



NONVERBAL TEACHING ARTISTRY TOOLKIT

ITAC INNOVATOR WORKING GROUP 2022

INTRODUCTION

This open-source digital toolkit was commissioned by the **International Teaching Artist Collaborative (ITAC)** through their **ITAC Innovators** initiative.

In 2021, **NYC-based teaching artist Becky Baumwoll** proposed creating this toolkit as a response to **how nonverbal teaching artistry had emerged as a source of inspiration in her work.**

After sharing the idea with her ITAC peers, **the desire for this toolkit** was clear!

Becky and her collaborating colleagues hope that this may serve as a **meaningful, practical, and accessible** resource to you.

For questions, ideas, or comments, please contact the ITAC team at info@itac-collaborative.com.

Enjoy!



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Useful links, resources, and suggestions for ongoing learning



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WHO IT'S FOR



This toolkit is designed to be used by **anyone who facilitates shared learning experiences**. That may include but is not limited to:

Teaching artists, general education or non-arts subject teachers, arts educators, educators for individuals with disabilities, parents and caretakers, community organizers, spiritual leaders, curriculum developers, and/or those who participate in these spaces.

Learning is inherently creative, and art-making is a learning practice! A “teaching artist” is many things, and our terminology is intended to be inclusive. Please use this toolkit in whichever way is relevant to your practice.

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PURPOSE

To offer

inspiration,

perspective,

and practical resources

for teaching without words.







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WHY TEACH WITHOUT WORDS?

	It's inclusive.	It allows for increased communication between different language backgrounds, abilities, and comfort levels with speaking aloud. It's relatable and accessible: we each have a body, no matter the dialect of our own body language! <i>Note: this toolkit does not yet account for blind or sight-impaired students.</i>
	It's engaging.	Communicating without words is fun! While feeling like <i>play</i> , it simultaneously requires increased focus, physical participation, and an experiential approach that links body and mind.
	It's ensemble-building.	Removing our default modes of communication in turn removes our typical ways for expressing judgement, claiming leadership, and/or negotiating participation. Nonverbal experiences can key into a sense of shared humanity, and make us feel empowered.
	It's refreshing.	Switching up classroom norms can be a welcome reset. It opens us up: the body is the meeting place of practical and emotional. <i>Many of the techniques in this toolkit overlap with SEL practices for wellbeing and mindfulness!</i>

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WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “NONVERBAL?”

Communication in which formal language **is not used** - written, spoken, or signed through sign language.

Communication therefore relies on **the body!**

“Nonverbal” could also include:

visuals - symbols, images, numbers either drawn or printed

sounds - music, melody, rhythm, non-verbal vocalization

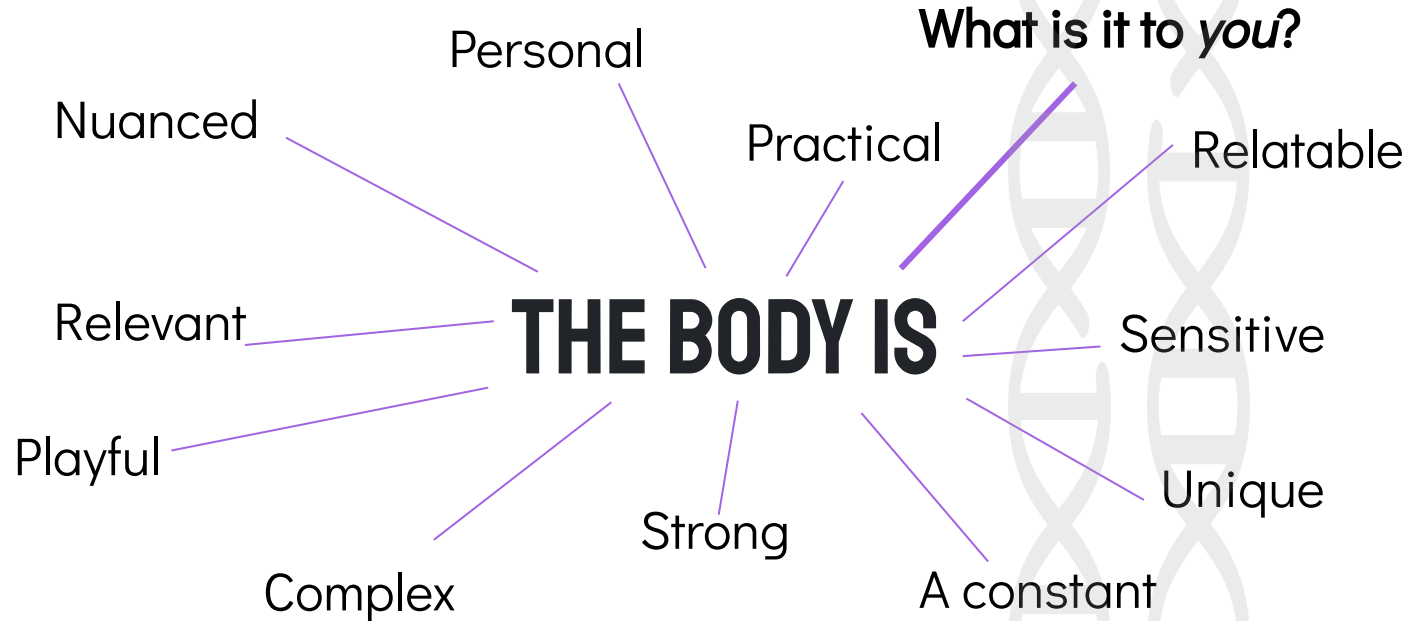
architecture - placement of objects or furniture in space

