rules of notice"—the clues that help us in "determining what constitutes importance" (Rabinowitz & Smith, 1998, p. 55).

Students

build a list of rules of notice for identifying lines that are particularly revelatory in regards to characterization and to development of conflicts and themes. As we find examples of such passages (e.g., plot pivot points, soliloquies, and passages that repeat words and ideas), a few volunteer actors read the lines and move about the "stage"—the cleared space at the front of our classroom.

The remaining students ("directors") draw from their interpretations to

coach the actors about how to deliver the lines, and we discuss how actors' positioning and movement on the stage can add emphasis to key ideas. In this way, our discussion of blocking dovetails with our attention to the lines we have identified through our work with rules of notice.

Drawing out ideas from students who are familiar with theatre, I lead a brief discussion of conventions for blocking and lighting that can be used to draw extra attention to actors during their delivery of especially

Act IV: Blocking for Dramatic Irony

By the time we study the fourth act of *Othello*, the class has had several different kinds of discussions, including conversations about Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony. At this point, students are ready to consider how dramatic irony and blocking may be connected. This lesson focuses on another passage that may be confusing to readers—unless they are able to visualize the blocking and the action.

In particular, the selected passage

is one where readers need to understand that the playwright wants the audience to have a different understanding of events from what the characters know. For our study of *Othello*, we use 4.1.53-224.

The lesson begins with a short inquiry session prompting students to reflect on

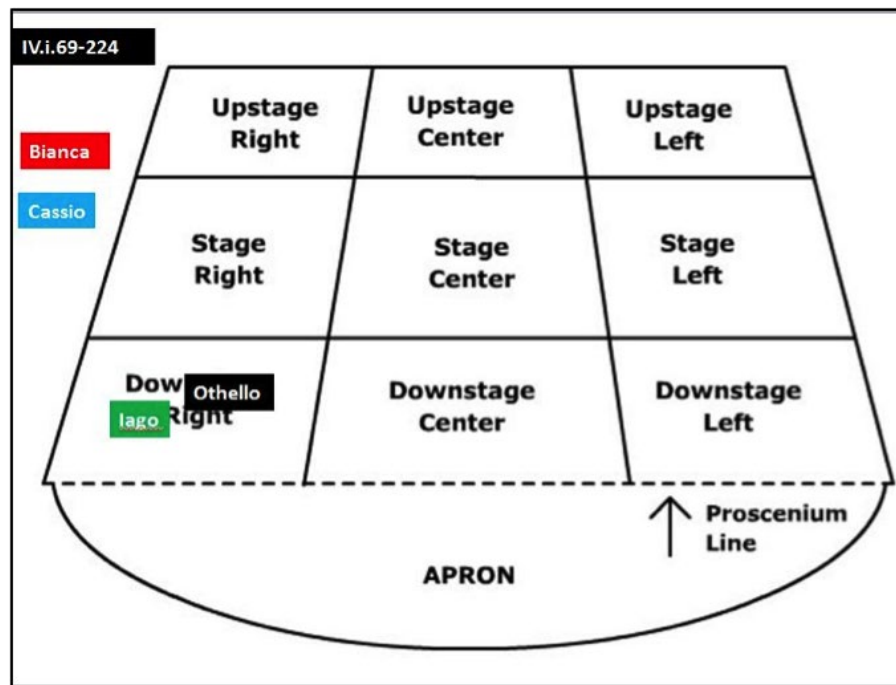


Figure 1. Stage Diagram with Character Markers

significant lines. (Take for example Wilder's (1938) *Our Town*, where blocking and lighting can be used to draw audience attention primarily to the narrator, even when other characters are on stage.) For reinforcement, students view slides showing a photo of a proscenium arch and a diagram of the stage; during these lessons, students practice stage directions and use phrases such as "Move downstage right" as they guide the volunteer actors.

the affordances of dramatic irony: why might a playwright want to create "a discrepancy between a character's perception and what the audience knows to be true" (Murfin & Ray, 2003, "Dramatic Irony")?

Following this conversation about purposes for dramatic irony, we discuss Shakespeare's methods for achieving dramatic irony. After reviewing other techniques we have discussed up to this point in the play, we consider how the

physicality of the stage may help to build dramatic irony—and especially how blocking may be used to expose actions or dialogue to the audience while hiding them from characters. The conversation begins with a question for students to consider: “During the performance of a play, how is it that we in the audience are able to know things that characters don’t know?” We discuss playwrights’ techniques for building dramatic irony in the broader sense, but eventually another question narrows students’ focus, shining a spotlight on the devices at the center of today’s lesson: “What conventions could directors use to help the audience see and hear the ‘truth’ about events on the stage—while also helping them to understand that particular characters cannot see or hear certain things?”

