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TEACHING THEATRE IN A THEATRE-LESS WORLD

Students at Calhoun Community College (CCC) are mostly working-class young adults, members of the military, and non-traditional students. Each student must choose an arts elective from Theatre Appreciation, Arts Appreciation, and Music Appreciation. I teach Theatre Appreciation.

Upon my arrival at CCC, I was given a sample syllabus and a possible text. It did not take me long to decide not to use the book. Theatre is supposed to be seen and heard, not read. With 90% of our students having never been exposed to live theatre, I decided to combine my own teaching tactics with the syllabus.

As the students entered on the first day of class, I had the television show, *Glee,* playing on the large screen at the front of the classroom. I thought having a popular television show would help break the ice, and it piqued the interest of several students. I continued to open each class with snippets of various shows, which I followed with more formal lectures on the different types of theatre structures, the artists involved in producing theatrical works, and basic theatre history and theory. It was not until after I showed a video of an authentic classic retelling of *Oedipus Rex* that I realized the students were more interested in the material I was showing *prior* to class than what was actually happening *in* class.

In response, I scrapped the standard syllabus. I began asking students questions designed to engage their critical thinking skills: What is your favorite television show, and why do you like it? What do you think of when someone says *theatre* or *Broadway?* I showed episodes of television shows like *Mad Men, Saturday Night Live,* and popular movies to illustrate the validity and importance of Aristotle's elements. So, instead of trying to teach a foreign subject—asking students to accept the theatre world—I began connecting theatre to my *students'* worlds, which allowed them to begin moving beyond their daily lives and start connecting to the world of *theatre*.

At the end of my first semester, I gave a take-home final that required the students watch their favorite piece of pop culture and apply all six of Aristotle's elements to their work. The last question on the exam asked how, or if, their opinion of theatre had changed. One student wrote: "Theatre is what you make of it. Our opinions and views help us decide what theatre really is...The main thing I learned is that theatre is NOT boring. Theatre is all around us."

Now in my fourth semester, this class has become a popular fixture on campus. The most rewarding aspect, though, is seeing students from past semesters attending college productions, going to each class-planned show, and even travelling to see theatre. With this abstract, outside-of-the-box way of teaching, I have created an entirely new batch of theatre-goers. Theatre is no longer exclusive for a few. It is for everyone.

Richard Wallace, *Instructor, Theatre*

For further information, contact the author at Calhoun Community College, 6250 Highway 31 North, Tanner, AL 35671. Email: rjw247@nyu.edu

IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Let's start with the question "What's the difference between 7 and 3?" The answer is 4. If you ask students how they got that answer, they will say something like, "I took 4 from 7," or "I subtracted them."

The point is that the math operation is subtraction. Demonstrating this on a thermometer (as a matter of personal preference, I make the number line vertical), the *difference* between 7 and 3 is also the *distance* between those two points on the thermometer. So when students are asked to find the difference between two numbers, they are also being asked to find the distance between those two values on a thermometer. The distance could be measured from the 7 or the 3. Always, *always* take the difference (or the distance) from the second term, or the term that is being subtracted. In some cases, the student will have to move down the thermometer (down gives a negative value), while moving up gives a positive value.

Using this idea, look at the problem 7 - (-3). If these two values are located on the thermometer, the distance between them (the "difference") starting at (-3) is 10. This makes it seem as though - (-3) results in +3, which it does. Being more specific, it appears that a +3 has been added. So, the original problem 7 - (-3), can be written as 7 + (+3). This is consistent with a current textbook definition of subtraction, which is "to subtract, add the opposite."

It seems then that the key to addition is subtraction. When subtracting, put both values on the thermometer; then starting at the term being subtracted, find the distance to the other value. Try, for example, -4 - (+3). In this case, since it is subtraction, start at the +3 and *move down* to the negative four. This gives a "difference" of -7. This is consistent with using the rule of adding the opposite.

What about -4 + (+3)? As noted above, 7 - (-3) can be written as 7 + (+3). The nice thing is that subtraction is commonly defined as "adding the opposite." Given this and what was demonstrated above is that its converse is also true—to add, subtract the opposite! So, -4 + (+3) becomes -4 – (-3). Since it is subtraction, put both values on the thermometer, and starting at (-3), the distance to minus -4 is -1. So, -4 + (+3) = -1.

I haven't yet tested this out with students. This visualization, however, captures all the rules for operations with signed numbers. It just takes a "different" approach.

Mark Schwartz, *Adjunct Instructor, Math*

For further information, contact the author at Southern Maine Community College, 2 Fort Road, Portland, ME 04106. Email: mschwartz@smccme.edu

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor
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