

# Taking notice

## *Helping your students build characters through observation* | BY PETER KING

IF YOUR STUDENTS are anything like mine, they are already masters at modeling.

And why shouldn't they be? They've been imitating their parents since birth. Even before they get to high school, most kids can skillfully imitate their teachers, their classmates, their favorite TV characters; they can mimic gestures and speaking patterns for comic effect. They do it constantly.

While this inborn affinity for imitation sometimes can get in students' way in an acting class—where a lot of the work is aimed at accessing one's true self—I've found modeling to be a quick, easy, and very useful tool when it comes to characterization.

Students can use themselves or others as models. Carefully observing people who resemble the characters your students will play provides immediate access to how those characters might feel, think, and behave. Observing people will give students a wealth of specific, authentic, and fascinating detail, and keep them from creating stereotypes, the result of only "imagining" their characters.

Students easily enter and enjoy observation exercises because, as I said, they model naturally. When approaching modeling as a technique, in the way I teach it in my theatre classes, students first observe themselves and then observe others. As actors, they need to recognize their personal idiosyncrasies, habits, gestures, and vocal patterns in order to eliminate them

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A period photo of a couple on the street might lend character detail and inspiration to student actors preparing the roles of Lois and Bill in *Kiss Me, Kate* (a recent production directed by Peter King).





when playing other characters. It's a difficult but crucial first step.

I start this unit by making kids aware of what it means to observe concrete detail. In the same way visual artists need to see minute changes in light or color, actors need to see and hear what makes individuals unique. Is it the way she tilts her head, or the way he leaves his sentences hanging? When he walks, where is his center of gravity? These are a few of the questions your students will learn to answer by observing closely.

I also discuss with my students the taboos about looking at people. In real life, many of us avoid direct eye contact; we've been taught not to stare. Reassure your students that as actors they need to observe other people. They don't need to be rude about it, but they shouldn't feel guilty about it, either. And on stage and in film, they will *have* to look in their scene partner's eyes.

### **Exercise one: I'd wear that**

Here's a simple, ten-minute exercise I use to show students how important it is to observe details about other people.

After doing a vigorous physical warm-up such as tag or some other theatre game, sit the class in a circle and tell them to look closely at what everyone else is wearing: clothing, shoes, jewelry, everything. Have the students, without talking, pick one or two items they would like to have and wear for themselves. Tell students they will be asked *why* they chose a certain item.

Make sure you encourage your students to look at the garments and accessories in isolation from the wearer. Guard students against making this a popularity contest where everyone picks what their best friend is wearing. Students should be identifying their own preferences, not what is fashionable or socially acceptable. There may be some socio-economic factors at play here, too, which you can defuse beforehand by saying this is not about what things cost, it's about observing details: color, shape, texture, etc. Don't make a big deal about this; it's only an observation exercise.

After a few minutes of observing, go around the group, and ask each student what he or she liked and to support his or her answer by identifying specific details. For example, Sam says, "I'd like Tom's blue sweater because it looks soft, baggy, and comfortable, and cobalt blue is one of my favorite colors."

What did your students notice about *how* they observed? Were they thorough? Did they notice details? Which students gave the best specifics when justifying their choices? Did anyone feel embarrassed having to look at their classmates? Did anyone avoid making eye contact?

### **Exercise two: Have a rotten day**

Here's another quick exercise for making students aware of what is going on inside people by observing what's happening on the outside—a critical step in good acting.

Without doing any preliminary warm-up, have the class stand in a circle and observe each other. Without talking, students should look at each member of the class and note whether they think that person is having a good day, a bad day, or an in-between day. Who appears anxious, relaxed, elated, or jealous? Encourage your students to see what is going on in the moment with each person. If a student knows a friend flunked an exam earlier in the day, they should try not to bring that prior knowledge to bear. They should see what is happening *right now*.

After students make mental notes on who in the group is having a good day or a rotten day, ask individuals to share their findings. Ask students to identify the specific details of *why* they think somebody might be having a good day. Is it the way she's flicking her hair back or the way he's widening his eyes?

Your students have just learned the importance of observing people closely and seeing verifiable facts. They can use these details when they create characters from models.

### **Assignment one: Self-observation**

Now that your students know what observing carefully means, their first assignment is to observe themselves.

