

**Title:** Daily Actings

**Grade Ranges:**

    K-4  
    5-8  
  X 9-12

**Subject Tag:**

Art and Music: Theatre  
Creative Writing: Play Writing  
Creative Writing: Screen Writing

**Synopsis:**

Students will interview people on video or audiotape and learn their lines, dialect, and syntax. Students will then put together a play in which they emulate the people they interview. This project is inspired by the work of Anna Deavere Smith; references to Web sites and books about her work are provided.

**Keywords:**

daily life, theatre, dialect, action, gesture, Anna Deavere Smith, interview, character study, syntax, dialogue, play writing, script writing, screen writing

**Body:**

Explain to students that they are going to do an exercise inspired by a performer and director named Anna Deavere Smith. If possible, show students the clips available online (see links). Read the following quotation from Smith talking about her method of portraying real people (as opposed to characters from plays) in her performances:

What are the subtleties in real-life behavior that could be used in the creating of characters? There are linguistics as well as physical details that make a person unique. My overall goal was to show that no one acts like anyone else. Identity, in fact, lives in the unique ways that a person departs from the English language in a perfect state to create something that is individual... In fact, everyone, in a given moment of time, will say something that is like poetry. The process of getting to that poetic moment is where "character" lives (xxx-xxxi. Anna Deavere Smith. *Fires in The Mirror*. Anchor Books: New York, 1993).

Tell students that they are going to create performances from their daily lives based on interviews on a topic they choose. Place students in groups of four to six, and have each group choose a location where they will find inspiration and people to interview. Explain that each student will later emulate a person from this chosen place. Make sure that the chosen locations will have people who are accessible and willing to participate in this type of project. A lunchroom may be a good choice, while a supermarket might be difficult because of laws against taping or because people will be in too much of a rush to participate.

Have students discuss in their groups what issues might be important to people in the environment they plan to film. Students must find a topic that will have multiple perspectives. Have students write a one-page proposal as a group. It should include: when and where they will collect material, what their focus will be, who they will interview (if known), and a list of at least five questions they will ask. Good interview questions cannot be answered with one word but instead get people talking about things that interest them. Words like how, why, and describe are helpful when forming open-ended questions.

Students should have a basic knowledge of how to use the tape recorder or video camera before going out. Show them where the power buttons are, how to use the batteries, and how to record and play back their tapes. Have students use microphones and headphones, as sound is of paramount importance to this project. If students videotape, the image should be clear and set on a wide shot that shows the subject's hands and other body movements

Inform students of safety issues that they need to be aware of in order to properly care for the equipment. Make sure that students get their footage in groups. They should be aware of basic ethical and personal safety issues. Specifically:

- ◆ The process of taping takes focus. Make sure someone else with you keeps an eye on your surroundings if you are in public.
- ◆ Whenever you tape someone, you alter the situation. You cannot be invisible with equipment, and the bigger the equipment the more that is true.
- ◆ People may not want you to record their image or their voice. Do not tape anyone who does not want to be taped.
- ◆ Go to the location you plan to use more than once before bringing equipment in order to look for potential hazards or complications.
- ◆ If people live where you plan to record, tell them what you plan to do, and listen to their responses.
- ◆ If you have any doubts about the safety of a situation, find somewhere else to record.

Students should record at least one person per group member for a maximum of half an hour per person.

When they have gathered their footage, have students select parts that were most effective and that express the essence of the person that they interviewed. From here this lesson has two options:

- a) Students can study and portray the people they interviewed exactly as they were taped.
- b) Students can write a play (as a group) or monologues (individually) in which all characters are based on the people interviewed.

Give students time to write, if applicable, and to learn the parts of their characters. Instruct them to learn this person's part by repeating it over and over including all ums, uhs, coughs, and hesitations; all of these mannerisms add to the individuality of the speaker. If students have used video to capture their subject, have them imitate gestures

as well. Make sure they understand that this is not the time to make fun of people. They need to embody their characters in ways that are empathetic yet accurate. Have students work with their groups to help each other better express their parts.

When everyone is ready, have students perform with their groups.

Ask students to consider:

- ◆ How would these performances be different if you had worked only from written texts?
- ◆ How would the texts be different? How would people be represented differently if they were part of a written script?
- ◆ How do these characters seem more or less authentic?
- ◆ How are these characters more or less entertaining?

### **Related Links:**

#### **PBS Stage on Screen: Twilight Los Angeles:**

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/stageonscreen/twilight/twilight.html>

Gives a synopsis of Anna Deavere Smith's performance video about the Rodney King trial and verdict. From this site, you can view two video clips and link to an essay by Smith.

#### **Salon.com She the People**

<http://www.salon.com/books/feature/2000/11/01/smith/>

This page features an interview with Anna Deavere Smith by Nan Goldberg.

#### **Video 101 with Professor Monkey**

<http://www.northernvisions.org/htmlhowto/how1.htm>

Presents a good overview on how to make a video from pre-production through post.

#### **Features: [please mark with an x]**

- Contains special education tips
- Quick Activity (less than 30 minutes; story starter)
- Requires Internet access for students to complete

#### **Objectives:**

Using the myriad of material in one's daily life in a video or audio recording, students will study human mannerisms, practice acting, and understand that a situation can demand a number of approaches to capture it on stage and/or paper.

#### **Standards:**

**NY: Arts Standard 1:** Creating, Performing and Participating in the Arts Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts. **2:** Knowing and Using Arts Materials and Resources Students will be knowledgeable about

and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.

**NYC: A2c.** Develop a multi-media presentation. **E3d.** The student makes informed judgments about television, radio, and film productions; that is, the student evaluates the role of the media in focusing attention and in forming opinion.

**CT: Theatre 1.** Creating. Students will create theatre through improvising, writing and refining scripts. **2.** Acting. Students will act by developing, communicating and sustaining characters. **5.** Researching And Interpreting. Students will research, evaluate and apply cultural and historical information to make artistic choices. **6.** Connections. Students will make connections between theatre, other disciplines and daily life.

**NJ: Visual and Performing Arts 1.2:** All students will refine perceptual, intellectual, physical, and technical skills through creating dance, music, theater, and/or visual arts. **1.3:** All students will utilize arts elements and arts media to produce artistic products and performances.

**Prerequisite Skills:**

1. Some knowledge of video or audio technology is helpful.
2. Some experience interviewing is helpful.
3. The ability to conduct oneself appropriately when taping in public is important.

**Time Required:**

Five to seven hours (which includes out of class time to conduct interviews)

**Technology and Materials Needed:**

1. Video or audio equipment and batteries
2. Tape stock
3. microphones
4. tripod (optional)

**Procedures**

**Assessment Criteria:**

1. Are students able to embody their subjects respectfully and accurately?
2. Are students able to find a bit of the poetic in working with the characters?
3. Are groups able to explore a range of topics with people who are diverse in their opinions and character?

**Recommended Lesson Plan Review Date:**

**Review Comments:**