

# physical **sculptures**

*by Kurt Wootton*





**ArtsLit** was founded in 1998 by Eileen Landay, Kurt Wootton, and Nancy Hoffman with the goal of finding ways to develop the literacy of youth through the performing and visual arts. The ArtsLiteracy Project piloted a summer lab school at Brown University where they invited artists and teachers from around the world to develop innovative pedagogies for improving literacy. They received the prestigious Coming Up Taller Award in 2005 from the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities for "extraordinary work in making a remarkable difference to our nation's youth."

## Physical sculptures

What happens in the mind of a person who is struggling to read a book? What do they understand? Where do they get stuck? Are they reading a book at the surface level or are they thinking more deeply about it? We see our students appearing to be engaged in reading, but we really have no idea of what is going on in their minds. The reading process remains invisible to us as teachers. In order to address the needs of students who have a difficult time reading, over the years I have increasingly turned to theater to help make my students' reading processes visible. Peter Brook, one of the seminal directors of the last century, writes, "Rehearsing is a visible thinking-aloud." When we create theater, we physically and vocally express what we are thinking and feeling to an audience. We must take the words on the page and inhabit them - words take form.

My work as an educator is in different communities with people who don't initially think of themselves as actors. One of the primary performance techniques I turn to





is physical sculptures, also referred to as *tableau vivants* or *tableaux* (living pictures). Physical sculptures are pictures on the stage where actors freeze for a moment. Since the religious performances of the medieval era, tableaux have been employed in the theater. Today directors who focus on designing compelling stage images use them frequently, including Broadway directors Julie Taymor and Mary Zimmerman. They are also used in the work of many contemporary photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Gregory Crewdson. Because physical sculptures do not require the actors to speak or move on stage, sculptures are an excellent starting point for students who might be apprehensive about performing.

### **Preparation: Learning to Freeze**

Before introducing physical sculptures, I find it's valuable for students of any age to first practice freezing. Ask the students to walk around the room. The best technique for leading students around the room is described by the ArtsLiteracy Project in the activity *The Human Atom*:

Students walk around the space and keep the room balanced. Choose a point at the center of the room and point out that it is the "Nucleus." All of the students in the room are the "electrons"; they will walk around the center of the nucleus, walk to a far point in the room, back to the nucleus, and then back out

to another far point in the room. If the room is large and there are only a few participants, delineate a smaller space with chairs or tape.

Another option for walking around the room is for participants to picture a shape in their minds and to imagine that shape is taped onto the floor around the entire room. They can trace the shape as they walk throughout the room.

During the activity students should not talk to each other or make physical contact unless instructed. Ask the students to move



around the room in random patterns; they often want to move in a continuous circle.

After establishing the pattern, say “freeze.” The students will stop walking and freeze in space, exactly as they are at that moment in time. Walk around the room and explain, “When you’re frozen, no part of you should be moving. Not your hands, not your fingers, not even your eyes. Freezing takes commitment. Practice remaining absolutely frozen. If your eyes are following me right now as I walk around the room, then you aren’t frozen.” Continue walking and then freezing. The activity can also be introduced as a game where students strike poses and see who can remain frozen the longest without moving.

## Procedure

There are dozens of ways to use sculptures in the classroom. The following procedure outlines a way of using sculptures to explore interpretations of interesting images in a text. Before beginning the class, select a text that the students will read. Then highlight lines, phrases, or words that are compelling images. When students are working with physical sculptures for the first time, begin with lines that are concrete images and then move to the more abstract. In a workshop we recently gave at Habla for teachers, we used the poem “The Plaza” by Antonio Deltoro from the book *The Tree is Older than You Are: A Bilingual Gathering of Poems & Stories from Mexico with Paintings from Mexican Artists*.

We chose the following phrases from the poem, moving from the concrete to the more abstract:

- bicycles dance
- those street dogs are regular beggars
- the fountain in the plaza is a palm tree of water
- time stops, the plaza stretches out
- in the fountain children discover language

**1. Instant sculptures.** After teaching the participants to freeze, ask them to begin walking around the room again in the formation described above. Explain: “While you are walking I’m going to give you an image. Listen carefully. I’ll repeat it several times. I want you to think about it and picture it in your head. Then when I say, “Freeze” you’ll freeze again but this time you will *snap* your body into the image.” Tell the students the phrase. Looking around the room make sure everyone understands. Then say “freeze” and they will snap into the sculptures. Remind them to remain frozen. After a couple of seconds ask them to resume walking. Repeat this process several times with different phrases.

**2. Pair instant sculptures.** After the participants have created three or four sculptures individually, explain that now we will work in pairs to create a combined sculpture. To mix the students up, ask them to walk around the room again in the above formation, then

call out “back to back” and ask the students to grab the person next to them and go back to back. While they are back to back, explain you will give them a new phrase and then count to 5. By the time you arrive at 5, they should be frozen, as a pair, in a new sculpture. They need to create the sculpture in complete silence.