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Communicating primarily through body language invites intentionality, agency, complex thinking, and play.

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THE BODY IS

...also where we hold trauma and memory. It is important to take a trauma-informed approach when teaching through the body, for which more resources are in section 4 of this toolkit.

One of the **major benefits** of nonverbal teaching is that it **affirms**:

Your body is interesting.

Your body is in control.

Your body is correct.

Your body is changeable.

Your body is beyond labels.

Your body is enough.

Your body is joyful.

Your body is powerful.

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HOW MANY PARTS ARE THERE TO BODY LANGUAGE?

SO MANY!

- Remember that body language is complex and layered! Consider all these parts of your “nonverbal” body.
- If all of these elements *communicate* from a singular body - imagine what possibilities for communication exist *between multiple bodies!*
- Body language is *not* universal. Physical communication is diverse!

- Facial expressions
- Hand / arm gestures
- Body shape / posture
- Pace and quality of movement
- Hand puppeting
- Mime / invisible objects
- Stillness / absence of movement
- Referential gestures, like pointing
- *What else?*

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WHEN TO USE THESE TOOLS...

"Sounds like fun!"	Use any of these integrations either for part of class or for the entire class , or as an option for students to opt into.
"I have students who are nonverbal and I want to include them!"	Teaching without words - even throughout instruction - can model for students across the spectrum of verbal engagement that you respect how they communicate , and language is not their only option. Students used to being in charge will often gain a new perspective without words, and their counterparts will have room to shine.
"My students all speak different languages!"	Many of these games will allow students across languages to connect through cooperation, creativity, and humor .
"I don't speak the language my students do!"	By removing language from your instruction, you can flatten the classroom hierarchy and indicate your desire to understand them beyond language . Students will learn that not understanding everything is okay .
"We're stuck!"	Using the body can move a creative process forward by offering a new way into a problem . Try using body language to answer a question without words, respond to a physical prompt, or add nuance to written or spoken expression.

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Remember that removing words can sometimes remove **clarity or consistency of understanding**. As long as the safety of your students is intact, **this is okay**. Language can do the same thing! When in doubt, return to your learning outcomes:
does nonverbal teaching support the experience I want to create in my classroom?

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TIPS & TENETS

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JOIN IN WITH YOUR STUDENTS



Model by participating yourself

- Instead of watching, observing, or narrating, **participate in each activity** with the students. Not only does this help with clarity, but it helps them “buy in” to a new way of learning.

Try giving instruction without language

- Practice ways to **introduce your activity without language** so that the norm is set up immediately. Sometimes this communication can **be** its own activity, transition, or learning moment.

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USE SUPPORTING LANGUAGES

Experiment with other nonverbal languages

- Use pictures, written text, verbalized sound effects, music, lighting, etc.

