

*Dr. Kathie Kratochvil's*  
**Top Ten Tried, True and Tangible Techniques**  
*For Classroom/Group Management in the Performing Arts*

Over the years, many colleagues have asked me how I manage to keep order when working with large groups of children in the performing arts, both in the classroom and in the play production setting. In answer to that question, I have formulated these top ten techniques. It is my experience that classroom management in the arts is not just something we innately have or don't have, but rather an acquired skill set. It requires thoughtful planning and strategic techniques, balancing *structure* with *playfulness* and above all a *respect* for the students/young performers with whom you will be working. I hope that you may find some of these ideas useful!

- 1. Careful, thoughtful, lesson planning that is developmentally appropriate can prevent most classroom management problems from occurring.**
  - a. Be aware that most behavior problems that arise are a direct result of how you have set up your lesson.
  - b. "An ounce of prevention..." If you anticipate the problems that may occur you can eliminate the need for a cure! As an artist yourself (and every teacher is an artist!), you have developed a keen sense of observation. Utilize this skill by constantly observing the reactions/responses to your lesson *during your lesson*. Make adjustments to your lesson from what you observe.
  - c. Some questions that you might ask yourself regarding your lesson plan:
    1. At this grade level what is the maximum time I can talk and still keep the student's attention?
    2. Have I involved students in a variety of experiences, which acknowledge the multiple intelligences of the students? (See research by Howard Gardner from Harvard's Project Zero).
    3. Have I differentiated the instruction carefully where appropriate?
    4. Have I carefully addressed how visual, auditory or kinesthetic learners can all be successful in the lesson and in the understanding of directions or demonstrations?
    5. Have I found ways to utilize a variety of strategies to introduce, explain and restate concepts?
    6. Have I carefully thought through my opening, warm-up activities, body of my lesson, transitions, and closing so that they build on each other (scaffold) from one activity to the next and utilize a variety of teaching strategies?
    7. Have I given careful, thoughtful attention to moving smoothly from one activity to the next, (Transitions!!) so that I keep the classes' attention and focus? Transitions between activities in theatre can make or break your lesson, and can be lots of fun! Think of fun, dramatic or musical ways to walk or move from one activity to the next.
    8. Have I thought about the pacing of the lesson?
    9. Have I allowed opportunities for students to engage in their own creative process and provided a suitable context?
    10. Does my lesson allow for all students to be successful?
    11. Does my lesson keep all students actively involved in a meaningful way? (A group of students who have "nothing to do" sets you up for classroom management problems.)

## 2. ESTABLISH YOUR RULES, AGREEMENTS, CONSEQUENCES AND ATTENTION GETTING DEVICES ON THE FIRST DAY!

- a. My number one rule is "THIS IS A SAFE PLACE." In order to deliver an effective drama or movement lesson, students must feel safe on both a physical and emotional level. My first lesson always begins with a discussion about the times when we have felt both safe and unsafe. Based on this discussion, we can then establish agreements about safety. Some of the typical agreements the students come up with are: 1) No comments or put-downs are allowed or tolerated, 2) All of our physical movements are in control and never pose a threat to ourselves or to others, 3) Respect for others is essential.
- b. Use intervention techniques before the rules get broken. Some simple techniques include: 1) quietly but firmly separating or moving students to a new location, 2) move to where you see a problem brewing and stand there while continuing your instructions (proximity technique), 3) gently place your hand on the shoulder of the student causing the disruption but continue on with your discussion, 4) give a warning, "Jason, I'd like your full attention now, thank you," and continue on.
- c. If an agreed upon rule is broken, take immediate action. If you ignore the problem, other students will see that it is O.K. to break the rules and will follow, leading to a bigger problem that could have been prevented earlier. One immediate action that seems to work most of the time is a "time out." After five to ten minutes I ask the student if he/she is ready to join the group again and follow the rules we have agreed on. I remind the student that the rules we have agreed on insure the safety of themselves and others.
- d. Begin each lesson with a structured environment that is consistent. I like to begin each lesson with all students sitting in a circle on the floor. This sets up a daily structure that helps to build a sense of security and a centered perspective for all. It also helps the students "ground" into a safe, predictable starting place for each new lesson, thereby making it easier for me to lead them into new unexplored territory.
- e. Teach your attention getting devices during your first lesson. Practice them. Review them during your next lesson. Practice again. Keep repeating the practice until they are internalized. Some attention getting devices are:
  1. Number counting (why this always works is beyond me!)
  2. Bells or sounds
  3. Freezes
  4. Clapping/rhythms
  5. Hand signals
  6. Singing a song (call/response)
  7. Copy me (some kind of movement pattern)
- f. Yelling or shouting **is not** an effective method of gaining attention. WHISPERING is actually more effective than shouting.
- g. Offer choices in problem situations. "You have a choice right now. You can either join us and use appropriate language, or take a five minute time out to calm down."
- h. Use the words "I need" rather than "You need to..." Center on what your needs are not the child's. Offer an explanation if necessary. "I'd like you to...Here's why..."
- i. Don't take sides in emotional upsets between students. Be an unattached referee.
- j. Never allow any kind of hitting, pushing, shoving or any kind of physical display of anger against another person that puts the safety of the children in jeopardy.
- k. Phrase criticism constructively. "I'd like you to try this..." rather than "I didn't like that."

