

**Creative Engagement:  
Using Music, Movement, and Drama with  
Less Active Adults**

**Bonnie L. Vorenberg**





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*We help older performers fulfill their theatrical dreams!*

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## **Creative Engagement: Using Music, Movement and Drama with Less Active Adults**

by Bonnie L. Vorenberg  
Senior Theatre Expert

Probably the most challenging group of seniors to introduce to theatre is the low and very low functioning group. These older adults are usually in the old-old age group or older (75 and above) and reside in retirement facilities, assisted living or nursing homes. For them, I have successfully used a method that I named creative engagement.

Creative engagement is a combination of drama, music and dance with several therapeutic elements. The creative engagement session is an opportunity and the inducement for the elders to break through the many layers of isolation which alienate them not only from the outside world but also from the people around them. The approach is a many-faceted arrangement of stimuli. It has been developed with the express purpose of jolting these seniors who are often depressed and lonely because of their internal and external detachment. With hefty doses of patience and reinforcement, creative engagement can motivate and encourage, while breaking down the walls of silence and bringing new expressive lights onto the sometimes-blank faces. Participants have more self-esteem and greater appreciation of life...plus it's fun!

Because movement, music and drama are combined, the program not only stimulates the physical body, but also the imagination, voice and personality. Each part of the person receives focus at some time during the hour or 45-minute long. The process utilizes remotivation therapy, getting people to want to do something, which is especially helpful in cases of learned helplessness. Through praise and positive reinforcement, the leader builds more self-worth and hopefully helps remotivate the person towards a better outlook toward life. The physical, mental, emotional, intellectual and social aspects are benefited by this all-inclusive artistic approach, tends to unify the person. Creative Engagement produces impressive results.

Like other classes in Senior Theatre, creative engagement opens with an honest and warm greeting of each individual in the class. Be animated and expressive,

remembering to use your face and body for total body language. Be sure to touch and to include touching during the class. Assess each person's abilities and state of mind to elicit a reaction, of any size, from each participant. This exchange of talking, smiling and reacting should be a simple and free-flowing two-way communication.

After the welcome, begin with music. Short, simple songs, which can be remembered, work well. It often helps to use songs from the senior's own era. Numerous books and pamphlets containing a wealth of sing-a-long oldies are available. Be sure to use a different song at each or every other class because the basic concept of creative engagement is variety.

Use a vocal memorizing process to learn the song. This method stimulates memory and avoids vision problems that arise if songbooks are used. In addition, this approach gets the brain working which increases their feeling of self-worth.

In the learning process, I first sing the song to let them hear the melody and to assess how well they already know the song. We then speak the first line. After that we combine and speak both first and second lines. We then sing the two lines. This accumulative approach can be continued throughout the song until each line has been learned. It includes sufficient repetition to insure easy memorization.

### **Adding Movement**

Once the song is learned, begin to include elements of dance. Simple movements of arms and legs, clapping, slapping things, etc., done in rhythm to the singing, begins to warm up the body. This combination of singing and moving forces the participants to do two things at once--another basic element of creative engagement.

The major portion of a creative engagement class combines music and movement. So now, play some classical music as you lead the seniors in stretch and strengthening exercise to loosen stiff bones and muscles and to awaken their physical selves. Most of the exercises are done in the sitting position. The exercises usually begin with head movements. Simple head rotations are done to soft, melodic accompaniment. The

exercises then progress downward to neck and shoulder exercises. During most exercises, I encourage participants to speak while they move. Vocal cues like "right" "left" "up" "down" not only aid in learning the movements; once again, they encourage the seniors to do two things at once. Speaking also exercises the voice, a muscle which will be used later in the session.

Switching to more upbeat exercises, add side stretches, arm movements, finger and hand movements. Use exercises that stimulate the muscles under the neck and under the upper arms, and eye exercise. Then focus on leg and stomach movements eventually stretching every part of the body. Change the music and movements frequently so that the seniors will be encouraged. Keep the session moving because, "If you are bored, they are bored!"

The session should also include a focus on balance, coordination and breathing. To combat the senior's naturally occurring decreased lung capacity. Use activities which focus on deep abdominal breathing and roll breathing as a way to increase the amount of blood flow to the brain. They'll end up with greater stamina and awareness. A dash of yoga, ballet, and other dance/movement techniques are very popular.

You'll find that many participants in a creative engagement class are physically disabled. The class may contain stroke victims, amputees, or extremely frail seniors. These people require exercise as much as any normal adult. To make movements less strenuous, reduce the number of repetitions, decrease the dynamics (size, height) required, and reduce the complexity. Though it is painful, stroke victims should be encouraged to use their good limb to help move the one that is impaired.

Be sure to let each participant that they will be expected to participate. The leader should make these expectations clear and should reinforce them. Reward and praise each person's effort during the class. For no matter how well they do it, if they TRY, then the exercise and the class is a success.

The movement segment of creative engagement should move promptly from one part of the body to the next, without delay. Vary the tempo of the exercises. Move from slow to quick, from percussive to flowing, being sure to include a wide variety of paces in each class and sometimes in each exercise. Accompany each tempo with an appropriate

piece of music. The dance should conclude with several slowing down movements, bringing the body back to homeostasis.