Example: try using a visual agenda, leaving spaces to fill in with pictures and/or written text. At various times throughout class, students will return their focus to nonverbal communication

The classroom is never empty or neutral

- The architecture/arrangement of your classroom is already communicating to your students as soon as they walk in. To connect with **nonverbal, embodied learning**, pick different room set-ups for different parts of class. If you are not permitted to move furniture, have students move their bodies around their seats in different ways to reset, transition, or start a new activity.

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INTEGRATE PHYSICALITY

Consider nonverbal additions to existing activities

- Students may be more open to trying entirely nonverbal activities if they have already moved their body throughout class.

Examples: have students add a gesture to an explanation, or students move to different parts of the room based on their thoughts or feedback. Start with speaking+moving, then transition to silence!

Come up with a class language

- Many classrooms use a unique gestural language to signal different parts of class or messages, e.g. “Quiet coyote” to gather attention or the “i” handshape in American Sign Language to ask to use the restroom. Where else can you integrate gestures so that these communications can happen even **during** a group discussion? Remember that these signals or signs can change daily, and that itself can be an activity for group creativity.

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TRY THESE EASY ACCESS POINTS

Name Games - Personalizing

- Moving a name game from verbal to nonverbal through adding or substituting gesture can be a **great entrapoint** to nonverbal instruction. It gives students an immediate link between **movement** and **agency/ownership**.

Guessing - Adding Practicality

- Asking a student to “lift your elbows up” can feel vulnerable or awkward. However, setting up a guessing game that requires a peer to guess “you’re washing your hair!” will incentivize that student to lift their elbows because they want their peer to guess; it takes the vulnerability out of movement and gamifies it, adding a sense of practicality and accessibility.

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WHAT ARE USEFUL PHRASES TO HAVE GESTURES FOR?

Many of these phrases or words are associated with a commonly-understood gesture in any given culture. **However!** Sometimes what we think is “universal” varies culture to culture, body to body, and home to home. Test out and clarify your gestures to ensure that all students understand.

Pay special attention to going over different ways to say **yes** and **no** without words in order to practice consent.

- Yes
- No
- Breathe
- Rest/relax
- End/it's done
- New one/reboot
- I need a break
- Bathroom
- I need help
- Repeat
- Good!
- Good?
- Listen/focus
- Stop
- Wait
- Try Again
- Your Turn
- Return/reset
- Watch
- Ready

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HOW DO I DESIGN A WORDLESS LESSON?

When designing a nonverbal
activity,
game,
exercise,
or lesson plan,

the following structures can help!

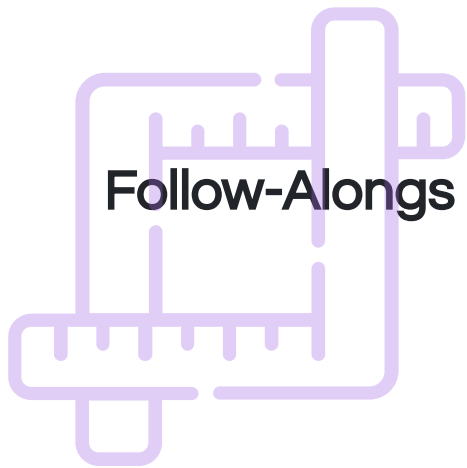


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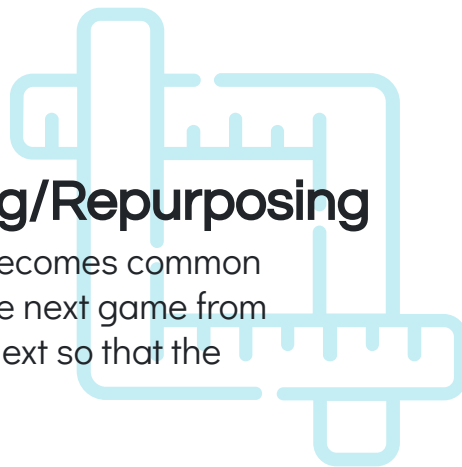


Follow-Alongs

This is useful for showing how a game works!
Students follow the teacher or a given singular leader.