Students list conventional ways in which directors prompt audiences to suspend their disbelief about actors’ inability to see or hear certain events on stage (e.g., spotlighting some actors while keeping others in the dark; keeping some actors in motion while freezing others in place, and using sets and blocking to signify that a character’s vision or hearing is obscured.) This listing exercise sets the stage for us to give sustained attention to the links between blocking and dramatic irony.

As students turn in their *Othello* scripts to 4.1.53-224, they also check the large screen at the front of the room, which displays a PowerPoint slide featuring a stage diagram. This is the same diagram that was used in earlier lessons, but this time, it also includes four text boxes, each one in a contrasting color and displaying the name of a character who is onstage during this scene (Figure 1). We review the opening lines of the passage and place the character text boxes on the stage diagram in locations

that students believe are appropriate. At this point in the play, Othello has fallen into a trance; Iago is exulting in the success of his schemes, and Cassio enters. Watching the diagram on screen, the class offers suggestions about where to place Iago and Othello on the stage, and I move their character markers accordingly. Following students’ suggestions, I also move Cassio’s marker so that he enters, pauses to converse with Iago, and then exits. As we negotiate the blocking for these few lines, students are asked to think aloud about the meaning of the dialogue and how it connects with the blocking. We try a few different ways of blocking this passage so that we can discuss differences in what is conveyed by the actors and understood by the audience.

After this short round of modeling and mentoring, I turn the director role over to students. However, instead of relying on class discussion as we have for the past two days, I change the routine so that all students can engage the text deeply rather than relying on a few vocal peers to do this work. Students work through the remainder of the passage with a partner so that they voice the inferences they make as they read and explain how they are visualizing the movement of characters through the scene.

Each pair has a stage diagram and markers that they select (e.g., loose change, sticky notes) to represent the four characters. As they proceed through the passage, students discuss the dialogue and the blocking in tandem. Each time they determine that a character needs to move, they move the marker on the diagram and also pencil a director’s note about blocking in the margins of the script. For example, they consider Iago’s instruction to Othello to “Stand you awhile apart . . . Do but

encave yourself / And mark the fleers, the gibes, and the botable scorns / That dwell in every region of [Cassio’s] face” (4.1.88, 95-97) as Cassio (purportedly) recounts his trysts with Desdemona. Their close reading of these lines helps them to determine where to place Othello on the stage immediately after 4.1.108—the point at which the stage directions in the script indicate that “Othello stands apart.”

For several students, this close reading of the dialogue—along with their manipulation of physical tokens for the characters—brings about their first realizations about the dramatic irony of the scene. It is an “Ah ha!” moment. They come to understand that the plot demands that Othello be hidden from Cassio’s view, and yet Othello must also have a line of sight to Cassio. They also realize that the staging must occur in such a way that the audience understand that Othello is hidden from the other characters—and yet the audience must also clearly hear (and perhaps see) Othello’s reaction to the unfolding drama.

To check students’ understanding and help them notice and interpret textual clues, I circulate the room and talk with pairs as they work through the directing exercise. A few of the pairs are then asked to “walk through” their explanations of their blocking choices with the class, using the diagram on the projected screen to show where and when they moved their actors even as they cite lines from the script to justify their decisions. Seeing and hearing a few different directing perspectives on the scene allows students to better recognize the significance of interpretation for directing, while also helping them to think more carefully about the action on the stage and its role in building dramatic irony.

Act V: Acting Companies

The in-class activities for Act IV prepare students for an important homework assignment for their reading of the play's final act (Appendix A). To layer more scaffolding into this preparatory assignment, students might also be directed to discuss or write about why they believe their selected scene needs special attention to blocking.

While previewing the homework instructions, I note that during our next class period, we'll use some of the students' director's notes to work through scenes in small groups. Preparing for this activity requires reserving additional space—preferably a large room where groups can spread out (the gym, cafeteria, music room, or auditorium). When this doesn't work, I reserve additional rooms near to our classroom, all as close as possible to our homeroom, and all with moveable furniture and space for one or two small "acting companies" of 4-5 students each. Because students are spread out, supervision becomes an issue, but this can be addressed by arranging for volunteers (such as preservice teachers from a college methods course) to help supervise the different groups during this lesson.

