

Hand Animals

Lesson plan by Matt Buchanan

Adapted by

This lesson serves as an introduction to the structured use of the imagination and to the idea of character. It's also great fun and gives all of the students a chance to "perform" on the first class.

Look at your hands.

We begin by examining our hands. I coach in the following vein: "Hold your two hands up and look at them. Use one finger to trace the lines and the shape of your other hand. Wiggle your fingers. Open and close your fists. Except your face, your hands are the most expressive part of your body. Look at all the different things they can do! Try to find as many different ways to move your hands as you can."

The students spend several minutes (or until they're done) closely examining the infinite possibilities of hand movement.

Animal Characters

Next I show them that I can make my hand or hands into an animal. Usually I show them a spider. One hand becomes the spider, and it "crawls" up my arm, across my chest, and finally over my head, as I make comic-terrified faces and generally react as I would were a real spider crawling on me. The children love this, but they also get the point. I am able to make my "hand-spider" real for them.

I then coach the children to invent their own hand animals. By raising their hands (an absolute must in my school), children volunteer to show their new creations to the class. After we have seen and admired each character, the whole class tries to make it. (This reinforces for each child the worth of his or her creation, and gives the whole class practice in observation and mirroring.)

If the group is sophisticated enough I will coach discussion in some of the following ways:

"Look at this particular bird (or dog or wildebeest). For this performer, what do you think is the most important characteristic of a bird?" (I'm looking for the primary feature—a bird can be mostly wings and flight, but it can also be mostly beak and pecking motions. I've even seen birds whose principal characteristic was their distinctive hopping walk.)

"What do you think this character would do if he saw that character?"

"Is one character "better" than another?" (NO—just different.)

"What is a puppet? In some ways can we call these hand animals puppets?"

Once we have all made many different hand animals, I use this activity as a springboard into using more of our bodies to create characters. We then figure out how to create our chosen character with our whole body.