Scaffolding/Repurposing

Once students understand a game, activity, or exercise, it becomes common knowledge. Leverage this shared knowledge by building the next game from the first. Structure your activities by building one upon the next so that the class is cumulative.



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Sequencing

Introduce games that require students to **put themselves in order**.
Spatial orientation does not require language, and a sequence can be many things - a timeline, pattern, storyline, etc.



Matching

Matching is another directive that does not require words. We can match bodies, faces, gestures, or visual aids like cards with pictures on them. A match can be an exact pair, *or* something that is more complexly linked based on cause, use, or association, e.g.

smoke→ fire, or plug→ phone, or cupcake→ birthday, etc.

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Repetition

Much of nonverbal teaching can feel like a **guessing game**, and sometimes not getting something right can feel disappointing. Reaffirm student confidence by returning to your class gestures throughout the session, repeating successful moments, and/or referencing earlier jokes to make sure the tone stays light and inviting.



Unison

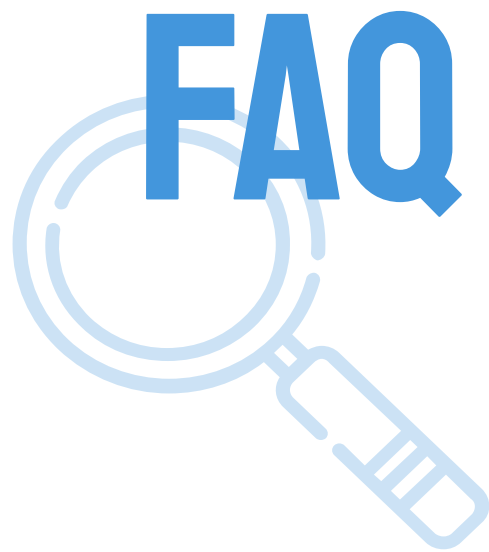
It is extremely satisfying, after much focus and following along, to move **in unison**. Use follow-along structures to flip back and forth into call and response structures, and try **culminating in a group movement**. Consider the “wind-up” - how can we ensure that we all jump at the same time by bending our knees together?

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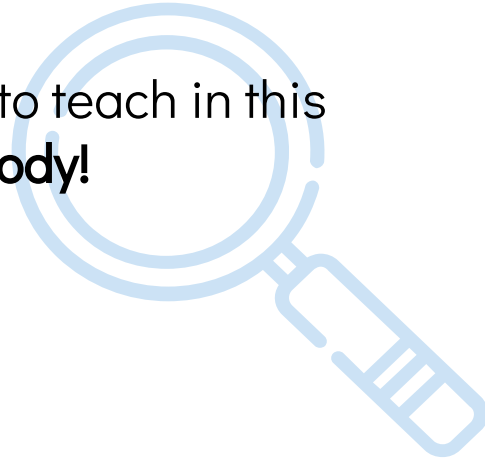
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Q

- Do I have to be a good physical
- communicator to teach this way?

A

- There is **no experience necessary** to teach in this
- style. All you need is a **body!**



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Q ■ What if students don't follow along *exactly*,
■ or move their bodies in uncontrolled ways?

A ■ That's okay! When focusing on **physicalized ways to communicate**, we do NOT want students to feel like their bodies are being judged or controlled by an outside power. Some pointers:

Try to design games that do not require "staying still"

Remember to let students know they can move "however is best for your body today," or offer a similar access statement at the start of class

Offer "fidgets" or other tools to keep hands busy and focus energy

Set up safety protocols of a personal space so that there is precedence to STOP or TAKE A BREAK if things get out of control

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What if students want to talk?

It'll happen! Here are some things to try:

Break into groups with different directives, so that smaller groups can be interrupted with language and it doesn't affect all kids at the same time

Play music as a reset, so students can let out their energy before refocusing.

At the start of class, set up a “reset” language. Try a sound cue, lights flickering, or even leaving the room and having a co-teacher speak so that you can stay in silence

Start a follow-along that is an invitation to play, so that students can slowly join in and resume silence again

Use a visual aid or “reveal” to gather attention, e.g. what happens next or what comes out of a box, etc. Only open it when students are quiet!

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Q ■ What are some obstacles to nonverbal communication?

