Devising using the topic of ‘young offenders’ as a stimulus

Rhianna Elsden

AS/A2

Introduction

This scheme offers methodology on devising original performance material linked to the overall topic of ‘young offenders’. It is relevant for many new A level Drama & Theatre Studies exam specifications where devising forms a large part of the assessment. Through the activities students will learn how to devise performance outcomes, develop characters, develop their performance writing, and learn how to complete different types of research to inform their work. Their understanding of social, cultural, political and historical aspects within the youth justice system will have been developed. The ideas of many different practitioners have been included as a way to devise and develop the material; this links to the increased requirements of many A level specifications where use of practitioners is becoming ever more prescriptive and explicit.

Learning objectives

By the end of this scheme all students will:

- Have developed their ability to work cooperatively in groups
- Have developed their ability to create original material from testimonies and social, political and cultural research
- Have developed their script and dialogue writing skills
- Have developed their ability to create depth within characterisation
- Have developed their ability to carry out in-depth research to inform and develop ideas and creativity
- Have developed their performance skills – aural and physical
- Have developed several small performance outcomes that could then be blended into a larger final piece
- Have developed their understanding of how to apply practitioners to the devising process
- Have developed their understanding of how to include verbatim practices within their work
- Have increased their ability to reflect on the development process and be able to articulate this in verbal and written formats for assessment.

Resources

- Augusto Boal’s Games for Actors and Non-Actors
- For a short video and explanation of forum theatre: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitsize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev7.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitsize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev7.shtml)
- Outlines the system and route through for offenders: [https://www.justice.gov.uk/offenders/types-of-offender/juveniles](https://www.justice.gov.uk/offenders/types-of-offender/juveniles)
- The route from arrest through the system – to be explored practically: [https://www.gov.uk/young-people-in-custody](https://www.gov.uk/young-people-in-custody)
- An article on the YJS and another potential source for a real person’s story: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8198496.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8198496.stm)
- Three short films informally interviewing YO on their crimes, their punishments and what they are now trying to do with their lives: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rffZmv0iuMLc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rffZmv0iuMLc) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suvY02jdbLA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suvY02jdbLA) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNVs_6dQmCs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNVs_6dQmCs)
Lesson 1: Using forum theatre to explore why young people might offend and the consequences of their actions

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson all students will have learnt:
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- How to use forum theatre effectively
- How to research material to be used within practical work.

By the end of the lesson most students will also:
- Have developed their own understanding of what justice is as explored through forum theatre.

By the end of the lesson some students will:
- Have developed their understanding on how to use the work of practitioners to develop their own original performance material.

Starter (10 mins)
In order to begin freeing the students to produce original work, some initial devising exercises mixed with improvisation may be useful.

Main activity
Students are introduced to the idea of forum theatre, perhaps including its origins and a little biographical detail on Boal who is credited with using the technique as part of his ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ in order to awaken within audiences an understanding of how they might change their own communities and situations.

There are many stories on the internet that could be used to inspire some forums, for example:

http://www.uservoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/User-Voice-Whats-Your-Story.pdf could be used to develop a situation from Ryan’s story, for example, and set up a forum whereby there is an imagined second provocation at school. Following the first provocation, where Ryan and the family felt there was an injustice, the outcome of this second provocation could be explored. Alternatively, the real fight that Ryan mentions he has at home which leads to his arrest could be explored.

Another potential source could be as short as the example to be found at:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8198496.stm

Plenary
Having explored several stories in the forums, discuss the emerging picture of what leads people to offend, and why they don’t find alternative routes out from the cycle that then leads them into the Youth Justice System and potentially into Young Offender Institutions and centres.

In the forums, what are the alternatives that the young people could have chosen to avoid getting into trouble with the law, and why didn’t they take these options?
What might the students themselves do in the same situations?

Homework
Each student is asked to find a story on the Internet, either a written story or in a documentary, that outlines how and why a person became ‘a young offender’. There needs to be background information that can be used to develop practical work, and there needs to be an outline of the consequences the young person faced as a result of their actions.

This is brought to Lesson 2 for direct use.
Lessons 2 and 3: Developing forum theatre improvisations into devised performance outcomes

This lesson will enable students to explore why young people might offend and the consequences of their actions.

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson all students will have learnt:

- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- How to use ideas from forum theatre to inform extended devised and rehearsed pieces.

Starter
In groups share the research completed for homework. Choose one story per group and turn it into a series of still images with titles.

Main activity
Using flashback, cross-cutting and marking the moment, tell the person's real story. Additional fictional material may be developed in order to add depth to it.

Plenary
Discuss the final pieces in terms of the devising process, and also in terms of the social, cultural and political, i.e. what did students learn from the stories they have worked with? Do they have sympathy with the characters whose lives they have seen or explored? What are they learning about the Youth Justice System?

