

Example of Janus Gate exercise in an adult literacy class

I tried this exercise with a college-based basic skills course that had been sheer magic. A group of about 18 had met almost every day for 4 months – an eternity by upgrading standards. It was hands down the best experience of my career: unusual warmth, intimacy, cohesion and support among learners, many of whom were survivors of current or past violence in their lives.

We were all sad and scared to say goodbye. We needed a way to name our hurting, to focus our anxious energy, and to contain its power so that we could continue to the next stage of life with the sense that we could take all the good stuff with us - the sense that these skills and self esteem were not dependent on this course, but belonged to us rightfully and permanently. For learners, especially, there was a need to remember that the gains made were not gifts from the teacher, but were intrinsic to their own processes.

We approached this exercise in our own way, working with more of a “drama” approach. We worked as a whole group, and people just moved fluidly throughout the entire space. We gave ourselves about an hour for both the preparation and performances; there were about 14 people there that day.

The Protagonist (P) chose whomever they wanted be their “speakers” (the LF, LB, and A), and since we knew one another so well, there was extra resonance (for example, 2 women had shared stories about their abusive fathers, found similarity, and now had an “in-language” to refer certain things in the past. Choosing each other to give voice to certain fears, then, was a process underpinned by that deeper understanding.). I, the teacher, was also fair game – and I got the job several times of voicing people’s ally/cheerleader.

Folks were nervous about remembering their roles, so we decided to let people write down their statements and actually give the notes to their speakers beforehand. Some even rehearsed a bit. Then when it came time for performance, there was no “Director” role, per se. We just said, “Okay, it’s so and so’s turn,” and then that P just watched from the audience. We had also decided as a class which chair would represent what, based on the morphology of the room (for example, if you have a big open window, maybe that direction could be the “future” facing chair).

People’s encouragement of one another – the main feature of the class’ dynamic – got a chance to be fully expressed. If a P got overwhelmed, others in the “audience” softly encouraged them, telling everyone to take their time, making gentle jokes and saying “it’s okay...” After each person’s “drama” was over we waited a moment, and checked in to make sure the protagonist was comfortable with the intense feelings that were usually raised.

One woman *could not* write down the encouraging words of an ally because she was really stuck in this moment about her abusive mother – she had just shared at the end of the course that every day as she was coming to school, her mother had been berating her, shouting her out the door every day, telling her to give up this useless plan of school, and go get a job and bring in some money.

She gave me her paper and asked me to “just reverse everything it says”. So, as her ally in performance, I told her gently and firmly, *What you are doing is important. I do believe you can have a better life. Keep going! You are wonderful.* It was very heavy. It was hard to look at the paper she had given me.

After the exercise, the group’s energy really lifted. It’s important that the encouraging words come last. It’s also really powerful to name the thing we want to leave behind, be done with. People got a chance, through this experience, to build a kind of container to put the whole swirl of emotions into, good and bad, and seemed almost to leave less encumbered – lighter and with clearer heads.