A ■ Like spoken language, there will always be obstacles to communication. Keep these in mind and do your best to accommodate for miscommunications!

- physical differences or abilities to process nonverbal communication
- cultural differences in what a gesture or sound may mean
- cultural differences around vulnerability, intimacy, or manners in regards to the body
- opposing cues, i.e. when the words and bodies say different things
- not looking or can't see clearly
- overstimulation (too much to look at/sensory overload)
- being untruthful due to inhibition, faking something, or altering intensity or quality of a feeling
- avoiding looking for fear of having to participate or respond

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PARTS OF YOUR PLANNING

	Warm-Up	The first activity done as a group
	Establishing Norms	Setting expectations or norms for the lesson
	Transition	Going from one part of the lesson to the next
	Main Activity	The central game, exercise, or learning engagement

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Basic Follow-Along



Warm-Up

Stand in a circle and begin a continuous gesture or movement.

Example in silence: Hands in front of face, wiggle fingers.

Example with sound: Patting hands against thighs.

Keep doing the movement until students are following along. Use a nod, smile, or other nonverbal “yes” gesture to affirm students who are following.

Change the gesture to include various elements: face, body, hands.

Try sharing your sense of humor and warmth. This sets the tone!

Once students are following along, weave in some key gestural signals for your class.

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Classroom Parade



Warm-Up

If students are entering via a hallway or doorway, enter the classroom in “follow the leader” format. A new entrance to a familiar classroom can give a nonverbal cue that class will feel different today.

Language version: “Everyone sit in a circle.”

Nonverbal version: Line kids up in the hallway. Take the spot at the front of the line and **walk into the room slowly** or with **shuffling** feet - a different way than normal. If kids start to break the line, **stop** and **point** to the line, **waiting** for them to go back to their spot. Make a long snake of students behind you, and lead them **into a circle**. **Pause, face the center of the circle**, and **sit down!**

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Handshakes



Warm-Up

Stand in a circle. Make eye contact with a co-teacher or other student who would be comfortable modeling an improvisational game. Step forward slowly, indicating with **eyebrows up** and a **smile** that you want them to do the same.

Once in the circle, hold out a hand for a high five! Then, stay in the circle and continue to silently come up with a handshake. Make it silly and fun! When you think it's done, walk to the spot in the circle where your partner had been standing, switching places with them.

Model a second handshake with a new student, this time with a new handshake. Keep playing until students initiate with one another.

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Name Games



Warm-Up

Stand or sit in a circle. Go around saying your name and a doing a gesture. On the second round, remove the name and only do the gesture.

Option: Instead of gesturing on the name, ask students to choose an *adjective that begins with the first letter of their name*, and add a gesture to that word, e.g. *My name is Becky and I am *beautiful.**

LEVEL UP: Turn it into a passing game. Once gestures are associated with students, take turns by acting out your own gesture followed by that of a different student. Then it's that student's turn - they do their own, then another.

LEVEL UP: For more coordination and challenge, associate this passing game with a rhythm that the group sustains in unison, like stomping feet or snapping and clapping. Students have to pass on rhythm.

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Visual Agenda



Establishing Norms

Try using symbols on a whiteboard to show the agenda for the day, instead of using words. (Use the “Parts of Your Planning” slide as an example!) Create a sequence that suggests an order to the activities by writing them in a line or writing times next to each item.

At the start of class, point to each one in order. Then, point to the very first activity before beginning. Return to the agenda before each activity, checking off the one that came before so students feel a sense of accomplishment and cumulation.

Option: Leave blank spaces next to each agenda item so that you can draw/write it in as soon as you arrive there in your agenda. This means that things will be *revealed throughout class* which can help maintain focus during transitions.

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Acting Out the Rules



Establishing Norms

Try to model your class norms or agreements nonverbally. This is particularly helpful when committing to an entirely nonverbal class.

Language version: *"If you get overwhelmed or stressed, come sit here in the cool down station and draw."*

Language version: **Point** to the "cool down spot" and **approach**. **Hold up** the drawing materials. Count down (3, 2, 1, go!) **on your fingers**, then **transform** your body shape. **Act out** getting overwhelmed: **short of breath, angry or sad facial expression, agitated, tense muscles in hands and shoulders and legs**. **See** the spot, **walk over**, and use drawing calm down. Then **rejoin** the group. End the scene by **bowing**; use **"thumbs up"** gesture and **eyebrows up** expression to ask students if they understand, and wait for visual cue of "yes." Repeat if needed.