Just as an artist might draw a self-portrait, your students will watch themselves closely and try to compose a physical and vocal sketch from life. By creating a self-portrait, students learn that they are many faceted, and that they can bring those different facets to the complex people they will play on stage. They also learn what personal idiosyncrasies and physical habits they must eliminate when playing someone else.

I ask students to observe themselves carefully for three days and to write a page-long description of themselves in their journals. I encourage them to be honest observers because they will be asked to share their findings with the class. I give students a checklist (see the sidebar opposite) containing aspects of characterization that will guide them when observing themselves and others. I have the class help me demonstrate the more physical items in the checklist. (The points dealing with posture and kinesiology will be familiar to anyone who's studied Laban Movement Analysis; consider this a fun way to introduce students to that useful discipline.) For example, we'll all walk around the space with very erect spines. Then I'll say, "Slump," and everybody will walk about the space slumping. Each body center can be isolated, and I'll ask the students to try leading from the head, or pelvis, and so on. We all look silly doing it, but the students get the idea.

Even after these preliminaries, students might say, "How can I observe myself?" Ask them to close their eyes and describe their posture at this moment. Ask them if they have ever looked at their reflection in storefront windows as they walk through the mall. Part of the problem may be that they never *have* observed themselves consciously. That's what this work is about. If they are really struggling, have them pair up with a good friend and observe each other using the checklist. This can be touchy, so make sure students accept whom they're partnered with.

As students observe themselves, ask them to notice and write in their journals concrete visible facts. I tell my students to press their "pause" button now

and again—when they're most relaxed, say, or when they're excited about something—and notice their spine position or what tempo they're going at. What is their state of relaxation, openness, or flow when they are on their way to the dentist, to a party, to scoring a goal in a soccer game? When they feel childish, mature, sexy, powerful, or depressed, what are their bodies and voices doing?

Ask your students to note in their journals how they change physically when they put on different types of clothes: getting dressed for a date, putting on a bathing suit, or pulling on their favorite old sweats. Ask them to describe the way they switch roles depending on whom they are talking to or what they are doing. How are they different when they are at home with their families as opposed to at a party? Can they describe how they change physically, especially their walk or spine? Ask them to notice changes in behavior and physicality when they talk with different people on the phone. How do their voices change?

After your students have spent a couple of days observing themselves, hold a discussion focusing on what they learned about themselves. Can they identify how their outward gestures and mannerisms show who they are on the inside? Do classmates agree with each others' findings?

### Assignment two: Modeling others

Imitating a beloved faculty member ranks near the top of my students' favorite assignments. I usually give them the assignment concurrently with the assignment to observe themselves, which gives them extra time to develop it.

In this observation exercise students will observe a faculty member as closely as possible over two weeks. Using the observation checklist, students should look for what stands out about their teacher and over-exaggerate it. They should be looking for the essence of the teacher and magnifying it, big time. The goal is a complete caricature.

Students should observe their faculty members from a distance so the teachers are not self-conscious. (Still, you might tip off your colleagues, ex-



## Observation checklist

- 1. Garment.** What is distinctive about what this person (or you if you are observing yourself) wears? Make sure you notice jewelry, handbags, hats, and other accessories. Does this person have any sacred objects?
- 2. Word choice.** Are there particular words or phrases this person uses often? Does he or she use common language or more elevated language?
- 3. Habitual gestures.** What gestures does this person perform habitually? It's fun to guess why a particular gesture to a part of the body may have developed.
- 4. Spine.** Is it straight, curved forward or backward, curved at the top or bottom, or lean to the side? Look for junctures between the spine and head, and the lower back and pelvis. Adjusting an actor's spine can radically change how he or she reads to the audience.
- 5. Body center.** Most people lead from a particular place in the body—head, neck, chest, stomach, pelvis, or base of spine.
- 6. Rhythm.** Everybody has his or her own dominant rhythm—fast, slow, or somewhere in between. We also can have inner rhythms that differ from our outer rhythms. Look for the nervous tapping of fingers or darting eyes.
- 7. Sense of weight.** Light, medium, or heavy. This is not actual weight. Some very large people move with a lightness about them, and some people who weigh less can be very grounded. Watch for how people stand up from a sitting position or whether they go up on their toes a lot, as opposed to being back on their heels.
- 8. Energy flow.** Is it bound or unbound? Again, look for the dominant flow. Does the person let his or her energy flow out freely or do they keep it all bound up inside? I always tell students to look at hands and faces. Does the person walk around with closed fists? Does a person have a wide-open smile or a tight-lipped smile? When the person gestures, does he extend the arm all the way out from the body, or does he stop it abruptly a few inches out from his torso?
- 9. Vocal patterns.** Start to identify pitch, rhythm, or specific breathing patterns. Does the person have a sing-songy voice? Does she have a breathy voice?