**3. Reflection.** Although you might stop the class to reflect at any point in the process (generally after the students have been creating sculptures for about ten minutes), I stop the class with everyone frozen in sculptures. I’ll select two sculptures I find most interesting. You’ll probably find when you start working with a new group of students, most people will create sculptures that are nearly the same. It takes time to free up the mind and body and to start taking risks. However, in any group, some students will start right away thinking outside the box. Here are some of the things I look for:

- Are the students exploring different levels: reaching for the sky or using the floor?
- Are the students using objects in the room: desks, walls, chairs?
- Are the students taking risks with each other: climbing, lifting, pulling, pushing?
- Are the students offering physical interpretations that look dramatically different from the rest of the group?



While the students are all frozen, I’ll choose one or two pairs of students who are doing something unique. I’ll ask everyone else to relax and look at these pairs. We’ll examine how they are offering a different interpretation of the text. One possibility is for the pair in the sculpture to explain what they are thinking. Another possibility is to ask the audience what they see in the sculpture. With this process we begin to explore the different textual interpretations that are possible and we start to see the different ways we might use the tool of physical sculptures to create dramatic images. Although later we might discuss some of the questions I’ve listed above (in education this is often called using a *rubric*), I don’t like to begin with a set of guidelines for creating sculptures. I want the students to surprise each other, and



me. I want to be amazed, and I often find that if we use the work of the students to inspire each other, we will move much farther in terms of fostering a creative space than if I give the students guidelines to begin with.

**4. Small group sculptures.** After a few rounds of sculptures in pairs, while they are still with a partner, ask each pair to find another pair. Now in groups of four, explain that you will give them a phrase and count to 10. By the time you reach 10, the entire group should be in a sculpture. Again, no talking or verbally planning. Read a phrase and count to 10. You might ask some groups to relax, walk around the room, and look at the other groups. Repeat the process (in the same groups of four).

**5. Reading.** After interpreting lines and phrases from the text individually, in pairs, and in groups, the students might now have an idea or feeling of regarding the text. Before reading, ask the class what they think the poem or story might be about based on the phrases they have explored. Then read the text as a class or assign it for homework.

### Extending Physical Sculptures

**Sculpture Performances.** When participants are in groups (part 3 above), I often keep them in the same group for four to six sculptures. After they've created the first sculpture, I explain, "We are now going to work with body memory. For each sculpture you create as a group, I want you to remember where you are

and what your relationship is to the other members of your group." I then read each phrase and the groups create the sculptures. When we've completed several, I ask them to go back as a group and recreate all of them one at a time. Finally, I explain, "When you are on stage, you are always on stage. The audience can always see you. You aren't on stage only when you are in one of your images. Work now as a group to create transitions between each of your sculptures. Move fluidly from one to the next." After more time to practice, we put several groups on stage at the same time. One possibility is now to play music and ask the groups on stage to feel when it's the right time to transition from sculpture to sculpture. Several groups then perform at the same time. Another possibility is to read the poem, or the individual phrases, and to ask the groups to transition when they hear the line that corresponds with each sculpture.

**Sculpture Garden.** We first learned about the Sculpture Garden from Minnesota theater educator Jan Mandell. You can find many ways to use sculptures in the classroom in her book *Acting, Learning, and Change* co-authored with Jennifer Wolf. One activity she describes is where one person is the "clay" and the other person is the "sculptor." The clay remains frozen unless the sculptor moves them into a position. In pairs, stu-



dents work together to explore a theme or a phrase from a text. The facilitator calls out the prompt; then the sculptors shape their clay into sculptures. All of the sculptors step aside and the room becomes a garden of sculptures. Sculpture Garden also works well in small groups. One person is the sculptor and that person now has four or five pieces of “clay” to work with to create a larger sculpture.

**Before Writing.** Brazilian theater director Augusto Boal uses physical sculptures to examine the lives of people in a community. We’ve adapted some of his activities in his excellent book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, and we use them to connect a theme we are studying in class to the lives of our students. In a recent class we were reading the short story “Gaston” by William Saroyan about the relationship between a father and his daughter. Using the Sculpture Garden previously described, I asked the students to create a sculpture of themselves as a child. Each sculptor then stood by their sculptures and explained how they represented themselves as children. I then asked them to create sculptures of themselves as teenagers and then as adults. Finally we created sculptures of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and siblings. Using “Gaston” as a model, students then wrote dialogues from the perspective of themselves as children having a conversation with another person in their family many years ago. The sculptures were a way of exploring themes and inspiring writing.

### Resources

Boal, Augusto. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. Routledge, 2002.

Mandell, Jan and Jennifer Wolf. *Acting, Learning, and Change*. Heinemann, 2003.

Wilhelm, Jeffrey. *Action Strategies for Deepening Comprehension: Role Plays, Text Structure Tableaux, Talking Statues, and other Enrichment Techniques that Engage Students with Text*. Scholastic, 2002.

Crewdson, Gregory. *Twilight: Photographs by Gregory Crewdson*. Abrams, 2002.

Taymor, Julie. *Playing with Fire*. Abrams, 2007.



**Habla** is an educational center and lab school based in Mérida, Yucatán, México, dedicated to fostering school environments that promote the success of all students from multiple cultural backgrounds. For teachers, artists, and school leaders, Habla offers: cultural and language experiences, teacher institutes, and an annual international educational forum.

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