

Get out of the comfort zone!

David Porter

KS5

KS5

Introduction

Two of the best ways to get out of a comfort zone in drama are to experiment and to take a few (calculated) risks.

After several years of making their drama in a regular studio or particular classroom space, KS5 students should be encouraged to push at boundaries to devise and improvise, to explore new ways of communicating meaning to audiences and to learn from a few failures.

This approach is good preparation for the exams they may take and for life itself. The five sessions in this scheme each last 90 minutes, and could also be used by a group preparing a performance, whether devised or scripted, as they focus questions and present challenges on their use of space, proxemics, styles and genres for the widest possible range of audience.

Received wisdom argues that it's rarely best to dive straight into devising with students, but to build up gradually. With KS5 the assumption is made that students can and should rapidly tackle devising, particularly as they prepare a devising section in one of the A levels on offer.

Warm-ups

Warm-ups are very much a matter of taste at this level. They are not suggested separately for each session, but useful ideas might be:

| | Heated discussion | Something physical |
|-----------|--|--|
| Session 1 | Is it sometimes good to tell 'a little white lie'? | A persuades B of something by intimidation; it backfires |
| Session 2 | Old people should always be listened to | Arm-wrestling Olympic event goes wrong |
| Session 3 | School children should have more daily screen time, not less | Our new family robot looks like a teenage human being! |
| Session 4 | The state cannot provide solutions to all problems | Person caught in cupboard tells truth! |
| Session 5 | It's better to stand out from the crowd than be lost within it | Parent and teacher in same football team |

Learning objectives

These general objectives are applicable to all five sessions, so are not listed separately. By the end of this scheme learners will have:

- ▶ Developed their drama devising repertoire
- ▶ Explored a range of performance spaces, styles and genres
- ▶ Created different plot-driving characters
- ▶ Experimented with proxemics and audience responses
- ▶ Worked collaboratively to improve drama skills.

The sessions

Session 1: Pomposity – everyone's at it!

Simple story of come-uppance for a pompous ass starts experiments with performance spaces.

Session 2: How would Brecht do it?

We all know how to approach devising in a Brechtian way, but are there other practitioners whose styles are of use and of interest?

Session 3: On your own, pal!

The monologue and the duologue are invaluable devices to convey meaning, to develop skills and to experiment.

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Exam specifications:

All A level specifications contain at least one section on devising. The International Baccalaureate's *Theatre Director's Notebook* specification and advice is worth looking at, too.

Gender

As part of the experimental nature of the scheme, students should be encouraged to experiment with playing different gender roles in addition to the ideas outlined in Session 5, 'Identity'.

Stretching and challenging

There are no specific stretch and challenge suggestions, because every activity should be such. For some students, even at this level, coming out of their normal comfort zones will be challenging enough. Always invite radical (self) assessment and students directing other students to push boundaries.

Useful words for what we're about

Devising, improvising, making up, pretending, imagining, creating, recreating, deconstructing/constructing, inventing, reconfiguring, framing, contriving, designing, plotting, concocting, extemporising, adlibbing, busking and winging it.

Session 4: Conspiracy – everyone’s got a theory

Whether by plot or conspiracy or shambolic incompetence, the world experiences all kinds of disasters, betrayals, deceptions and lies.

Session 5: Identity – flavour of the times

Gender identity is very current and this session suggests layered montage framework for devising, addresses issues and experiments with space and settings.

Session 1: Pomposity – everyone’s at it!**The starter ideas box (10 mins to delve around)**

A box of physical objects: clothes, props, shoes, hats, sticks, masks, CDs, paintings, photos, film clips, playscripts, novels, newspapers, magazines, podcasts, emails, old letters, Post-it notes, shopping lists, selfies and diaries should be given in the drama devising process for starting points.

Nothing needs be permanent. Once an idea runs, it takes on a life of its own.

For this session, useful additional ideas in the teacher’s box might include a plan of the school building, a street view of the nearest town centre, photos of types of staging, *Twelfth Night* and perhaps a story of someone who is agreed to be pompous.

Note: Each group needs to agree the direction of travel for devising to shape the piece and revise it.

Discussion (15 mins)

Teacher leads discussion asking what makes people look ridiculous.

How do people react to those who are ridiculous? Humour? Rebellion?

Ask if everyone understands what being pompous is, how pomposity affects other people and how pompous people are sometimes brought down.

Ask if anyone has ever met a ‘pompous ass’? Any examples? Politicians? Celebrities?

Shakespeare’s comedy *Twelfth Night* features a pompous ass called Malvolio (meaning ‘evil wisher’) who is made to look foolish; this may be worth a look.

