

Casting with Consent: Empowering Students in Theater Performance

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Introduction: casting and consent

This is for anyone new to working with students in performance scenarios, or for anyone looking for guidance when it comes to casting. How do we help find the right ‘fit’ of roles for all of our students?

Casting is tricky. Assigning students a character to play can - intentionally or unintentionally - send information about how we “see” them. This can be a simple question of gender (who is “masculine” enough to play a warrior like Macbeth?) It can also touch on nuanced social situations in your classroom; for example, who’s the best fit to play Tybalt, the outsider in ROMEO & JULIET? Is it the kid who’s already the outsider in the room? (Spoiler alert: it’s not.)

The casting approach below is designed to help empower all the members of your creative community and performance ensemble. It proposes that the hard work of ensuring consent in your casting will always lead to greater JOY and success for your students, onstage and off. We think you’ll find it’s entirely worth it!

If you’ll be working with students in a more in-depth way to create theater performances, we recommend further study on consent and boundaries in performance.

Creating a classroom culture of confidence and consent

Generally speaking, there are three areas where we want to ensure student consent:

1. Physical consent
2. Content consent
3. Casting consent

1. Physical consent: This includes any activity where students might make physical contact with each other. Actors should always, ALWAYS, make agreements with each other about how each of their bodies should and should not be interacted with.

The most common tool for creating physical consent with actors is a **physical boundary practice** - try [watching this example](#), then adapt for your classroom.



2. Content consent: This includes material that students might interact with. The most common, of course, is when it comes to material that will be read in class. It also includes the defining of content for improvisations, if you use them in the classroom. Make agreements with any group of students about topics, phrases, or subject matters that aren't okay.

Many educators already use **content warnings** for material they plan to have students read in class. If you'll be using improvisation as a learning or rehearsal tool, create some **community agreements** that define appropriate boundaries for topics, words/phrases, and approaches to the work.

Casting consent: This includes any roles that your students might play in scripted or improvised performance situations.

To effectively recruit your students' consent in their final casting for a performance, try using a **pre-casting survey** like [the one we've provided here](#). And staying in conversation with your students as you all become familiar with the script is often, also, your best resource in learning about their needs.

Casting Students: some considerations

When casting students in roles for performance, don't just think about their looks and "type". Be sure you're keeping the sum total of the stage picture - and classroom culture - in mind.

Think about:

- **How vulnerable** they can be - or not be - around each other. Who's going to feel comfortable in big emotional moments like Juliet's, and who isn't?
- The **visible and invisible differences** of each student, and how casting in a particular role might unintentionally point to them in a way that might make them uncomfortable. This is especially important when you're casting the "outsiders" in a show, like Tybalt or Caliban. We don't want to unintentionally "other" someone, or point to their differences, by casting them in these roles without their expressed interest or consent.
- The **social dynamics of the class/group** (status, etc). How might your casting choices heighten those dynamics in challenging ways? Or better yet... how can smart casting choices diffuse or upend those dynamics onstage? (Is it time for the shy kid to shine in a powerful role?)
- Any **prior casting** (if applicable) - do they get 'typecast' as certain roles? How can you break that pattern for them and help them explore other aspects of their personality and performance range?



Some Closing Thoughts

The core of consent-based work is collaboration, and de-centralizing power. How can your casting be a collaboration, rather than a pure reflection of how you see your students / the world?

Even if your students don't take advantage of consent tools - it's important to set the example. You can reinforce for them that they have agency in their lives! You might be the only reminder they have, that day, that they can have a say in how other people treat them.

There's nothing wrong with any choice they make. If they don't want to play a role you think they're perfect for, that's okay! Empowering students and giving them some agency is much more important than Making Great Art.