An especially useful book is Caplow-Lindner's *Therapeutic Dance Movement: Expressive Activities for Older Adults*. It contains a wealth of practical information and exercises, methods and benefits as well as many creative and unique ideas for coordinating exercise with pantomime, music and song. Dance therapy books, such as Eva Balazs' *Dance Therapy in the Classroom*, will give you additional suggestions.

### **Include Reminiscence**

Once the actors are warmed up, it's time to include acting and drama. I like to begin with life review. There are many benefits as Dr. Robert Butler says "life review allows for expiation of guilt, exorcism of problematic childhood identifications, the resolution of intra-psychic conflicts, the reconciliation of family relationships, the transmission of knowledge and values to those who follow, and the renewal of the ideals of citizenship". Reminiscence helps heal the past and put it into perspective. Use reminiscence to give credence and importance to reminiscing about the past, not necessarily in terms of lessons learned, but more in terms of experience owned.

Life review is easily used in drama. Senior's memories and fantasies can be discussion topics and ideas for pantomimes and improvisations. Any subject which stimulates a memory can be used. Good topics are color, wishes and dreams, hopes and desires animals and pets, childhood experiences, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives. Seasonal topics such as holidays and seasons also work well. For example, if food is the topic, after one person has pantomimed eating something, it can be passed to others in the group, involving the entire group in the dramatic action. Not only do you share the pantomimed food, but you also share the exhilaration of being included as an integral part of the group.

I feature group, as well as individual dramatic activities. After talking about Christmas experiences, for example, individuals may act out some of their personal memories. Then they combine in small groups for improvisations that add on to the individual

memories. Ultimately the whole group may become involved in a creative dramatics improvisation arising out of these memories.

### **Theatre is fantasy**

Drama lets participants leave reality and dwell in fantasy. What a wonderful escape! J. Stevens in his book, *Awareness*, discusses how fantasy allows for "thinking, comparing, remembering the past and anticipating the future." Images of things and events that do not exist in present reality can be explored through drama.

Thus creative engagement explores the senior's extremely active sense of fantasy. Their often neglected dreams and wishes are important to them. In Senior Theatre, these fantasies can become the focus not only of thought, but also of activity. This legitimizes their dreams and makes them more easily understood-and thus more of a healthy mode of communication. Older people have dreams; a ninety-year old of falling in love again; a paraplegic of going to Europe; an almost blind woman of being able to see again. Relatives may have quashed the idea of speaking of these fantasies, but I find them very close to the surface. They are thoughts central to each person's will. They should not be denied; they should be explored.

Use the chatting done before class to discover topics that will spark creativity and lead to improvisation. Find topics which stimulate the fantasies of seniors. "If you had any wish in the world, what would it be?" or "If you could go anywhere in the world, where would you go?" In order to make the connection between the exercise portion of the session and the dramatic play more cohesive, I may have said, "Let's reach for the clouds," when we were doing reaching exercises, and then suggest, later, "Let's go to the other side of the clouds."

### **Add Theatrical Elements**

Creative Engagement utilizes other theatrical elements like props, make-up, costumes and musical instruments to add dimensions to the class. Properties such as scarves, very soft foam balls, newspaper wands and large, group-size elastic bands can be

incorporated into both exercise and fantasy sections. I have been very successful by using a collection of hats as a way to stimulate both character and fantasy with lower functioning seniors.

Puppets are also very useful. They can communicate even when the person cannot. Simple puppets can be made from socks or paper bags. They work well and are easy to use. Since the focus of creative engagement is on outward reactions, the building of puppets is not recommended. In addition to being very time-consuming, it can also be very frustrating for those who do not have the skills necessary to complete the project. It is better to leave puppet making to a different class or to a workshop situation.

The session should move smoothly between the movement to the drama section. Flow promptly but not too quickly. It's fun to leave some short amounts of time between sections to let the participants chat. If you have ever seen an activity room full of people, all of them silent, you will know how good it is when you see them happily talking to each others. This transition time also give you chance to cajole, tease and tell jokes, allowing some of the real personalities to emerge. A vital part of one class was the banter that one of the residents and I would exchange. The class was not the same if he didn't threaten to "throw me into the creek!"

It is important to include individual as well as group activities, so that the class focuses attention on each person at one time or another during the session. Conclude with the same song that you used at the beginning of the class and speak to each person afterward. This unifies both the beginning and the ending of the class.

Creative Engagement, this unique and multi-faceted combination of music, movement and drama, along with reminiscence and fantasy creates a fun, stimulative and creative session. Give a lot of positive reinforcement, develop a warm, light atmosphere and they will be asking for more. You'll be fascinated to watch the seniors talk, sing, and move together while they share fantasy and memories. It is so stimulating that the seniors do not realize that it's good for them.

*Bonnie L. Vorenberg is an author, speaker, and Senior Theatre guru who serves as the President of ArtAge Publications. Turn to its Senior Theatre Resource Center for a complete collection of plays, books, materials, and workshops for the older performer. Call 800-858-4998 for a free newsletter, email [bonniev@seniortheatre.com](mailto:bonniev@seniortheatre.com), or visit online at [www.seniortheatre.com](http://www.seniortheatre.com). We help older adults fulfill theatrical dreams!*