Think about situations where a pompous person has power over others.

This is what will be explored this session.

Give it a go (30 mins)

In groups of 5/6, invite students to make a 2-minute (max) scene in which someone behaves like a pompous ass and is brought down to earth.

Make sure each person has a role that adds some value to the scene.

1. Share a couple of groups, no more.
2. Restage scene for an in-the-round performance.
3. Share a couple of groups, no more.
4. Restage again, for traverse performance.
5. Share a couple more.
6. Turn it into two scenes in different locations, promenade performance.
7. Share all scenes.

The devising deciding points (10 mins)

1. What do we want to say from our devised piece, what is the message to audience?
2. Do we want them to laugh or cry, learn or be shocked?
3. What style will we use to convey meaning? Dickensian, commedia dell’arte, surreal, Brechtian, Artaudian, Kafkaesque, horror, panto, children’s theatre, musical theatre, Theatre-in-Education?
4. What space(s) will we use/do we have available?

Experiment (10 mins to think)

Try the scene(s) in an unusual place, such as a cupboard, a tight corner, a space that is far too big, a car park, in and around a parked car, up and down a staircase, a corridor, somebody’s front room or in a public street (with permission from local council if needed).

Besides the actual space, think about sightlines for the audience and the likely size of those watching. Is it an audience of one (An examiner? Somebody’s mother?) or a group (of Year 10s or old age pensioners?)

Points of view

Students should be encouraged to take a viewpoint from the life and times of a range of characters, bearing in mind that audience views are determined by space and shape of the performance, proxemics and styles of presentation.

Practitioners as stimulus:

Useful practitioners’ styles and theories include Brecht, Stanislavski, Artaud, Meyerhold, Berkoff, Boal, Joan Littlewood, Peter Brook, Gordon Craig, Lloyd Newson and DV8, Katie Mitchell, Gecko, Graeae, Handspring, Propeller, Frantic Assembly, Complicite, Forced Entertainment, Frantic Assembly, Kneehigh, Punchdrunk, Polly Teale, Rupert Goold, Marianne Elliott, Shared Experience.

Resource

School Productions from Devised Drama, making a whole show from devising: <https://www.tes.com/resources/search/?&q=Devising%20Drama%20for%20School%20Productions>

Resource

- ▶ *The Theatre Times*, blog post, *What is Devised Theatre?* <https://thetheatretimes.com/what-is-devised-theatre/>
- ▶ *The Guardian*, Ten tips for a truly creative collaboration: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/2014/dec/16/devised-theatre-ten-tips-collaboration>

If nothing odd is available

If the session has to be conducted entirely in a drama space, experiment with proscenium, thrust, in-the-round, traverse and promenade approaches.

Malvolio

Useful *Spark Notes* on Malvolio: www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/twelfthnight/character/malvolio/

Sharing and reviewing (15 mins)

To gauge how far ideas work, some sharing is essential. Self, peer and teacher review is important for development. The test is always whether the piece has started to address the aims set out for the performance.

Session 2: How would Brecht do it?**The starter ideas box (10 mins to delve around)**

In addition to the starter box of ideas described in Session 1, for this session useful additional material might include news stories of stabbings, jealousy, rage, power-hunger, *Macbeth* (death of King Duncan) and *Othello* (death of Desdemona).

Note: Each group needs to agree the direction of travel for devising to shape the piece and revise it.

Discussion (15 mins)

In contemporary theatre and drama, Brecht has become so well-established that we so often think in his terms for demonstrating roles, making the familiar strange, multi-roling, montage and underscoring political messages, that we don't think beyond him.

Teacher now leads discussion on approaches to presenting a piece, with/without a message. Linking with the previous session on how we might use space, how can space and style work together? How is an audience influenced by space, style and location?

Explore students' understanding of proxemics (the significance of the distances between characters on stage and their distance to the audience). For more experimenting with proxemics, use Additional Material 1 at the end of this scheme, if there is time.

Give it a go (30 mins)

In groups of 5/6, invite students to make a 2 min (max) scene in which someone has just stabbed another person through jealousy, envy, rage or because of a hunger for power. The killer must be obvious. The scene is concerned with the immediate aftermath. Make sure each person has a role that adds some value to the scene.

1. Share a couple of groups, no more.
2. Restage scene for an in-the-round or thrust or traverse performance.
3. Share a couple of groups, no more.
4. Add a scene dealing with the run up to the stabbing and present it in two scenes in different locations, promenade performance.
5. Share all scenes.