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Circle Up Transition



Transition

Hold your hands above your head in a circle shape. Ask for students to join in by making eye contact and emphasizing the gesture (pumping or looking at the hands, for example). Wait until the whole group is doing this with their hands *and* standing in a circle. Use eyes to trace a circle on the floor and reference the hand shape until they understand.

Alternatively, hold hands and build a circle that way.

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Receive a Package



Transition

At each transition, act out the arrival of an invisible package. Perhaps a mimed person delivers it at the door and you have to sign for it, or you find a box hidden behind books in a shelf, or the package flies in through the window, etc.

Open the package in the same way each time so that students learn the process: unwrap it, open the top, look in and respond with your facial expression, then bring it out.

Each mimed object can bring us back to a reset (e.g. a circle comes out of the box so we circle up), or a new game (e.g. an invisible ball comes out of the box and we pass the ball for the first activity, or you find a map that leads you to the next set of cards or markers for the white board).

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Face Olympics

ELEMENTS:
making faces
coordination
memory

DESIGN:
full group
taking turns



Main Activity

In a class orientation where everyone can see your face, hold up one finger and show a HAPPY expression. Wait for students to follow along.

Then, hold up a second finger and make a SAD expression. (Feel free to point to the eyebrows and gesture “lifting” between them to show that key aspect of a sad face.)

Continue with 3 = Mad, 4 = Scared, 5 = Surprise, and 6 = Disgusted. (These are the six emotional facial expressions that are universal across culture, but feel free to choose fewer or different ones.)

Once the students understand all six, hold up fingers in a non-sequential pattern and see if the class can follow along.

Then, ask one student to follow along. Try to stump them! If they do well, give them a handshake or mimed trophy. Or, use your pointer fingers to show “switch,” and have them try to stump you. From there they can test other students in the room.

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Switch It Up

ELEMENTS:
making faces
body language
coordination
memory
cooperation

DESIGN:
audience/actor
taking turns



Main Activity

Students stand on opposite sides of the classroom, facing the center. Draw a line with your pointer finger down the center of the class.

- From the center of the space where everyone can see, point to Side 1. This group is happy! Show this through facial expression (smiling), body posture (open shape), and behavior (bouncing, excited muscles). (Use the number “1” with your finger if this is coming after *Face Olympics*.)
- Point to Side 2. This group is sad! Show this in the same way.
- Model being happy on side one, then walking across the space. When you cross the centerline, turn sad.
- Show the reverse, turning sad to happy when crossing the center.
- From the center (as if a tennis referee), point to both groups, then use pointer fingers to gesture “switch”. Students walk and switch!
- **Option:** Use new emotions!
- **Option:** Have one or two students go at a time.
- **Option:** Add a handshake to occur at the center line.

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Guess the Gesture

ELEMENTS:
guessing
gestures
body language
board writing

DESIGN:
audience/actor



Main Activity

Start at a white board or similar. Wave your hand, then write “Hello.” Point to the wave, then point to the word.

Then, do a new gesture, e.g. hands up and head tilted to ask “what?” or finger wagging to say “no.” Before writing the word on the board, look to your students. Give a student the marker. Do the gesture again, then point to the board to invite them to write the translation. Repeat!

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Match the Gesture

ELEMENTS:
guessing
gestures
body language
cards

DESIGN:
group play
card matching



Main Activity

Prepare pre-written cards with matching phrases or emojis, e.g. two cards say “Where have you *been?!*”, two say “I’m so tired,” etc.

Hand a card to one student and hold its match. Indicate that you want the student to act out their card without showing it to you. Model looking at your card, acting out “aha, I have a match!” and doing the same gesture as the student. Reveal the cards to show that the gestures are a match! Finish by sitting down together.

Look to the students for comprehension, repeat if necessary. Shuffle cards, hand them all out. Gesture “go ahead” and wait for them to begin finding their pairs and sitting down when they’ve found them.

