

MOTIVATING PERFORMERS AND AUDIENCE TO COMBAT PREJUDICE THROUGH READERS' THEATER

Ci sono pochissimi riferimenti ben contestualizzati ai diritti civili e all'attivismo nei materiali svizzeri; e ciò che gli studenti portano a casa (se portano a casa qualcosa) dalle loro lezioni di inglese come lingua straniera è spesso troppo generico. Le lezioni di storia nelle scuole secondarie svizzere (che avvengono nella lingua locale), dedicano talvolta delle unità agli Stati Uniti, dando però in genere poca attenzione ai movimenti civili e all'attivismo, concentrandosi su date e eventi storici basilari, senza raggiungere la profondità necessaria a insinuare un seme nella mente degli studenti e far avanzare la loro comprensione. Invece, il bisogno di contestualizzare meglio, nella speranza di creare una comprensione più profonda degli eventi e dell'umanità, può benissimo essere soddisfatto attraverso materiali autentici e attuali come quelli prodotti per promuovere Black Lives Matter non solo come movimento ma come modello di vita; un altro modo è quello della lettura teatralizzata (*readers' theater*) – un metodo davvero accessibile per l'insegnamento linguistico e di contenuti nelle aule d'inglese delle scuole secondarie e terziarie svizzere.

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Just about every world religion is based on the beliefs that "We are our brothers' keepers" and "We should do unto others as we would have others do unto us." "Yet, the history of our world contains very dark and disturbing examples of hatred and undisguised prejudice.

Fortunately, there are powerful examples where people from all different background have come together to combat this "virus" with words and deeds. Marches and protest demonstrations can be very effective, but there are other ways. While reading plays, watching movies and engaging in drama-based activities that focus on discrimination and injustice, participants come as close to climbing into the characters' skins as possible without undergoing surgery. When they take on the roles of the characters and their characters' problems, they are compelled to understand and express the hopes and fears of a people that are different from their own.

A readers' theater is a particular type of drama-based activity that is very economical, efficient and inclusive. It can be used to educate performers and audiences about all aspects of prejudice, including the causes, consequences and ways to combat it. A compelling performance doesn't require memorization of the script, scenery, props or costumes. Lighting and music are optional. With very little enhancements, an empathetic reading can empower and motivate members of a community to join the fight against prejudice.

Better to Light a Single Candle Than to Curse the Darkness

In reaction to acts of violence against minorities, including the Orlando shooting massacre, a diverse group of people (faculty, students- international and domestic, and staff) at Drexel University in Philadelphia, PA came together to express their desire to fight prejudice through drama. In response, we created a script, "Better to Light a Single Candle Than to

Curse the Darkness ,” that focuses on racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia. With the help of poignant dialogues, monologues, and songs from plays and movies, newspapers and podcasts, including *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *The Great Debaters*, performers have effectively exposed the pain and price of prejudice, encouraged people to exam their own, and empowered many to advocate respect and understanding for all members of humanity. Our accompanying slides and program that include timelines for each of the three areas, though unnecessary, have certainly enhanced the performance event.

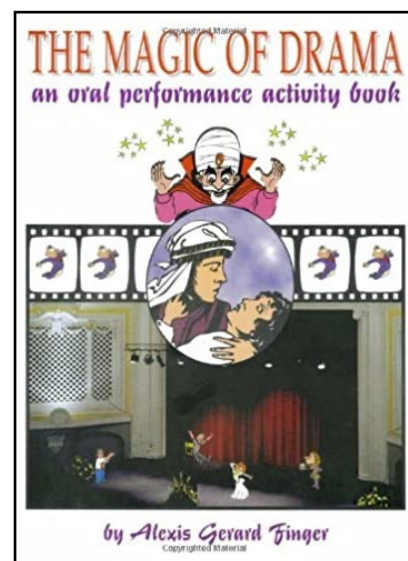
Positive reactions during follow-up discussions have shown us that we have made a difference. For example, a fabulous graduate student from China created the program and the production for our performance. She said she felt the message was so important that she wanted it to look as professional as possible. During the pandemic, the silver lining of Zoom is we had performers in California, Seattle, Minnesota, Canada, Boston, New Jersey and Philadelphia. Performers come from India, China, Taiwan, Argentina, Iran, Vietnam, Russia/Canada. They are gay & straight, young and old, male and female. People joined us for different reasons. Some joined because they liked the idea of performing. Others were motivated by the desire to address the problem of prejudice. In many cases, international students joined to practice using English in an exciting and authentic way.

And, yes, there were people who changed their thinking. There were people who couldn't understand why Jews were treated so badly. They wanted to know more. Is being gay really bad? Why shouldn't gay people be treated with the same respect we treat everybody else? Why are black people often in the news for doing bad things? After a performance, we had people sharing their own stories. For example, an African American who had been in jail, told his story. We heard stories from Muslims who have been treated badly. People wanted to know what performers got out of the experience of working with such a diverse group of people and what they learned from the content and the entire experience. You can access examples of one of our performances, The American Experiment, here: <https://youtu.be/D2eaQqehBBY>

If you are looking for more information on using Reader's Theater in the language classroom, these books can be useful:

- Carkin, G., Finger, A., Spence, S. & Caplan, N. (Winter 2009). Readers' Theater: Turbo-Charged Language Acquisition. (85-97) in *TESOL Classroom Practice Series: Authenticity in the Adult Language Classroom*.
- Finger, Alexis Gerard. (2000) *The Magic of Drama*. Lewiston, New York. Full Blast Production.
- Maley, Alan and Alan Duff. (1988). *Drama Techniques in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Reader's Theater is a powerful tool and the script is only part of it – the process of collaboration, the questions asked, the opinions re-thought, the caring about the product - all these elements can be catalysts of social change.



Questions for thought

1. What current world situations have you seen addressed in the foreign language classroom? How have they been taught?
2. What are the advantages of doing a reader's theater with a class? Discuss what a good choice of theater can bring, how you would organize the work, and what you could imagine some conversations would look like during practice sessions.

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