

# Action Methods in Education

Linda Ciotola

I was educated as a teacher before I learned about psychodrama, and many of the things I've learned can be taught—and indeed, taught better—using action methods. Indeed, these methods may be adjusted to the level of the students, from early elementary school to graduate and post-graduate professionals getting continuing education. This chapter illustrates some examples:

## Concretization

Concretization is the conversion of something abstract into something more concrete, thus making it more accessible to be used or worked with. For example, scarves or “furry auxiliaries” (stuffed toys or hand puppets) may be used to concretize strengths. Metaphors may become concrete and actualized. With children that is achieved by using puppets or stuffed animals. Even more contemporary findings in neuropsychology can be taught this way: For example, “mindful witness” can be taught in tandem with the “triune brain.”

Indeed, there are schools today that now give kids “brain breaks”, i.e., teach mindfulness, yoga, and meditation in order to help children relax and improve their ability to focus. The role of the “Mindful Witness” is held by the eagle who holds an “eagle eye view”, witnessing internal states and responses. The reptilian brain is represented by the dinosaur who can plod along noticing the heart beating, the breath coming down to the throat, moving the ribs and so on. Everything remains in homeostasis unless danger is perceived. When that happens, the heart races, breathing patterns change and the body prepares to fight or flee. This shift in the reptilian brain is held by the snake puppet who can hiss and strike or slither quickly away.

The mammalian brain—the limbic system—is represented by two dogs—one the border collie who “barks” “danger danger,” and the other a golden retriever who signals when everything is OK, and sends the message, “safe to play” and “safe to connect”. Two owls hold the role of frontal cortex, left side and right side. The brown owl puppet becomes the left side of the brain, the “thinker.” Balancing this, the white owl puppet represents the right side of the brain, the “big picture taker.” The owls are able to rotate their heads in a full circle, representing the abilities to see the big

picture. When the dinosaur is plodding along and the golden retriever is in charge of the limbic system, the frontal cortex can view things clearly, currently, and accurately making reasoned decisions. However, when the snake “hisses” then the owls are unable to move, “think”, or make good decisions. The teacher shows by picking up each hand puppet, each “furry auxiliary” one at a time and “becoming” that part of the brain and saying “I am the reptilian brain and it’s my job to...” and so on.

Once the teacher has gone through all the parts, the students take turns in the various roles using the hand puppets. The teacher observes and watches to see if the children have accurately perceived the various roles and brain parts. The teacher facilitates the action and then follows with questions for the children about what they noticed happening in their bodies in various roles (e.g. heart pounding, or fast breathing or an impulse to run etc.). Then the teacher assigns children the role of the eagle to observe while s/he takes each role, one at a time, and afterwards asks each “eagle” to say what s/he noticed (mindfulness training).

S/he then teaches the class how to self-soothe when they observe “the barking dog”—helping students to observe their breath, then slow down their breathing, practice gentle swaying, rocking, humming, yoga poses, etc.

This action structure teaches young children the basics of brain science and body awareness while introducing the concept and practice of mindfulness.

## Circle Sociometry

Circle Sociometry is an action structure that shows similarities in a group. A group member stands in the center of a circle, names a criterion that is true for himself or herself and asks that others who meet the criteria step into the circle. This builds group cohesion.

My colleague, Cathy Nugent, calls circle sociometry “circle similarities” which is a very user-friendly way to label this action intervention. Students stand in a circle and the teacher explains that this is a way to discover things we have in common with others ~ other students or with characters in a book they are reading or in a play they are studying. The teacher states a criteria and asks that if that criteria applies to them to “step into the circle”.

If the space does not accommodate a circle, “step to the line” can be used instead. This is an activity similar to circle sociometry, but instead using a line drawn down the center of the floor (perhaps using masking tape) in which a given criteria is stated and all those who meet that criteria step to the line.

These action structures can help students see how material they may be groaning about having to study may actually have some relevance to their lives—*e.g.* Shakespeare.

For “step to the line” the teacher draws a line using masking tape down the center of the room. Students are divided into two groups, randomly, on either side of the line. Let’s say the students have been studying *Hamlet* in their junior or senior year in high school. The teacher might ask, “Anyone who ever had a boyfriend /girlfriend behave strangely and in troubling ways, step to the line”. As students step in, the teacher can then ask which characters in *Hamlet* were in a boyfriend /girlfriend relationship and

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exhibited strange and troubling behavior. (Hamlet and Ophelia). The teacher can then ask, “Anyone who ever felt angry at a parent, step to the line” (Hamlet /his mother).

Helping the students identify how their current lives have some emotional relevance to that of the characters they are studying occurs more easily in action and also has the additional benefit of engaging students while allowing them to see that they are not alone amongst peers in their feelings. If the room is more conducive to creating a circle rather than a line, the teacher can ask the students to stand in a circle and when they can relate to the criteria being stated, they are asked to take a step into the circle. (To view a dramatization of how a teacher used “step to the line” to bring her students from warring gangs together, view the film, “The Freedom Writers” starring Hilary Swank.)

## Timelines

Timelines are a linear representation of a series of important events that are concretized in some way. They have multiple applications to express the history of anything in a multi-sensory way. Historical events, figures, literary figures; art history, music history and more can all be viewed using an action timeline. I will use the example of how I implement the timeline to teach *Romeo and Juliet* by Shakespeare. I use the device of sheets of yellow paper, a “yellow-brick road” on the floor—drawing from the song from the *Wizard of Oz*, “Follow the Yellow Brick Road.” There are events and dates, one on each of the yellow papers. For example, William Shakespeare and his date of birth and the date he wrote *Romeo and Juliet*. The yellow papers have the various scenes and characters named on them and are placed in order on the floor.

