

Mask Work Lesson Plan For Kids

Paper Masks

This particular lesson plan can be used in various classroom settings. Some teachers may opt to use it in an elementary Social Studies class when teaching a unit on Ancient Greece as actors in Greek Theatre wore masks. Some teachers may opt to use it in theatre class when studying historical art forms such as Commedia dell'Arte.

Materials

heavy card stock (8.5" X 11")
thin sewing elastic
scissors
hole-punch
rayons, markers, color pencils, paint, etc.
construction paper
glue

Day 1: Introduce History of Masks in Greek Theatre or Commedia (or both!)

Actors in ancient Greek Theatre were so far away from the audience that they opted to wear extravagant costumes and masks. Plus, it's believed that the shape of the mask actually helped amplify the performer's voice so the audience could hear him better. Masks used in tragic plays portrayed somber or distressed expressions, and masks used in comedic plays were smiling or smirking.

Commedia dell'Arte is Italian for "Play of Professional Artists," but it was performed in streets or market squares of Italy where it would attract people's attention. It was popular from the 1500s through the mid-1700s, and its popularity grew throughout Europe. As the style spread, it became influenced by each of the countries in which it was performed. Commedia was typically performed by travelling family troops, and this also caused it to change as different families would implement various changes. Masks were used in Commedia dell'Arte mainly to help represent the different types of characters. They also limited the performers' view, causing them to twist their head from side to side to see what was happening around them. This became part of the acting style. The characters all had features that controlled their movements, which influenced their actions on stage.

Day 2: Making the Masks

- Have the students measure the distance between their eyes with two fingers. Transfer distance to paper and mark the eyes, making sure they are centered.
- Once they have marked the location of the eyes, have them draw the eyes around their marks.
- Draw the shape of a head around the eyes. The head should be as big as the paper or their own face will show through.

- Once they have designed the basic shape of their mask, they can decorate it. Encourage each member of the class to make their mask a specific character. They may use construction paper and glue to add three-dimensional details to their mask.
- When finished decorating have the students cut out their mask and also the eyes.
- Punch holes on the sides, about one inch below the eyes.
- Tie one end of a piece of sewing elastic to each side and adjust to student accordingly.

Day 3: Mask Work

- Two or three students stand “on stage” wearing the masks. Discuss with the class the characters they see. Based on the characters displayed, create a scene for the actors to perform *without sound*. Feel free to take suggestions from the class. For older or more advanced students, you can divide them into groups and have them create their own scenes.
- As the students perform the scene, point out significant elements of their performances. You may have to remind students to face the audience so that their mask’s expression is visible.
- Students learn through this mask work that they greatly depend on their faces for expression and communication. While they are wearing the mask, communication is a challenge. Eventually the students will resort to using their bodies to communicate. This work is beneficial for kids who may feel insecure and hindered with moving their bodies (even if vocally and facially they are typically free and expressive).
- Discuss with the class the way the performers’ movement choices seem to transform the masks. Although the masks obviously remain the same, once the actor begins to communicate with his or her body, it seems as though we actually see the facial expressions change with the story.
- Be sure to give everyone a chance to perform!

Exercise Contributed by Laura Cole

Laura is a Plymouth State University alum with a degree in musical theatre. She has performed in revue shows and musicals around the country, most recently performing the role of Ulla in THE PRODUCERS at the Iao Theatre in Maui. Laura completed a year-long tour with Missoula Children’s Theatre, performing in, and directing, SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS, PINOCCHIO, and THE FROG PRINCE. Laura teaches at various summer theatre camps, and is a frequent counselor/teacher at Camp CenterStage in Raymond, Maine where she has proudly worked for the past two summers.