Plenary/Homework extension
Students could verbally or in writing evaluate the work and process using portfolio headings as specified in exam specifications, or ones re-worked to fit this scheme more specifically. For example:

1. Outline your initial response to the stimulus and how it was developed throughout the devising process.
2. Connect your research material(s) to key stages in the development process and to performance outcomes.
3. Evaluate how your chosen role(s) emerged and developed from initial ideas through to the final performance.
4. Evaluate the creative choices you made and whether or not they were successful.
5. Outline your understanding of forum theatre and the ways in which you have connected Boal in the process or performance.
6. Outline something you would look to develop if taking this work further and looking to extend the piece beyond its current running time.

Students should be encouraged to avoid extensive monologue or narration from the central character, as this style will be explored elsewhere in the scheme. Develop the work and then present for peer evaluation in Lesson 3.
Lesson 3: Exploring the Youth Justice System, part 1

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:
- How to work from research stimuli to devise original imaginative performance outcomes
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical.

Starter
In groups, on a large piece of paper, outline the steps they think take place once a young person is arrested for committing a crime. They need to consider all the steps and where exactly they think the person goes if there is a custodial or indeed a non-custodial sentence. Then, what do they think happens in the institutes and beyond when the person is released?

Students are then directed to the following websites and compare what they have outlined as the routes through the Youth Justice System compared with the ones they had written down:
- https://www.gov.uk/young-people-in-custody – the route from arrest through the system – to be explored practically.

Discussion
Are there any steps that surprised them?
Are there any things outlined that they weren’t aware of that they think are particularly negative or positive in terms of the YJS and how it operates?
What other things do they think should be more prescriptively outlined or would they hope there are things going on within the system that are perhaps not outlined?
Does the system sound effective as a place to hold offenders and stop re-offending?

Main activity
Create a piece showing the route through the system using narration and mime. This time no one but the narrator speaks. It should appear as an almost instructional presentation, rather than a ‘performance’.

Extension
Students then develop the work to include PowerPoint placards to reinforce or add to what the narrator is saying.

Homework
If the students haven’t been introduced to Brecht, for the next lesson they need to complete research into his ideas and intentions.

Students should also seek to find testimonies about what the Young Offender Institutions and centres are like, from the perspectives of both the offenders and those working in the centres. They should also try to find real stories from those young people who have been arrested of what their experience was like.
Lesson 4: Exploring the Youth Justice System, part 2

This lesson explores incorporating Brecht into the devising and performance. This could be covered in two lessons in order to fully realise the potential of the devised material and to ensure the practices of Brecht are embedded.

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:
- How to work from research stimuli to devise original imaginative performance outcomes
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- How to use the ideas of a practitioner – Brecht – within the devising and performance.

Discussion
Returning to the pieces from the previous lesson, what new information did their research provide? Did it contradict any of the legislation or outline anything more positive or negative about the YJS?

Main activity
The students will now attempt to turn the piece from the previous lesson into more of a performance, with some of the research they have done influencing the work.

Students should be asked to add in naturalistic dialogue, characters inspired by research, and scenes around the structure they already have. Having done this, they then explore Brecht’s techniques, such as:

Brecht – Narration
The piece devised in the last lesson already uses narration rather than dialogue, but what the narrator says could now change. As characters and dialogue are introduced to the work, the narrator could also reveal what the character is feeling, as well as giving factual information about the system. Placards are already in use from last lesson’s extension task, but the information on these could now be altered so they are more ‘Brechtian’ in what they say, i.e. revealing characters’ thoughts for example.

Brecht – Coming out of role/third person narration technique/direct address
Each of these could be used once characters are introduced into the piece. They will continue the distancing effect of the piece even with the added emotional depth of characterisation which will be an interesting mix for the students to see and work with.

The work is devised, rehearsed and then evaluated, using again perhaps the headings from portfolios to frame the discussion.

Plenary
What is the developed understanding in terms of the Youth Justice System and young offenders? What did using Brecht as a practitioner add to the work? Why was he a potentially good fit alongside this work?
Lesson 5: Working with real people’s testimonies and stories

In this lesson students will create short verbatim outcomes in the style of Alecky Blythe.

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- To consider the implications of using real people and their actual words within performance work
- To consider ideas and moral issues within verbatim theatre
- How to carry out in-depth research to inform and develop ideas and creativity.

Starter
In pairs, students label themselves A and B. A is going to talk about a favourite or least favourite holiday or Christmas. B is to watch closely and listen. After a couple of minutes, this activity is stopped. A now watches as B relays what they have said, trying to get the mannerisms and the vocal delivery right as well. This activity is then swapped.

Starter extension
Students walk around the room. The teacher calls out a person’s name and everyone in the room has to stop and watch them walk. Then on the instruction ‘go’ everyone walks behind the observed walker, copying the natural way they walk. At various stages the facilitator then instructs the class to exaggerate this. For example, if the person has a heavy footfall this becomes even heavier, or if they slightly swing their hips or lean forward these things become hyper exaggerated.

