

# Nutcracker Lesson Plan

## Telling a Story through Dance

### Lesson Overview:

This lesson introduces students to the concept of emotionally and physically telling a story through dance and pantomime. Students will learn that in ballet the dancer is trained to act out the story/character with movement instead of words. *The Nutcracker* will serve as the foundation for the lesson and activities.

### Length of Lesson:

Three 45-minute class periods

### Instructional Objectives:

Students will:

- develop skills in communicating through physical movement (pantomime).
- be introduced to the story of *The Nutcracker* originally by E. T. A. Hoffman.
- understand how a story may be told through dance.
- learn about ballet as a means of expression and storytelling.

### Supplies:

- A well-illustrated children's book of *The Nutcracker*. A suggested text is: Hautzig, Deborah and Diane Goode (ill.). *The Story of the Nutcracker Ballet*.

### Instructional Plan:

#### Warm Up

Arrange the classroom space so that students have space to move around. Stand in front of the class, and tell them that you are going to "speak" to them without using any words. Tell them that you will point to someone who should tell the class what you are "saying" or feeling.

Wave to the students with a smile on your face. Point to a student. (The student should say "hello. "). Then, frown and pretend to cry. Point to a student. (The student should say "I'm sad. ") Finally, furrow your brow and fold your arms. Point to a student. (The student should say "I'm angry. ")

Next, tell the class that you are going to pretend to *do* something. They must guess what you are trying to communicate. Pantomime the process of getting into a car, starting it, and driving it. When you have finished, ask the students what you were doing.

Explain to students that you are doing something called "pantomime." Tell them that pantomime is a way to communicate without using words. Instead, you use your face and your body to help show actions, thoughts, or feelings.

#### Guided Practice

Tell the students that they will now do a pantomime. Have them get up and start moving by walking around the room. Tell them to pretend that they are walking to school. Then, give the students the following prompts. (Give them about a minute to adjust to each new scenario):

- You are walking to school in the pouring rain.
- You are walking to school after a big snowstorm, and there is a foot of snow on the ground.
- You stayed up late, so you are very tired when you are walking to school.
- It is the last day of school, and you can't wait to get there.

When you have finished the exercise, ask the students to talk about what kinds of things they did to show the different situations. How did they change their body movements to show that they were walking through snow? To show that they were tired?

Ask students if they think it would be possible to tell an entire story without words. Tell them that you are going to read them a story. As you read, they should listen carefully and think about how they could tell it without words. Read the story of *The Nutcracker* aloud. (Note: for more information on *The Nutcracker*, see [The Nutcracker: Story and Music](#) or [The Nutcracker Ballet Web site](#).) After you have read the story, tell the students that you are going to re-tell part of the story through pantomime. Their job is to guess which scene you are miming.

Choose a scene that you would like to recreate for your class. A good scene to use for this exercise starts when Clara is happily twirling and dancing in the parlor at the beginning of the ballet. She is holding one of her dolls. She looks at it lovingly and holds it to her chest. Tchaikovsky wrote the musical piece *Marche* to portray this moment. Pantomime the scene and ask the children to guess the character you portrayed (Clara). Ask the students what happened in the scene you pantomimed. (Clara woke up and went to her find her doll.) Ask the class if you spoke any words (No). If not, how did they know what was happening and what you were feeling.

In the following video excerpt from [Act One, Scene 1 of The Nutcracker](#), you will see this scene and hear a portion of the music. You may wish to allow students to view this scene, observing the pantomime used by the dancer portraying Clara in the clip.

Tell the class that it is their turn to pantomime a scene. Tell them that this time, they will work in groups to tell the story together. Choose a scene to be re-enacted through dance or pantomime, or use the one given as an example here. Choose a student to play Clara, another to play her brother Fritz, and a third to play their godfather, Herr Drosselmeyer. Ask the class what happened when Herr Drosselmeyer first came to the party? (Herr Drosselmeyer gave Clara and Fritz gifts.) Ask the chosen students to pantomime getting gifts from their godfather. Remind the children that no words may be spoken. Now choose three other students to pantomime the same scene, adding another action: have Clara and Fritz now show each other the gifts they have received. Building upon the previous two presentations, ask the class what now happens in the story. (Fritz, being jealous of the Nutcracker doll Clara has received, takes the doll and breaks it.) Choose three new students to play the parts, adding in the breaking of the Nutcracker doll.

To give students another example of group pantomime, show the clip of the Nutcracker and the Mouse King battling with their armies behind them. Tchaikovsky wrote the musical piece *The Battle* to portray this. If time permits, the students may brainstorm other scenes in the story to re-enact through pantomime.

Tell the students that the story of *The Nutcracker* has often been told without words, through a type of dance called ballet. Tell the students that ballet is similar to pantomime, because it tells a story without words; however, it is different, because dancers perform special dance movements and steps to music.

Explain to the students that the music is also an integral part of the story and closely relates to the mood set for the pantomime. In many instances you only have to hear the music and scenes pop into your mind. You can visualize what might be happening and the characters involved.

You might play students some musical pieces from favorite movies or TV shows to see if they can recognize the theme and characters.

### **Closure**

Have students view the two video clips from *The Nutcracker* shown earlier in the lesson.

After they view the clips, have them discuss how the dance helped to tell the story without words.

- How did the dancers' movements help to show you what was happening in the story?
- How were their movements similar to the movements you used when you acted out the scene?
- How were the dance movements different from your pantomimes in class?

Have students look back at the information you recorded on the board after the first viewing of the clips from *The Nutcracker*. Chart the new answers beside the old to show students that they have grown in their understanding of dance and pantomime.

### **Assessment:**

Ask each student to think of a story that could be told without words (such as a fairy tale). Have them think of a scene from the story and pantomime it for the class. (Have them identify the story that they are pantomiming before they start the scene.)

Evaluate students' ability to:

- select an appropriate story
- identify an appropriate scene
- communicate the scene through pantomime

### **Sources:**

Hayward, Linda. *A Day in the Life of a Dancer*. London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001.

*Pytor Illych Tchaikovsky: The Nutcracker - Complete Ballet ~ Valery Gergiev (Composer), Kirov Orchestra and Choir (Conductor)*

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