What other aspects of character can be observed? Ask your students if they can add to this list.

—P.K.

plaining the assignment's purpose.) In front of a mirror or some friends, the students should practice imitating their teachers' walks, the way they hold their spines, their vocal rhythms, and their physical gestures and habits. Can your students identify their faculty members' physical tempos and rhythms? What aspects of the student are similar to his or her faculty member? As the students adopt the physical attributes, they should notice how the attributes *affect* them, not just physically but also emotionally and psychologically. When does the student feel like the teacher? Can they begin to see things from the faculty member's point of view?

Other questions your students might answer in their journals: What type of music might best reflect this person? What three adjectives might best describe him? Can they think of a metaphor that accurately describes this person?

Then, through improvisation, students develop a two-minute monologue (they'll need to practice at home) in which they teach a class or reveal some other aspect of the teacher's life. For their presentation the students should come to class as their faculty members, wearing similar shoes and clothes, and teach brief classes or lead activities using the rest of the students as their imaginary pupils.

The point is to isolate what is unique about the teacher and exaggerate it—even over-exaggerate, as I said before. This forces students to make clear choices and commit to them. The first time students present their scenes, they will be in this over-the-top form. In my classes, after we critique the presentations, students practice and perform them again, adjusting the characters to be as realistic as possible, to eliminate all comic aspects.

After each round of presentations—the comic and the truthful—ask the

audience what physical or vocal adjustments were dead-on. Ask the presenters which choices made them *feel* the most like their faculty members.

### **From imitation to creation**

While focusing on modeling, I have students do as many written observations as possible. Ask your students to find a place they can unobtrusively observe a model for twenty minutes and write their observations in a journal. They can use the observation checklist as a guide, but they should not feel bound by it. Suggest that they include specific, detailed descriptions of the people and any apparent relationships, dramatic situations, or interesting environments.

Then ask students—and this is the fun part—to invent brief biographies for their models: where they came from, how many times they've been married, what secrets they have in their pasts. Of course, the stories the students invent should be plausible, based on how their models dress and act. Students might share these with the class by reading them out loud.

Encourage your students to model people they like. If observing strangers, students should pick people who arouse their curiosity. Some students will want to imitate for the sole purpose of mocking. This works against the intention of modeling as a means of entering another person's point of view, of understanding another's motives.

It is also important that your students observe and model their characters after people in life, not the ones they see on TV or in the movies. Students love to imitate movie stars, but movie stars are already modeling—sometimes even when playing themselves—and your students will be led toward hollow stereotypes.

Some of your students will be brilliant imitators but actually distance themselves from the real person they are modeling. These students are essentially judging the model and proclaiming to the audience, "I'm not really like this, and don't you forget it." But the point is that the audience *does* forget it—by having the student *identify* with the character through moving in his or her body and using his or her words. Once they feel the power of that transformation for themselves, even these tough cases in your class are apt to come around.

It will take time for most students to make truthful the physical and vocal choices they garner from their models. That's okay. Let your students have fun doing this work and allow for a lot of comic exaggeration as they make their way toward complex and *believable* characters.

Consider that every character ever written is already living inside of these young actors: Richard III or Juliet, Walter Lee Younger or Heidi Holland. Your students don't know it yet, but if they develop their ability to observe and accept what is happening inside, they will have the wealth of all human experience to draw upon for their character work. They may not have the life experience now, but they are in the midst of gaining it everyday, so they need to pay attention.

Whether or not your students are destined to play the great characters on stage someday, help them develop the habit of watching and wondering about people. It will instill a lifelong curiosity about what it means to be human.

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