

# MAKING THE FAMILIAR STRANGE:

## CREATIVELY ENGAGING VOICE, GESTURE, & STORYTELLING WITHIN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING CLASSROOM

**Objective:** After completing this activity, students will be able to look critically at an everyday experience, creating a story and performatively re-linguaging this practice. Additionally, students will develop confidence in presentation skills, further enhancing critical thinking and cultural awareness by learning to creatively engage voice, gesture, and performance through "making the familiar strange" within the public speaking classroom.

**Rationale:** In this activity, students employ mock campfire storytelling to "make the familiar strange" in the same spirit as Horace Miner's (1956) classic tale of the "Nacirema." Students work individually, in pairs, or as small groups (around three) to create a whimsical story, deconstructing a mundane, everyday ritual (event, activity, practice) into a mythical or folkloric re-vision. Through storytelling, students are experimenting with performance while learning to integrate vocal variation (pitch, pace, power, pauses, and exaggeration) with gestures, movement, and sensory-rich language. The mock campfire, as an alternative pedagogical method, further deconstructs and "makes strange" the classroom space in a way that supports and inspires creative expression while also performing the activity itself. This activity creates a collective experience that brings students together as a group, building community, while helping them to unleash their creativity.

**Materials:** Blankets or towels for sitting on the floor, a flashlight, and one or two bunches of single or multi-colored Christmas tree lights

**Introduction:** To prepare students for this activity, it is helpful to introduce Conquergood's (1985) "four ethical pitfalls" as a tool to help students critically "witness" how they perform their own cultural traditions and those of others. By introducing Conquergood's (1985) ethical stances in combination with Miner's (1956) "Nacirema" and Hughes' (1974) "The Sacred Rac," students have the opportunity to "make strange" their own everyday practices, and, as a result, hopefully, engage with cultural diversity in a more sensitive, compassionate, and ethical manner. Two video examples can further help illustrate making familiar practices strange, including: Monty Python's<sup>1</sup> "The Ministry of Silly Walks" and the BBC Symphony Orchestra's (2004) performance of John Cage's<sup>2</sup> "4'33" musical composition.

**Discussion:** For this activity, students will be asked to choose an everyday activity (from their own culture), practice, or ritual, considered "normal," mundane, or taken-for-granted. As a class, you should brainstorm topic possibilities, such as wearing heels, going out to eat, brushing your teeth, doing laundry, setting the table, playing football, etc. Other options might include specific events, such as music concerts, birthdays, shopping, cooking, or specific holidays. It is helpful to create a sample story together as a class to illustrate this concept. Students should then reflect on their chosen topic as if they are unfamiliar with the practice or custom or are learning about it for the first time in the same way they might view outside cultural traditions. In constructing the familiar as strange, students should problematize the processes, traditions, philosophies, and instruments or equipment, creating a story as if they have no background knowledge of these rituals.

**Creation:** Students must then create a character for themselves (traveler, researcher, reporter, or other identity), a back story, and a setting for their tale. They must be able to explain how they encounter what they witness, what other characters are present (appearance, mannerisms, accents, etc.), what type of interactions occur (talk, movement, rituals), what comprises the setting, and what objects, tools, or other artifacts are important to this experience. Students must also consider what rules, norms, steps, or explanations are necessary to describe their topics, as well as what sensory details and vocal changes, gestures, or movement and use of space will enhance their story delivery. For instance, if a story is focusing on football, then the student cannot refer to the actual object as a football, pigskin, or sports equipment. Instead, they should create a new label for it, such as "magical egg." Each story should employ descriptive elements that engage the senses, focusing only on the story itself (no

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<sup>1</sup> "The Ministry of Silly Walks" was featured in Monty Python's television series, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, episode 14, "Face the Press," in 1970.

<sup>2</sup> John Cage's three-movement piece was composed in 1952.

notecards, powerpoints, written text). By requiring students to internalize the story, they are better able to practice extemporaneous speaking and employment of imagery, while focusing on improving overall delivery. I encourage students to utilize humor, tension-building, conflict, and/or suspense into their stories as well as fictional quotes, expert testimonies, statistics, interviews, or facts to build and maintain audience interest. It is often the case that students employ costumes and props in the telling of their stories.

**Planning:** Much like campfire stories told between family and friends, this performance should follow the same conversational interplay that occurs in the telling of jokes, personal stories, and tall tales. Finally, depending on the time frame allotted to this assignment, students have been successful presenting stories that fall between 3-6 minutes (3-4 minutes for solo presentations and 5-6 minutes for partners and so on). Depending on the class and its goals, students can be asked to plan and pre-write in essay form their story as a tool for planning; however, this is only to turn in and is not allowed on the actual performance day. I find that students perform best when this activity is integrated later in the semester as a final project versus at the beginning. If students are seasoned speakers/performers, then this activity would be well placed at the beginning of the semester; however, students new to presenting would be better served to build gradually to this assignment.

**Performance Day:** As students arrive, desks should be removed from the center of the classroom. Christmas tree lights are plugged in and placed in the center of the cleared space in a pile and should be arranged to look like a mock campfire. Students are then instructed to sit around the fire in a circle - with no one outside of the circle space. To commence, I ask students to briefly say something, going around the circle. For example, students can tell a joke, talk about their day, discuss their plans, express concerns, ask questions, or give announcements. This provides space for all students' voices to be heard, also creating a calm, supportive atmosphere prior to their performance. As a way to keep stories within a limited timeframe, I designate one or two students to serve as timekeepers. I instruct them to alert the speaker(s) at 3 minutes for solo presenters, which is their cue to start concluding their performances. Students working in pairs or in small groups are alerted at 5 minutes. To keep the environment fun, I ask the timekeepers to signal the speaker by performing a mock animal sound (i.e. bird or other animal sound one might encounter while camping). I encourage students, who are presenting, to tell their story in a way that feels comfortable to them; therefore, some students stay seated, some stand in one place, some move around the fire, and some interact with audience members.

**Conclusion:** After each tale, students are encouraged to guess each story's depiction and to offer encouragement about how the story was performed and described. Depending on the length of the class, it may take one or more class sessions for all stories to be heard. I allow a more organic flow of presentation order, based on volunteering, finding that this enhances the campfire environment more than pre-determined speaking times. After the stories have concluded, I ask students to share their experiences with this activity. We collectively discuss story preparation, performance, the advantages or disadvantages of working collaboratively, and how this activity builds on or departs from other performances, activities, or speeches within the semester. During this debriefing, students can express what worked for them and what did not, as well as having the opportunity to reflect on their processes and overall experiences.

**References:** Conquergood, D. (1985). Performing as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance. *Literature in Performance*, 5, 2, 1-13.  
Hughes, P. (1974). The sacred rac. In J. C. Millar (Ed.), *Focusing on global poverty and development* (pp. 357-358). Washington, D.C.: Overseas Development Council.  
Miner, H. (1956). Body ritual among the Nacirema. *American Anthropologist*, 58, 3, 503-507.

**Please note:** A revised version of this activity will be published under a new title in *Communication Teacher* (2012)

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