

## **An Exercise in Expression**

Written by Catina Anderson

The following article describes an exercise used by Broad Run High School color guard coach (and CGE editor) Catina Anderson to help her students expand their repertoire for emotional expression beyond the "plastered-on" smile.

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A few years ago I designed a regional A winter guard show requiring performers to express happy, sad and angry emotions in various parts of the show. My students understood happy to some extent, and a few could do angry. But getting "sad" across to the audience was just not working.

After several weeks of discussion and demonstration I was at a loss for how to teach this so, in desperation, I went to my school's drama teacher... What follows is an exercise he gave me that worked wonders with my students. Four years later I'm still using it on a regular basis. Here's what we do to help them expand their repertoire beyond the plastered-on smile!

### **At the Beginning:**

We start by talking about the physical expression of emotions. We talk about how breathing changes when someone is sad versus happy versus excited. We talk about the involvement of various aspects of the face (not just the mouth) including the eyebrows, eyes, tilt of the head, etc. We emphasize how the expression of emotion in real life is dynamic rather than static. It's constantly changing from one moment to the next. Rarely would you see someone who is truly happy walking around with just a static smile on his/her face, for example.

We then demonstrate the differences between static and dynamic emotions as staff members. This usually gets a bit of a laugh and breaks some tension.

It's actually much harder than you might imagine, stepping outside of our own comfort zones to demonstrate these expressions for our students. It's definitely a reality check regarding what we're about to ask them to do. Then we share with the students our own "stage fright" and fears. We let them know we understand what we're asking them to do is difficult but the payoff in audience response is more than worth the struggle.

### **Give it a Go:**

We ask the kids to stand in a block facing forward and explain that no one is allowed to turn their head to look at anyone else. This helps to ensure privacy, and allows them to experiment and go out on a limb without the pressure of an audience.

The first time we do the exercise each season, the staff members also stand in the back of the room so we cannot see their faces and they cannot see us.

Initially, we ask them to smile. Then, we tell them the smile on their face is a “5” on a scale of one to ten. From there we ask them to vary the intensity of the physical expression along a scale of 1 to 10. While doing this, we coach them, providing hints and suggestions on how to increase or decrease the intensity of the expression. We might remind them to consider their breathing, or give them an example of something they would really be excited about (e.g. “Now try an 8, perhaps the boy you really like just asked you to go to prom with him!” ).

We repeat the same exercise with happy emotions, sad emotions, angry emotions, or any type of expression we need them to incorporate into the show.

After the first try with no audience, the staff moves to the front of the room and observes.

### **Positive Reinforcement:**

It’s EXTREMELY important to be positive, supportive and encouraging. For the first few weeks focus only on what the students are doing well. Layer on praise for those who are really going out on a limb and experimenting. Keep talking to them about the engagement of their eyes and breath within each expression. Talk about how they might try to recall situations from their own experiences in order to remind them of how they felt when expressing this type of emotion in “real life.”

As you get further into rehearsals you may notice kids who are overdoing it a bit. Make sure to handle these situations with sensitivity. Talk to them in private. Never laugh or point them out in front of their peers. And praise them for going above and beyond. Keep the environment safe.

### **One Step Further:**

Once they are comfortable with the exercise on its own (and with their basic equipment exercises) you can layer this element in as part of fundamentals. For example, have them work their 100 drop spins at the start of practice, paying attention to correct technique, while also demonstrating one type of emotion as you call out varying levels of intensity. This will help them learn to layer on the additional responsibility of expression in tandem with their equipment responsibilities.

Ultimately, getting past feelings of self-consciousness and being able to experiment with different emotions and characters within their performance is a huge hurdle for most young students to complete. Provide examples and information about what physical characteristics are involved in the expression of various emotions. This exercise (and others like it) will help expand their repertoire beyond just smiling that well-known static smile.

Then, provide a safe environment for them to experiment . It may take some time. Be patient and encouraging. Some performers will achieve more quickly, while others may need more direct instruction regarding specific sections of choreography. All will need

to be certain of their equipment work before they'll be able to layer on expression. It is often a long process full of repetition, but as timid young freshmen develop over time into dynamic performers you'll know it was worth the time invested!

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*Catina Anderson is the founder and editor of Color Guard Educators. She has been instructing high school colorguards since 1994 and has been on staff with Broad Run High School in Ashburn, Virginia since 1998. She also serves as the education specialist for the Atlantic Indoor Association Winter Guard Circuit.*