Teaching Tips for TAs:
Dramatic Ideas For The Classroom

A good teacher must not only be a smart and approachable scholar, but also a dramatic success. Like actors, teachers can develop specific skills to enhance their communication of ideas. A large part of this involves developing skills which help you perform with enthusiasm. Your improved performance as a teacher will enhance student achievement and your own enjoyment of teaching. While you need to find a teaching style that suits your personality, as a teacher you do need to perform. This means becoming a salesperson, a performance artist, and an enthusiastic, passionate person in the classroom. The following skills are all part of a successful teacher’s dramatic repertoire. Consider which you might need to develop:

SUBJECT MATTER MASTERY

Of course you must know the material well before you can deliver your message effectively. Consider the extent to which your classroom performance might be enhanced simply by better preparation.

VOCAL ANIMATION

Varying the pitch, volume, quality, and rate of your voice enhances your expressiveness and overall style. Vocal expressiveness helps establish relationships among ideas and emphasizes specific points. It can also influence your credibility and students’ comprehension and retention of ideas. Allow your voice to vary naturally--and vary it deliberately once in a while, too.

PHYSICAL ANIMATION

Using eye contact displays confidence and conveys an interest in students. Facial expressions animate the material you wish to convey. Physical gestures--such as sweeping the air with hands--help you clarify, describe, and emphasize points. Gesturing and moving about the room can help constructively use up some of your nervous energy, too.

CLASSROOM SPACE

Be sure that you can be seen and heard by students seated at various points in the classroom. Break away from the podium, desk, or chalkboard. Use space to emphasize important points, establish a desired relationship with students, and hold students’ attention.

HUMOR

Try using constructive (i.e., nonhostile) humor: Show cartoons or tell funny stories that relate a point, put corny stickers that say “Good Job!” on assignments well done, and add some joke to an exam or assignment. Students
learn more when they’re having fun.

ROLE-PLAYING

You can portray a particular character—say, the central figure in the material being studied—using costumes and other props. (But allow an opportunity for “debriefing” after your role-play to be sure that students understood the overall point.) You may also want to take on the role of narrator and tell a story to the class.

PROPS

Bring a three dimensional object or something to use with electronic media into the classroom to integrate into the lecture or discussion. You can even sometimes use the students as props. Props can also be used to address or direct classroom dynamics. For instance, one professor takes out a piece of taffy and chews on it. As he chews, he expects students to “chew on” the points he has made and “digest” them. By the time he swallows, students always have some comments.

SUSPENSE AND SURPRISE

The use of suspense makes material more intriguing for students. Try developing an “anticipatory set” at the beginning of class: a question which you will answer by the end of class. (Examples might be: “What is ‘heavy’ about heavy water?” or “Why did Napoleon hold his hand inside his coat?”) You can display a prop destined for later use and let students guess what it’s for. You can use surprise by beginning class with a surprising behavior or event.

PREPARATION

Of course, to have the energy and self-confidence to use props, surprising behaviors, jokes, and other techniques noted above, you must prepare. In order to be enthused in the classroom, you must capture the passion for the subject matter and for the teaching-learning process. You must also practice using the props and other techniques before trying them in the classroom.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Your dramatic skills will also help you manage uncomfortable situations in the classroom. For instance, you can carry a portable phone and pretend to make a call to someone when a student is being disruptive (prop, humor). If students seem distracted or inattentive, lose all body animation and give them the “boy, am I bored” look (physical animation).

Adapted from Acting Lessons for Teachers: A Using Performance Skills in the Classroom (Robert T. Tauber and Cathy Sargent Mester, 1994, Westport, CT: Praeger) by Martha McCaughey for Office of Instructional Consultation under the supervision of Shirley Ronkowski.