## 3. SET UP A SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL LEARNERS AND CONTINUALLY BUILD A SENSE OF COMMUNITY.

- a. **Warm-up activities** are essential in the theatrical classroom setting. Warm-ups serve several purposes. They create safety and comfort, they introduce vocabulary and techniques, they help to scaffold ideas and processes, they re-create the environment, and they help participants to connect with each other.

- b. If we want students to be calm and centered, we need to exhibit calm and centered behavior as teachers. Have you ever noticed how students respond to you when you are “off-center” or having a “bad day?” They tend to mirror your own mood.
- c. Teambuild! Teambuild! Teambuild! Continue to build a sense of community in all that you do. Remind students that every person’s contributions are essential to the whole. Foster cooperation!
- d. Always honor the student’s dignity. Pull participants aside from the group if a problem presents itself rather than embarrassing them.
- e. Positive reinforcement works wonders!
- f. Greet each class warmly each day no matter what.
- g. Notice the good and acknowledge it! I have this lofty goal of trying to give each student at least one meaningful compliment each day. Think of what it means to you to receive a meaningful compliment from someone you respect.
- h. Encourage students to compliment each other.
- i. Be consistent and fair, yet firm about your expectations. It is not necessary to “put on an angry face.” Model calmness. Feel free to laugh.

**4. GIVE CLEAR, CONCISE DIRECTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS. MODEL AND PROBLEM SOLVE BEFORE STUDENTS BEGIN THE ACTIVITY. CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING OF DIRECTIONS/EXPECTATIONS.**

- a. Keep your communication regarding directions clear and simple.
- b. If more than a few steps are involved in the process, give directions for the first few steps, let them do it, then go on to the next step.
- c. It is important to set up BEFORE HAND how you will get the group back together again. “When I. (ring the bell, clap my hands twice, flicker the lights), I’d like you to take your place back in the circle,” etc.
- d. Always insist on and WAIT for the silence and attention of all students before you speak to give directions or instruction. Speaking in a whisper at this point will help maintain the focus for all.
- e. Deliver your directions in several modalities. Speak them for your auditory learners, model the process for kinesthetic learners, and write out the directions and steps for visual learners. Have someone repeat back what he or she heard. Check for any questions about directions.
- f. Make sure that all students can both hear and see you from all directions. Set up the time you will be giving directions in a way that everyone has access, and no one is behind someone or something.

**5. ENGAGE YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR!**

**6. TEACH GROUP COOPERATION STRATEGIES AS PART OF YOUR LESSON IF YOU EXPECT STUDENTS TO WORK WELL IN GROUPS.**

- a. Don’t assume that students know how to work effectively in a group situation. Anticipate some of the problems that might come up and brainstorm with the students some ways that these can be addressed.

For example:

“Can we think of some ideas about how we can choose groups so that everyone is included and no one will feel left out?”

“If you are working in a group and someone is fooling around, what could you do?”

“If one person is being “bossy” what could you do to help make that person see that everyone’s ideas are important?”

