The One-Act Play

Purpose

The purpose of this exercise is to give the students the opportunity to be creative as they explore a concept, issue, dilemma, person, or situation. One-act plays usually have a simple setting, few characters, and a plot that focuses on a single incident or goal. The assignment of creating a one-act play moves quickly from establishing the topic to developing the characters, plot, setting, and climax, followed quickly by the conclusion. The assignment is also two-dimensional in that students can both create the play and perform it. If the students perform the play, their classmates can explore the topic from the perspective of the author(s) of the play.

Intent

When asking the students to create a one-act play, consider the following:

- Focus this assignment on a topic or issue the students can bring to life through dramatization and performance.
- Assign groups to work together to create and perform the play. The students could work on this assignment outside class and even use online file-sharing services (such as Google Docs or DropBox) as a way to collaborate online as they write the play.
- Instruct the students that the play should be short and have the following components: one to three main characters, a simple setting, and a simple plot that proceeds quickly to a high point, followed immediately by a conclusion.

Method

The student groups can follow this process as they create the one-act play:

1. Pick a topic or issue (if you have not already assigned one), or narrow the topic down to a suitable scenario for the one-act play.

2. Start with a main character or plot line. Whose story does the play tell? Who is telling the story?

3. Decide on the goal for the main character. What is the main character trying to overcome, accomplish, learn, or understand?

4. Craft the sequence of events, the plot. What obstacles must the main character(s) overcome as they depict the goal of the play and proceed to the climax and the conclusion? What do all the characters in the play do?

5. Describe the setting. Where and during what time period does the action or plot take place?

6. What is the high point, or climax, of the play? The plot should lead characters through some obstacles or events to a climax or moment of understanding. As soon as this moment occurs in the play, the conclusion quickly follows.
Performing the one-act play is an interesting way for the students to showcase their creative understanding of a topic, issue, or dilemma. Performing also helps to develop the students’ public-speaking skills. These one-act plays, because they are short, can be read from a script or improvised from a script outline and can be performed during a class period. The students in the audience could rate both the content of the plays and the performances.