Prologue ~ The Chorus

Act 1, Scene 1 ~ Verona

Sampson, Gregory, Abram, Balthasar, Benvolio, Tybalt, Capulet, his wife,  
old Montague, his wife, Prince Romeo

Act 1, Scene 2 ~ A Street

Capulet, Paris, Servant/Clown, Benvolio, Romeo

Act 1, Scene 3 ~ Capulet’s House

Capulet’s wife, Nurse, Juliet

Act 1, Scene 4 ~ A Street

Romeo, Mercutio, Benvolio, Maskers, Torch Bearers

Act 1, Scene 5 ~ Capulet’s House

Serving men with napkins, Capulet, Romeo, Tybolt, Juliet, Nurse

The remainder of the play is laid out similarly. I have found that one Act per class period works well, but more time per Act may be needed, depending upon students' abilities, previous preparation and class length and size.

The teacher has prepared index cards each with a character's name and a brief description of the character and his/her importance in the play.

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For example, Romeo: "I am Romeo, member of the Montague family and a teenager. My best friend is Mercutio and my family is in a long-standing feud with the Capulets. When I meet Juliet Capulet, I fall for her immediately, but tragedy follows."

Juliet: "I am Juliet, member of the Capulet family. Although I am a teenager, I have a Nurse who is rather like a baby-sitter who watches over me. My family has a long time feud with the Montagues and when Romeo and I fall in love, tragedy follows."

Depending upon class size, there may be enough cards (characters) for each student in class to have one, but it might be necessary in smaller classes for students to play more than one character. The teacher can decide if s/he assigns roles or uses a lottery system or other method of making role assignments.

Students are asked to stand by the yellow paper that indicates the first scene in which his/her character appears. Then the teacher calls upon the student-characters in order of appearance to say what is written on their index card. In other words, each student steps into the role of the character.

The process continues with students in character, moving through the timeline. The teacher can ask questions of the students "in character" to help them discern the characters' emotions, motivations, etc. For example, following Tybolt's slaying of Mercutio the teacher might role reverse Tybolt and Romeo to help students see both perspectives.

When using the timeline, role reversal and enactment in teaching historical or literary events and figures, the students are able to go beyond merely learning facts into exploring the multi-dimensional facets of characters and the issues and times that shaped them.

## **Locograms**

A locogram is an activity that designates locations on the floor that represent certain roles or preferences about specific questions in a given moment.

My examples here are applying locograms specifically in classes on civics and social studies. However, locograms can be used in a variety of classroom settings to explore numerous topics.

Here, we are focusing on various forms of government: democracy, republic, parliamentary, monarchy, communist, socialist, dictatorship, and others etc. Students will have previously studied these in class and assigned a type of government to represent. One student per each type on the corresponding locogram.

Remaining students are "citizens". One at a time, each student representative of a type of government states the advantages of that type of government. The teacher facilitates and opens the floor for questions from the "citizens". This is given a time limit by the teacher for each one and also a time limit for questions. The teacher can ask questions too.

Then the teacher has the "citizens" go to the locogram that indicates the type of government under which they would like to live. The students who held roles do not have to stay on that particular one—they can also choose.

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Next, students say why they chose that particular one. There can be a follow up to this where students stand on the locogram showing the form under which they'd least like to live and make a soliloquy about what it is like to live under that form of government.

This activity requires that the students prepare ahead to become familiar with the various types of government and so will reveal in the activity which students are prepared and which ones are not.

It also elicits careful consideration by the students about the advantages and/or disadvantages of the various types of government and invites speculation about what it might be like to live under the various forms.

I have found this activity works well in secondary and higher education. It can also be adapted for middle school students.

## **Conclusion**

These examples are just a few of the many action method techniques that can be easily and creatively applied in educational settings.

### **Linda Ciotola**

Linda Ciotola, M.Ed., TEP is a certified trainer-educator-practitioner of sociometry, group psychotherapy, and psychodrama with 45 plus years of experience in teaching and group facilitation: elementary, secondary and higher levels of education in English, Drama, Communication, and Health.

She has led or co-led a number of training workshops in action methods. As a certified trainer in "The Therapeutic Spiral Model" of psychodrama (specifically designed for work with trauma survivors) she has worked both as clinician and trainer in private and group settings. With psychotherapist, Nancy Alexander, LCSW-C and team she co-created the first on-line educational program, entitled ACTS, to show how action methods can be used to heal trauma. She holds multiple certifications in fitness, health, yoga, nutrition, Reiki and is an interfaith minister. Her writing includes a number of journal articles and co-authorship with Karen Carnabucci: *Healing Eating Disorders with Psychodrama and Other Action Methods-Beyond the Silence and the Fury* (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2013).

Linda received the ASGPP Zerka Moreno Award in 2008 for outstanding contributions in the field of psychodrama and, with Nancy Alexander, the 2019 ASGPP Collaborator's Award. She is a Fellow of the ASGPP and presents widely at national and international conferences. Linda resides in

Maryland with her husband, Joseph, and their pet therapy collie dog, Lassie. She is the proud mother of two children and three grandchildren. For more information visit her website at: *healing-bridges.com* and ACTS: *ac-ts.com*