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Feeling Spectrum

ELEMENTS:
guessing
emotions
body language
cards optional

DESIGN:
audience/actors



Main Activity

Choose a sensation, state, or emotion to act out, e.g. hot, tired, or excited.

Option: share with the group by writing it on the board or pointing to an emoji.

Bring up a volunteer. Show them a point on the floor to stand (can be marked with tape) as the LOW end of the spectrum. Model how they should stand, acting out someone who is *just a little tired*.

Invite a second participant to be on the HIGH end of the spectrum, e.g. *extremely tired*. Model walking from the low to the high end of the spectrum, getting increasingly tired as you walk the line between the two people. Repeat with new words and volunteers.

Option: Instead of walking, bring a few students up to stand between the two ends of the spectrum so that everyone is in sequence from most to least.

Option: hand out cards with numbers from 1 - 5 (or a shape that is small to large) and have students arrange themselves in order without showing cards.

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Object Matching

ELEMENTS:
guessing
mime
prepared cards
board writing optional

DESIGN:
group matching
audience/actor



Main Activity

Prepare pre-written cards with matching images. The images should be objects that are easily mimed, e.g. an apple, floss, glasses, headphones, a glass of water, etc. Model the rules to find matches in the same way as *Match the Gesture*.

Option: choose matches that are *associated* with each other instead of a direct match, e.g. whistle/basketball, hot pepper/taco, baby/bottle, etc.

LEVEL UP: Turn over all cards in front of the “audience” of students. Act out a *need*, e.g. going for a run and being out of breath and thirsty. Use your eyes to look at the cards on the ground. Wait for a student to hand you the “glass of water” card. Applaud for them! Keep setting up silent scenarios that would require one of the objects. Have the students tag in to act out a scenario as needed.

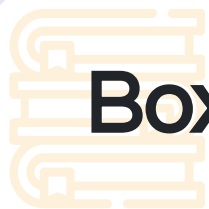
LEVEL UP: Use blank cards or whiteboard to draw new objects in an “object bank.” Once the water glass is pointed to as a match, erase it. Add a new object. Students can act a need, point to a need, OR draw a new object on the board.

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Box Game

ELEMENTS:
guessing
mime
imagination

DESIGN:
turns in a circle



Main Activity

Sit in a circle. Begin by showing with your hands a mimed box: show the walls with your hands. Pick it up to show if it's light or heavy.

Then, open the top of the box. Use your face to show the students what was inside of the box, i.e. your emotional reaction to the object.

Show the students what invisible object was inside the box by using your hands to mime it and your face to react to it. Then, put it back in the box. Close the box back up, shake it (which is our reset), and then pass to the next person in the circle.

If possible, sit next to someone who knows the game so that they can model that the next person takes out something entirely different, not the same object.

Go around the circle!

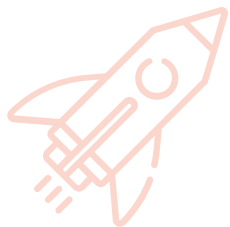
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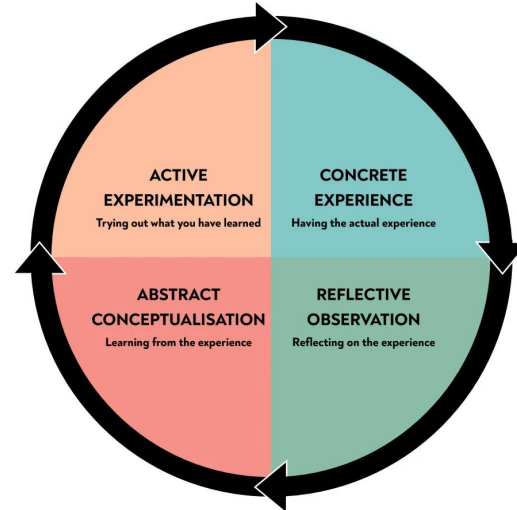
FURTHER READING

Help us add to this library by contacting rebecca [dot] baumwoll [at] gmail [dot] com.

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Image credit: Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle:
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CREDITING

Created by Becky Baumwoll

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Thanks to the International Teaching Artist Collective, Broken Box Mime Theater, Alma Baumwoll, and the students and teachers who helped develop this work

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