



Purpose

By working together in a theater and drama setting, students are able to internalize what is meant by “working as an ensemble.” They build skills around sharing time, listening to each other, and taking turns. They also begin to understand the rewards that come along with cooperation and teamwork. These games are designed to get students acquainted with the physical feeling of working in a circle and working together. Each game helps them feel successful at simple tasks and feel invested through the possibility of “winning” a game as a community. The games invite students to stretch their capacity for working together by listening to one another, asking for help from their classmates, and engaging with agreed-upon norms. These are skills that translate into all aspects of life, and teachers can cite the games when encouraging students to practice teamwork throughout the day.

Introduction

Define *ensemble*

Say: *We are going to work today as members of an ensemble. An ensemble is a group of people working together.*

Show a hand motion for “ensemble.” For example, bring your hands together so your fingers are intertwined. Have students repeat this back.

Teach *actors’ neutral*

Say: *Actors are often all over the place when they are in a play. It can be helpful for a director to use the term “actors’ neutral” to bring actors back to a starting place. To stand in actors’ neutral, keep your feet hips’ width distance apart and put your hands at your sides. Relax your body and your face. Your face should not look like it has any feelings on it.*

Model standing in actors’ neutral.

Have student practice wiggling or dancing around, and then returning to actors’ neutral when you clap your hands or say “actors’ neutral” loudly.

Set norms and expectations

List expectations for keeping the theater space safe, kind, and productive. It is best if students can brainstorm this list together, but here are some ideas for norms and expectations:

- Listen when others are speaking.
- Raise a hand to speak in a group setting.
- Return to actors' neutral when the teacher gives the signal.
- Respect others' ideas by refraining from laughter or teasing.

Transition to theater space

Say: *When I clap my hands three times, stand up, tuck your chair in, and move into a circle silently. When you get to the circle, stand in actors' neutral. Let's see how swiftly we can do this as an ensemble!*

You may want to set a timer to see how fast students can move into a circle. Once there, the teacher can report the time back and celebrate the students for moving so quickly into a circle.

Note: It can be helpful to leave an option open for some students to participate in the ensemble by watching as an audience member. You might say, "You can either play the game, or watch the ensemble play the game from your seat. If you choose to be an audience member, you may contribute to the ensemble by providing feedback after the activity." Be sure to let students who choose to be audience members give compliments to the group after the game is over, during student reflection. Do not have audience members provide criticism; just positive comments about what the ensemble did well.

Unit 1: Name Patterns

Level 1

Students stand in a circle. One student says her name and adds a word that starts with the same first letter as her name. For example: Sophie Spaghetti. Everyone in the circle echoes back the first student's name and word. The second student repeats this activity. Continue until every student has had a chance to say her name, a word, and have it echoed back.

Level 2

Repeat Level 1, but add a movement to the name and the word. For example: Sophie Spaghetti might stomp her foot while saying her name and word. Students can pick a new word for their name if they'd like.

Level 3

Repeat Level 2, but add an inflection to the name, word, and motion. For example, Sophie Spaghetti might say "spaghetti" in a particularly high-pitched voice, she might choose to whisper her name, or she might choose to add some rhythm to the way she says it.

Level 4

Repeat Level 3, telling students to try to remember some of their classmates' words, motions, and sounds. Once everyone has had a chance, the first player (for example, Sophie Spaghetti) says the name, motion, and inflection of another player somewhere else in the circle (for example, James Jar). The second player repeats his own name (James Jar), and then says the name, motion, and inflection of another player somewhere else in the circle (Abigail Ant). Repeat until everyone has had her name, motion, and inflection "passed" to her.

Level 5

Have students attempt to play this game in groups of seven without the teacher's intervention.

Unit 2: What Are You Doing?

Level 1

Students stand in a circle. The teacher is the leader. Introduce the vocabulary word **pantomime**: To pantomime is to act out an activity without making any sound. The teacher says an action (for example, jumping rope). Students practice pantomiming the action until the teacher says, “Neutral.” When they hear the word “neutral,” students return to actors’ neutral. Teacher says a few more actions (such as talking on the phone, dribbling a basketball, brushing your teeth, making a pie, eating a pizza, etc.). Students practice transitioning from one action to another and occasionally returning to neutral.

Level 2

Students stand in a circle. Each student thinks of an action. Start with one student (Player A). That student asks the person to her left (Player B), “What am I doing?” Player B gives an action (for example, playing a guitar). Player A pantomimes playing a guitar until Player B says, “Neutral.” Then Player B asks the person to her left (Player C), “What am I doing?” Player C gives an action. Player B pantomimes the action until Player C says, “Neutral.”