**7. FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS: TEACH AND MODEL AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR EXPECTATIONS.**

- a. Set up expectations for the audience when you begin to do activities in the “performance” arena. Some of the guidelines that I have found to be effective are:
  1. Everyone watches and actively listens.
  2. No comments, talking or put-downs are allowed.
  3. Laughter needs to be appropriate.
  4. Everyone applauds at the end of the performance or presentation regardless of whether they liked the performance or not.
- b. Offer an opportunity for “feedback” for the performers. I ask the performers to sit comfortably where they have just performed and ask the audience to give the performers positive feedback. Typical beginning questions for the audience during beginning phases of the aesthetic valuing process might be:
  1. What did you see?
  2. What did you hear?
  3. What did you feel?
  4. What caught your attention?

From this point, when students are comfortable with the feedback process, you can then proceed to more sophisticated questions. **It is imperative that you spend the time to carefully construct and ask thought provoking questions of your students** regarding their work and the work of others. A well constructed inquiry process contributes to cognitive learning not just in the arts, but across the curriculum.

Some examples of the types of questions you might ask are:

1. “Why” questions.
2. “What if” questions.
3. “How does it change things” questions.
4. “What if we knew more” questions.
5. “What is the significance” questions.
6. “Puzzle-finding” questions (Why do you think the performers chose to use...).
7. “Interpretive” questions (What is this work saying to you?).
8. “Symbolism and meaning” questions (Does the artist have a message?).

(See Aesthetic Valuing Component of California VAPA Standards for more information).

## **8. FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS: SET UP AND BUILD SAFETY IN INCREMENTAL STEPS SO THAT STUENTS WILL CONQUER THE FEAR OF PERFORMING IN FRONT OF A GROUP.**

- a. I have noticed that typically students in grades 4-8<sup>th</sup> will exhibit behavior problems when they are feeling uncomfortable “performing” in front of peers. Here are some of my strategies in addressing these problems before they become a crisis for students:
  1. When planning lessons where a “mini” class performance will be included in your lesson, remember that there is “safety in numbers.” Start with games that involve the entire class, and where no one student is put on the spot. Progress to activities where students perform in groups of four to five, then groups of two to three, and eventually to one person performances.
  2. Progression of skills is essential in drama activities. We don’t expect students to do long division before mastering the basics of addition and subtraction. The same is true for drama. A natural progression is:
    - a. Understanding basic body movement.
    - b. Pantomime technique.
    - c. Improvisation without the use of voice.
    - d. Voice and vocal expression techniques.
    - e. Integration of body expression and vocal techniques.
    - f. Scripted and written materials integrated with body and voice.
  3. Performance Progression:
    - a. Classroom sharing (process, not product is emphasized).

- b. Sharing of work in progress with other classes. (Process is emphasized).
    - c. Specialized, high quality performances that have ample rehearsal time and where students have been taught basic skills for stage work.
  4. The younger the child, the more **process** is emphasized over **product**.
  5. In your beginning sessions, ask for volunteers to perform.
  6. Let the student's progress at their own rate of speed in regards to their own comfort zone. Respect this. Never force an unwilling participant to perform! They will eventually jump in when they see that it is safe and fun. Getting up in front of a group/audience is an individual process. Build the process and confidence level of your students. Remember that the number one fear listed by adults in our society is the fear of getting up in front of a group or an audience. We don't want to contribute to that!
  7. If students choose not to perform, make it clear that you still expect participation in some form. This might include excellent audience behavior, or taking the role of the "observer" to offer official feedback to the groups about process.
  8. In the beginning phases ask students to sit down in the same place they have been practicing when practice is over. Ask them to perform in the same exact place. A safety net is built into this technique because students will feel most comfortable repeating exactly what they have been practicing in the same locations as opposed to "going up front" or "on-stage" to perform.
- 9. SOME TIPS IF YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A CLASSROOM WHERE LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN THAT YOU DO NOT YOURSELF UNDERSTAND OR SPEAK:**
- a. Remember that the *arts transcend language*.
  - b. Find out how many students will understand your directions in English (or other language being used) and how many will not.
  - c. If most of the class will not understand you, you will need assistance from a translator. Set this up before you teach the class. Be careful that in asking for translation that you do not "hand over" your control of the class to that person.
  - d. If only some of the class will not understand you, you can ask for students who are bilingual to assist you as a translator. Assign these translators to individual students and give them permission to translate as you go. This WILL set up talking and noise as you are trying to guide the rest of the class, so expect it!
  - e. Use the TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE strategies of making sure as you are giving directions or instructions that you are physically acting out every thing you say.
- 10. REMEMBER TO HAVE FUN! BREAK A LEG!**