

Theater and Writing Exercises for Adult Literacy Students A Shareback by EarSay and Ellsworth Adult Education

[EarSay](#) artist Judith Sloan of Sunnyside, NY met with the teaching team at [Ellsworth Adult Education](#), in Ellsworth, Maine, followed by a workshop with Adult Learners and high school interns. The goal of the project was to explore theater and writing exercises with adult literacy students of a wide age range and to create a plan for future storytelling performances and workshops. We wanted to find a way to adapt techniques EarSay developed for new English learners and recently arrived immigrants to an adult literacy learners.



For our first work session we brainstormed about various writing, storytelling and theatre exercises that would engage Adult Learners. One of the most important aspects of the brainstorming session was to heighten awareness of the specific challenges of Adult Learners who have tremendous issues with lack of confidence. At the conclusion of this first session we created a plan for a full morning workshop in theatre and storytelling. We decided to have the workshop leader, Judith Sloan, begin by performing excerpts of a theatre piece that uses music, poetry and humor as a way of showing how the power of stories can resonate to create interconnections with disparate groups of people.

We then had two interns from Maine come to Queens New York and participate in an immigrant youth theatre program. We used theatre games, prop games, and automatic writing exercises to engage everyone. We adjusted the exercises to specifically use repetition in circles using words, names and movements so everyone gets comfortable speaking. Writing a personal story can be scary for people who have not had that experience.

With the adult literacy students, one of the most important things was getting everyone comfortable to actually participate and write stories. It was a common theme: beginning with fear and moving toward building confidence.

We started with a writing prompt, by sharing a story of an immigrant from Queens who said:

“No one knows me here. They don’t know if I’m shy, or frightened or friendly. I can re-invent myself right now if I want to. How many times do you get to do that in your life?”

This was extremely successful given that many of the people in the workshop had to re-create their lives several times.

Titling theatre game:

This is an exercise that build on a well-known prop game. Once everyone gets used to using three or four props in various ways: ie, a pillow as a baby, or as a person that needs resuscitation, we placed the props in various visual forms and asked everyone to "TITLE" the piece. Much like an art exhibition. By having a group activity, people can participate verbally at their own level and eventually feed off each other. A group of props became: "A day at the beach"; or "my messy house."

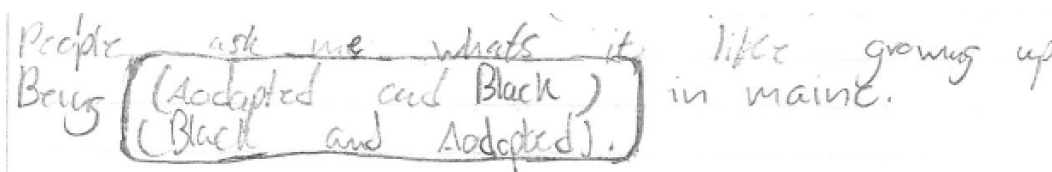
Once everyone is comfortable using props as 'something else', and seeing props as something else, we found that the willingness to "play" and experiment with stories increased. And it opened up the dialogue about perspective.

We then had the group write out their stories. As we went around to share, people were reluctant to read their stories out loud. The first student asked Judith to read their story out loud. Then other people asked that their story be read out loud. There was a certain comfort level in having a professional actor read the story at first because everyone saw the power in their own story without having to feel so 'exposed.' Also, people in the workshop had past experiences of being teased or made fun of when they read out loud. By the time we got to the second automatic writing exercise everyone was more comfortable reading out loud.

Here's an example of an unexpected story that came out of rural Maine by Elizabeth Randall:

"I would say people don't understand my growing up in a white state... being a person of color (in Maine) is hard. People ask me what it's like growing up being adopted and black / black and adopted in Maine."

Here's a screen shot of how she wrote the piece. After we did the titling exercise everyone felt freer to explore a visual way of writing.



People ask me what's it like growing up being (Adopted and Black) (Black and Adopted) in maine.

We all looked at the way she wrote her story and it generated a discussion about which should come first: Adopted and Black in Maine or Black and Adopted. In the end Elizabeth thought it should be Black and Adopted because her experience as a black woman was so much more recognizable to her and everyone around her.

One of the things both groups have in common is fear of writing their own stories. Here is a reflection from Sarmistha Das, a ninth grader from Bangladesh:

"I am scared to write something by myself. But here, in the theatre workshop, we had to write everything from our life experience and that was easy. I do not usually like to write but here I write about myself. So, it was nothing much to worry about. It will be such an exciting feeling to perform in front of people on the stage. I like it. I performed dance a lot of time before. But it is my first time to perform script on the stage."