Level 3

Repeat Level 2, except have the entire group say “Neutral,” instead of a single player. This means the group will need to develop a rhythm so that they can all say the word “neutral” in unison.

Level 4

Students stand in a circle. Each student thinks of an action. The first player (Player A) begins pantomiming an action (for example, washing a dog). The player to her left (Player B) asks, “What are you doing?” Player A says an action that does NOT match the action she is doing (for example, “I’m dancing ballet”). Player B begins pantomiming that action (dancing ballet), and Player A stops pantomiming. The player to Player B’s left (Player C) asks, “What are you doing?” Player B gives a new action (for example, “I’m coloring in a coloring book”). Continue around the entire circle.

Level 5

Have students attempt to play this game at Level 4 in groups of seven without the teacher’s intervention.

Unit 3: One-Word Story

Level 1

Students stand in a circle. The teacher directs. The first student (Player A) begins telling a silly story about anything. The teacher taps Player A (or otherwise directs her) to indicate that she can stop talking. The teacher taps the next student in the circle (Player B). Player B should pick up where Player A left off as best she can. (For example, maybe Player A said, “Once upon a time there was a mean pig named Danny.” Then Player A’s turn ended, as indicated by a tap by the teacher. Player B might say, “Danny was mean because he always ate his brother’s slop, no matter what.”) Continue around the circle until everyone has had a turn.

Level 2

Students stand in a circle. Player A says one word (such as “Once”). Player B says the next word (such as “upon”), that connects to Player A’s word. Continue around the circle, telling a story one word at a time. When the story reaches the end of a sentence, a player may say “period,” “exclamation point,” or “question mark” in lieu of a word in the story. Continue around the circle a few times so that a cohesive story can form.

Level 3

Repeat Level 2, except rather than saying one word at a time, have students say three words at a time.

Level 4

Repeat Level 2, except that students do not have to speak in order. Rather, whenever a student has said a word, she puts one hand in the circle. Students each get two words in the story, one word for each hand. The student who has the last hand must also say the last word in the story.

Level 5

Have students attempt to play this game at Level 4 in groups of seven without the teacher's intervention.

Unit 4: Zip Zap Zop

Level 1

Students stand in a circle. Player A says, "Zip." Player B says, "Zap." Player C says, "Zop." Go around in a circle saying these words as fast as they can, taking turns. Students should look to the student next to them when saying their word, like they are "passing" the word around the circle. See how fast they can get around the circle saying "Zip," "Zap," and "Zop."

Level 2

Students stand in a circle. This time, instead of passing the words "Zip," "Zap," and "Zop" around the circle, have students make eye contact with each other and pass the words across the circle. They can clap in the direction of the person they are passing the word to.

For example, if the circle included, in order, Abby, Britney, Carl, Deante, Evan, Faye, and Gene, this might happen:

Gene (looking across the circle at Deante): Zip

Deante (looking across the circle at Britney): Zap

Britney (looking at Evan): Zop

And so on. See how quickly students can pass the word, and remember, eye contact matters. It's easy to get confused when students are standing across from each other.

Level 3

Incorporate "Elephant." Students may still send "Zip," "Zap," or "Zop" across the circle, but at any given time, they may also send "Elephant." If a person receives an "Elephant" command from across the circle, they must put their hands in front of them like a trunk, and the people on either side of the trunk must each become ears (by stretching their arms over their heads). The elephant trunk then gets to decide if she would like to send a "Zip," "Zap," "Zop," or "Elephant."

Level 4

Incorporate "Racecar," "Bunny," and "Palm Tree":

Racecar: The middle person is the driver, the people on either side are the wheels on the car.

Bunny: The middle person is the bunny face and legs, the people on either side are the tall ears.

Palm Tree: The middle person is the trunk, the people on either side are swaying leaves.

Now the middle person may choose to send “Zip,” “Zap,” “Zop,” “Racecar,” “Bunny,” “Palm Tree,” or “Elephant.”

Level 5

Allow a few students to invent their own additions to the game and add them to the options of things to send around the circle. Students can come up with anything from “Gym Teacher” to “Pokémon,” so the sky’s the limit. As long as they can teach their idea to everyone, anything’s game. Try just three additions, or have students break into small groups and invent their own version of the game to play with each other.