The devising deciding points (20 mins)

It is worth reminding students of the points from last session:

1. What do we want to say from our devised piece, message to audience?
2. Do we want them to laugh or cry, to learn or be shocked?
3. What style will we use to convey meaning? Dickensian, commedia dell'arte, surreal, Brechtian, Artaudian, Kafkaesque, horror, panto, children's theatre, musical theatre, Theatre-in-Education?
4. What space(s) will we use/do we have available?
5. If there is time, stage a third scene where the killer sits among the audience, in close proximity to them.

Sharing and reviewing (15 mins)

Sharing is essential, with opportunities to make adjustments in space(s), proxemics, plot content, characters or style of performance.

Self, peer and teacher review is important for development.

The test is always did the piece start to address the aims for the performance?

Resource

- ▶ *A Short Guide to Shakespeare's Plays* by John Goodwin: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Short-Guide-Shakespeares-Supporting-Shakespeare/dp/0435183710>
- ▶ *A List of Theatre Practitioners*, for ideas on style and genre: <https://www.famousfix.com/list/theatre-practitioners>

Shock or comedy?

Violent death can be handled realistically or as comedy. The barbaric ferocity of *Titus Andronicus* lends itself to a comic treatment to make it palatable: <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/titus/>

Brecht

The scheme assumes knowledge of Brecht, but a quick revision for secondary age is at *BBC Bitesize*: http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/drama_wjec/devisedperformance/taskone11.shtml

Session 3: On your own, pal!

The starter ideas box (10 minutes to delve around)

Useful addition to the starter box of ideas for this session might include published collections of monologues and duologues, scenes and sketches, recordings of phone conversations, two-way interviews, clips of characters talking to themselves or direct address to an audience.

Whole plays performed as monologues include:

- ▶ *Kafka's Monkey*, adapted by Colin Teevan from a Franz Kafka story in which an ape gives an account of his transition from ape to human being:
<https://www.digitaltheatreplus.com/education/kafkas-monkey>
- ▶ *Misterman* by Enda Walsh is a study of a man's descent into religious obsession in Ireland:
<https://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/plays/misterman-iid-141244>

Note: Each group needs to agree the direction of travel for devising to shape the piece and revise it.

Discussion (15 mins)

Most drama and exams require some solo or paired sections. Drama is well served by the direct or indirect address, sharing something with the audience that other characters do not know. It may be a whispered aside or full monologues straight to the crowd, as favoured by John Godber, for instance.

While there are hundreds of published and internet monologues available, we are focusing on students devising their own in these sessions. To succeed, the character(s) speaking must be convincing, credible and sustained.

The actor needs to know who he/she is addressing (not just 'the audience'). Is it another invisible character, is it a dead person, is it a conscience?

Give it a go (40 mins)

In pairs and then solo, invite students to make a 2-minute (max) scene in which someone realises and comes to terms with total inadequacy, personal failure, betrayal, deceit and lies in either themselves or others.

1. Share all pairs.
2. Restage scene for an in-the-round or thrust or traverse performance.
3. Share all pairs.
4. Restage the scene for one character only.
5. Share all solos.
6. Restage the scene in an unusual place.
7. Share all solos.

The devising deciding points (10 mins)

1. What do we want the mono/duologue to say, message to audience?
2. Do we want them to laugh or cry, learn or be shocked?
3. What style will we use to convey meaning? Dickensian, commedia dell'arte, surreal, Brechtian, Artaudian, Kafkaesque, horror, panto, children's theatre, musical theatre, Theatre-in-Education?
4. What space(s) will we use/do we have available?

Sharing and reviewing (15 mins)

Focus on self-assessment for this, supported by peer verdicts.

Ask what changes would he/she make if time?

What was learned by the actor using that space? That style?

What was learned by students as audience in that setting?

Resources

- ▶ *Fifteen Powerful Female Dramatic Monologues*: <https://monologueblogger.com/15-powerful-female-dramatic-monologues/>
- ▶ *Drama Notebook*, free *Monologues for Teenagers*:
<https://www.dramanotebook.com/monologues-teenagers/>

Experiment

Try a monologue or duologue from a balcony, from a loft, from up a short ladder, from a cellar, from a caretaker's store, from a parked car surrounded by a crowd, in a shop, from a garden or on the bus or train.

Mimes

Miming is as necessary as walking on stage, but it can support acting, contradict it or be used in narrator-in-role approaches. Experiment with telling a story in mime with no words, or a narrator miming the actions of a group of 6.