When we arrive at class, I explain how the day's small-group work will proceed, talking through the instructions that I distribute on half sheets to all students (Appendix A). I help students to troubleshoot before they begin their group work. "You'll have only four or five actors in your company. What could you do if your passage has parts for more characters? If there are key props or set items that you don't have (such as swords, or Desdemona's bed), how might you improvise?" Then, I split the students into groups based on

their comfort level with acting. Students rate their comfort level on a scale of 1-5; then, students who give themselves high scores number off, followed by those in the mid-range and then those who are least comfortable. In this way, each acting company includes members who feel fairly comfortable with acting and only one or two hesitant actors.

This dynamic, along with the fact that students are working in rehearsal groups without a large audience of peers, seems to encourage the vast majority of students to participate enthusiastically. Groups move to their assigned "stage," and I cue students to begin their work, noting that I will rotate through the groups periodically to observe and answer questions.

My visits are brief, as I want to see each group in action two to three times. Typically, I find students mid-scene, with at least a few members acting their parts with more flare than I anticipated. The acting companies check their movements against the script, occasionally interrupting the flow to suggest a change to the blocking or line delivery—and sometimes arguing about the director's interpretation of the text, what it means, and why it matters. Some students hang back, but although they are less than enthusiastic in their acting, they are seeing and stepping through the blocking of the scene—and therefore are meeting the main goals of the lesson.

Most students are animated when they return to the classroom, too: our follow-up discussion about the final scenes from the play elicits questions and reactions characterized by a new level of insight and intensity. Students take a new level of ownership when they know the play actively and from the inside out rather than as passive observers.

Post Script

While ideally there would be time and space for students to enact a much greater portion of the play, we don't always have the ideal available to us. A lesson sequence on blocking can teach important literary conventions while also improving students' reading skills and perhaps even their interest in the theatre arts. Additional ideas for bringing Shakespeare's scripts from page to stage can be found in the excellent series *Shakespeare Set Free* (O'Brien, 1995), and more ideas for helping students to visualize what they read are offered in teaching resources such as *Reading IS Seeing* (Wilhelm, 2004) and *Enriching Comprehension with Visualization Strategies* (Wilhelm, 2013).

Students' participation during the blocking lessons, their written reflections and classroom discussions, their work on other projects and writing connected with the play, and their anonymous comments in responses submitted at semester's end indicate that this lesson sequence (and especially the culminating lesson) is a highlight for students. They enjoy it—not only because they are "playing," but also because they see blocking as a new and interesting challenge that is a key to unlocking the world and meaning of the play. It seems that students' active involvement in decisions about blocking helps them also to be active in their reading and interpretation. It could be said that the blocking lessons help students to move: from simply trying to follow what is happening to developing confidence in their abilities to envision, interpret, and respond to the play.

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Appendix A. Preparation and Instructions for Acting Companies

Preparing for Acting Companies

Choose one short section of a scene from *Othello* (about 2 pages) that you would like to study more closely through blocking and acting. Photocopy that section and reread it carefully. On the photocopy, make director's notes about blocking, any stage directions you would add, advice you would give about how actors should deliver their lines, and interpretation of the meaning of any complex lines. On the back of your photocopy, write a short paragraph about why you picked this scene.

Instructions for Acting Companies

Othello dramatization

1. All group members tell which passage they picked and why.
2. Come to agreement about which scene to enact together.
3. First, assign parts. Stay seated and read the passage aloud together. Use a pencil to mark any lines you'd like help interpreting.
4. Discuss together the lines that group members wanted help interpreting.
5. Discuss: Which lines are especially important, and why?
6. Listen as your director shares notes about blocking, stage directions, line delivery.
7. Together, do a dramatized reading (a performance) of the passage. Stand up, move about your stage. Get in character and deliver your lines. Your goal as a group is to bring this passage to life in order to better understand this portion of the play.
8. If time allows, repeat the process with another scene. Return to our classroom after 30 minutes.

Reflection

9. Independent work. On the back of your director's notes, write your answer to this question: What were the most important blocking choices that your group made, and how did performing your group's passage(s) influence your understanding of the play?
10. Hand in your director's notes page when I call for it.

Leah Zuidema loves helping others to love reading and writing. She has enjoyed doing this in a variety of roles—first as a high school English teacher, more recently as an English teacher educator, and currently by serving as associate provost at Dordt College.