This then leads into working in the style of Alecky Blythe. Her methods for creating verbatim pieces are outlined at: http://www.recordeddelivery.net/about.html which provides a perfect resource for teachers and students, with links to interviews and articles on her work and practices.

Main activity
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfZmv0luMLd
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suvY02jdbLA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNVs_6dQmCs

Any one of the clips above could be used. One is played and students have to watch and listen. They then have it played again and this time while watching they try to copy it. This is repeated several times.

Extension 1
The students try this with headphones and acting the piece, i.e. in the style directly linking to Alecky Blythe. Reflect on what this would be like in performance.

Extension 2
Use some written testimony, perhaps from one of the clips not used. Act it out, and then watch it and discuss the differences.

Discussion/plenary
What do these activities tell us about verbatim? Does it throw questions of authenticity and fiction into their considerations? Other forms of verbatim use testimonies, but actors have it as a script. They have often met the people they are playing if they are part of the original showing of the work, so they are ‘mimicking’ the people, but not through headsets prompting their delivery. Is the character real or fictional therefore? Does it matter? How could this material be used with the Brechtian devised material if splicing them together?
Lesson 6: Working with real people’s testimonies and stories

In this lesson students will work with real testimonies and stories to inspire dialogue in the style of Caryl Churchill to explore the offender and victim roles.

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- To consider the techniques/style of established writers within their own performance writing – Caryl Churchill in this instance
- How to develop naturalistic dialogue in performance writing
- To consider the victims of crime and the idea of restorative justice.

Starter
Students write down the opening to an imagined dialogue between a young person who has committed a crime, and then meeting with their victim. This is done as if it has been a deliberate meeting as part of a restorative justice initiative.

They give this to another pair who will act it out. They then reflect on what it is like to watch their own dialogue in action.

Students are then given a section from the end scene of Top Girls and are asked to try it out having been made aware of Churchill’s use of the ‘/’ and ‘*’ and its intended effect upon pace and realism, etc.

They then reflect upon this exploration, how it looks and how it is to work in the style.

Main activity
Students now look to extend their own starting points into a full conversation between a victim of crime and the young offender.

Students could be encouraged to use real testimonies from elsewhere in the scheme or from their own research. They could also be encouraged to bring in some lines that are taken exactly from a young offender’s testimony, thus fusing in some verbatim techniques as well.

Once the dialogue is written the students again swap and work with someone else’s script. While working, they cannot go back to the original writers; they must work to the best of their understanding with the material they have.

These are then rehearsed and shown and the pairs reflect on what was written and how realistic and effective it has been.

Plenary
Reflect on the activities, but also the idea of restorative justice and the planned meeting of victims of crime and the perpetrators. Does it seem like a useful practice? What have students found out about the impact of such meetings where it has been used in the youth justice system?
Lesson 7: Fusing writing and Frantic Assembly to explore characterisation within the topic

Learning objectives
By the end of the lesson students will have learnt:
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and, especially, physical
- To develop an understanding of the implications and possibilities in using real people and their actual words within performance work
- How to use Frantic Assembly within the scheme to further explore the themes and to develop characterisation.

Starter
A Frantic Assembly highly energetic warm-up game.

Main activity
Depending on the group and their interest and skills within physical performance work, they could either look to develop a Chair Duet or a group physical theatre piece.

The Chair Duet could potentially link to the dialogue the students created in Lesson 6 and they could look to have parts of it spoken while a Chair Duet is either acted by them, or another pair act one out while they voice-over the dialogue.

Alternatively, a real person’s testimony about their progression into young offending (such as Ryan’s story) could be used and read (or pre-recorded if the lesson was extended into two) and used to form a group piece with movements inspired by Frantic Assembly linking to what is being said.

Whichever the group complete, they rehearse and show their work and consider the impact of this form of physicality linked to the dialogue or real testimonies for an audience.

Music should be chosen by the group to accompany their work.

Lessons 8–10: Creating an extended piece

Learning objectives
By the end of these lessons students will have learnt:
- How to work collaboratively with others in discussion and practical work
- How to develop performance skills – aural and physical
- About the implications of using real people and their actual words within performance work
- How to develop an extended original performance piece fusing different practitioners and source material together effectively
- How to carry out in-depth research to inform and develop ideas and creativity.

Starter
Students will need to re-cap and fully reflect on all the different material they have developed across the scheme.

They are then set the task – to develop an extended piece that fuses the scheme’s performance and explorations together.

Main activity
The students need to set targets for themselves from the outset and decide what they want their eventual audience to gain from the experience.

They may choose to focus on one aspect or all aspects – social, cultural or political – that they have explored during the scheme.

Lessons are then spent putting the work together and rehearsing.

Plenary
At the end of the scheme, students could verbally or in writing evaluate the work and process using portfolio headings as specified in exam specifications, or some re-worked to fit this scheme.