Session 4: Conspiracy – everyone’s got a theory

The starter ideas box (10 mins to delve around)

Useful addition to the starter box of ideas for this session might include media stories about contemporary conspiracies by countries and individuals, political conspiracies and historical ones. The plot to assassinate Julius Caesar in March 44BC is covered in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* when the treachery of those he trusted around him turned to murder.

Note: Each group needs to agree the direction of travel for devising to shape the piece and revise it.

Discussion (15 mins)

Some people take the view that when anything big goes wrong, it’s either because someone has fouled it up or there is a conspiracy against whoever has suffered the failure.

Some Christian believers hold that Jesus Christ was betrayed in a conspiracy; during World War II Adolf Hitler came close to being assassinated by several trusted people.

Not all conspiracies lead to murder. Some may be aimed at sabotage of data systems, elections, financial structures or the good reputations of companies and individuals. Others will be to cover something up. Often in films and books, it’s the agencies of government who frequently are guilty of plots and conspiracies.

Historical conspiracies worth closer inspection include:

- ▶ The Gunpowder Plot in England, well-summarized here: www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_robinson_01.shtml
- ▶ Who killed US President John F. Kennedy in 1963? <http://www.22november1963.org.uk/>

Give it a go (40 mins)

In groups of 5/6 invite students to make a 2-minute (max) scene in which someone accuses another of a conspiracy/plot against them and admits it with horrifying consequences for everyone. It must be in-the-round.

Make sure each person has a role that adds some value to the scene.

1. Share all groups.
2. Restage scene, adding in more impact on the audience.
3. Share all scenes.
4. All swap roles in each group and rerun the scenes.
5. Share all scenes.

The devising deciding points (10 mins)

1. What do we want to say from our devised piece, what is the message to audience?
2. Do we want them to laugh or cry, learn or be shocked?
3. What style will we use to convey meaning? Dickensian; commedia dell’arte; surreal; Brechtian; Artaudian; Kafkaesque; horror; panto; children’s theatre; musical theatre; Theatre-in-Education?
4. What space(s) will we use/do we have available?

Sharing and reviewing (15 mins)

- ▶ Focus on teacher assessment for this, supported by self verdicts.
- ▶ Ask what changes would he/she make if time?
- ▶ What was learned by the actor using that space? That style?
- ▶ What was learned by students as audience in that setting?
- ▶ What was learned by being forced to swap roles?

Resources

- ▶ *Conspiracy* by Ryan Holliday: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/conspiracy-Books/s?page=1&rh=n%3A266239%2Ck%3Aconspiracy>
- ▶ 12 Great Government Conspiracies on Film: <https://www.fandango.com/movie-photos/12-great-government-conspiracies-on-film-1230>

Precious roles

Students often cling to their original roles and ideas, which hampers development. By forcing periodic actor/role changes, the comfort zone is left behind and interesting new angles develop naturally.

Transitions

Always key to performance success, they are often best incorporated within the performance. Equally, they could be entirely incongruous or just whacky for humour, depending on taste.

Session 5: Identity – flavour of the times

The starter ideas box (10 mins to delve around)

A useful addition to the starter box of ideas for this session might include the montage ideas of Brecht, the collage ideas of postmodernism, and current news items about gender politics, educational and medical, legal, religious and ethical issues surrounding gender.

Note: Each group needs to agree the direction of travel for devising to shape the piece and revise it.

Discussion (15 mins)

Teacher leads discussion about gender politics and the current views in society about people identifying one way or another, problems experienced and reactions in society. For example, some older people do not readily agree with young people, especially children, wanting to change gender. Do their views matter? Should the NHS pay for whatever people want to have done to themselves?

On the montage issue, while the suggested piece of work is not Brechtian at all, it does introduce the experimental concept of many layers of things happening simultaneously.

The devising deciding points (10 mins)

1. What do we want to say from our devised piece, message to audience?
2. Do we want them to laugh or cry, learn or be shocked?
3. What style will we use to convey meaning? Dickensian; commedia dell'arte; surreal; Brechtian; Artaudian; Kafkaesque; horror; panto; children's theatre; musical theatre; Theatre-in-Education?
4. What space(s) will we use/do we have available?

Give it a go (40 mins)

Use Additional Material 2 at the end of this scheme, an 'Identity' sheet, which suggests four groups working on related ideas with the possibility of merging all or some parts as a performance. Each group prepares four very short scenes, and each group should have three members at least. It could be that with fewer students, doubling up may be effective. Each of the four scenes could be tried in different settings and in different styles, using influences from different practitioners or not.

Sharing and reviewing (15 mins)

- ▶ Focus on student-led assessment for this, supported by teacher verdicts.
- ▶ Ask what changes would each group make, if they had time?
- ▶ What changes would any individual make, if they had time?
- ▶ What was learned by the groups using that space(s)? That style?
- ▶ What was learned by students as audience in that setting?

Follow-up

Since this scheme can only be part of a journey through devising and improvisation at KS5, it is also worth researching *Immersive Theatre* – always, by its very nature, totally experimental and very much outside the comfort zones of actors and audiences alike.

Immersive is participative performance where the audience is not a group of passive observers, but actors and directors, along with the actual actors and directors. They take decisions that influence directions and outcomes; they move from area to area rather as if in a promenade and/or site-specific performance.

One difference is that the audience are not directed to move or be shown what the cast want them to see. They choose when to wander, stand and stare, move along at any point. They contribute to telling the story by changing something, expanding a piece of text, influencing a light or sound effect, changing a costume or moment in time.

Therefore, no two performances are exactly the same. It's exciting, edge-of-the-seat stuff. These are 'total experience' performances, also known as 'transportation performances'.

Resources

- ▶ The Drama Teacher, *Montage in Dramatic Performance*: <https://thedramateacher.com/montage-in-dramatic-performance/>
- ▶ The Actor Hub, *Brecht's Epic Theatre and Verfremdungseffekt*: <http://www.actorhub.co.uk/259/brechts-epic-theatre-and-verfremdungseffekt-techniques>

Song and dance

Don't neglect the additional resource of using song, music and dance to support acting, to merge with it or to replace it altogether, at least in some sections. An original, well-written catchy song can really convey meaning.

Play within a play

This is a popular device (e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Comedy might be served by going further: a play within a play within a play. Or, a flashback within a flashback within a flashback.

Resources

- ▶ Punchdrunk Theatre: <https://www.punchdrunk.org.uk/home>.
- ▶ *The Space*, what is immersive theatre?: <https://space.org.uk/2014/08/04/what-is-immersive-theatre/>

RESOURCES

Additional Material 1: Proxemics exercise

1. What is closest, bearable invasion of living space that A can endure if B is closing in?
2. Repeat with different pairings.
3. How close can/should an adult get to you?
4. On stage how close would it be ideal for A to say to B: I love you?
5. Or to say I hate you?
6. Experiment; decide an optimum distance for dramatic tension. How close for personal comfort and/or dramatic tensions would it be for A to do a variety of activities in front of B:
 - ▶ Eating disgustingly?
 - ▶ Laughing hysterically?
 - ▶ Farting?
 - ▶ Being sick?
 - ▶ Being angry with a dog?
 - ▶ Being angry with you?
 - ▶ Being rude to a loved one?
 - ▶ Demonstrating an assault?
 - ▶ Killing somebody?
7. Try experimenting with a scene in which a known killer is making friends with someone unsuitable – a child, a vulnerable person, a grandparent, a foreigner, another killer.
8. As above, but change killer for thief or psychopath or obsessive.
9. Change the unsuitable person for a passerby or grandmother or journalist.
10. Experiment with positioning a creepy person or killer in different relationships with the audience – including far away and behind them.

Additional Material 2: Identity

| Sections of the material | Devising outline – direction of travel | Notes |
|--------------------------|--|--|
| GROUP ONE: | | |
| Prologue | A is unable to cope with anything. | How show the failure? Establish characters |
| Scene 1 | B is mistaken for someone else and doesn't like it. | Establish characters |
| Scene 2 | C identifies as a gender he/she was not assigned at birth. | Establish characters |
| Scene 3 | All agree not to accept C's decision. | Establish characters |
| GROUP TWO: | | |
| Prologue | A is able to cope with everything. | How show the coping? Establish characters |
| Scene 1 | B pretends to be somebody else as a joke. | Establish characters. |
| Scene 2 | C is told he/she should identify as a different gender, but disagrees. | Establish characters |
| Scene 3 | All agree to find a blind date for C. | Establish characters |
| GROUP THREE: | | |
| Prologue | A can only cope with black/white, no grey. | How show this? |
| Scene 1 | B tries to be like C without success. | Establish characters |
| Scene 2 | C tries to be all genders at once; to please all. | Establish characters |
| Scene 3 | All fall out with each other. | Establish characters |
| GROUP FOUR: | | |
| Prologue | A is totally self-obsessed, complete self-love. | How show self love? |
| Scene 1 | B used to be A, but is now changed. | Establish characters. |
| Scene 2 | C changes the gender they present every day for personal gain. | Establish characters |
| Scene 3 | All try to sort C out, but fail. | Establish characters |