

Voyages of Discovery: Experiencing the Emotion of History

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AS I DISTRIBUTED DIMINUTIVE SLIPS OF PAPER, several of the third graders grabbed hold of each other. “No, not me,” several stated, along with, “I don’t want to look.” I asked the students to open the papers. Some opened them quickly others took deep breaths before doing so, and a few fidgeted nervously, avoiding the inevitable. One quickly hid the piece of paper, stating none too convincingly, “Not me. It’s not me.”

A few of those pieces of paper had little symbols printed on them. Before opening the paper slips, the students knew what the symbol meant: death of the character the student was role-playing. This moment occurred in the midst of an integrated drama lesson focused on Henry Hudson’s voyages in the early 1600s. In their roles as Hudson’s sailors, the students were facing the cold, loneliness, frustration, and disorientation of Hudson’s last voyage.

Although I have long developed integrated lesson plans that recreate historical events in order to elicit genuine emotional responses in students, this particular one surprised me. In past lessons, participating students, in-role as historical characters, have expressed real frustration over having lands taken away, being forced to relocate, or acts of discrimination. In a journal entry from a workshop residency I led on the Japanese American internment in May 2004, a sixth grade student wrote, “The part when we got to experience how people felt when they had to go to the internment camp, even if it wasn’t true I felt scared that I had to go into the camp and shocked that I couldn’t bring a few things that I wanted to bring.”

Emotion and Curiosity

Over the course of two class periods, each of 60 minutes, students playing the role of Henry Hudson’s crew felt the fear of an unknown future. That emotional response spurred them on to devise an event that made them feel triumphant and instilled in them an avid interest in finding out more details about the real history of Hudson’s voyages. One particular girl in the class was not doing well academically. Lectures by the teacher did not grab her interest, and reading was hindered by her limited comprehension. Upon finishing the Hudson adventure, she was the first, and most eager, student to ask to borrow my Henry Hudson books. She took three books and read then over



the following week. When next I stepped into that class, she came running up to me to show me on a map where the Hudson Bay and Hudson River were, noting she had been there.

An integrated drama/history activity such as this builds on children’s natural curiosity, avid imaginations, and love of good stories. Role-playing an historical event engages all of these affinities simultaneously.¹ The lesson is not a theatrical recreation, with a focus on volume, poise, and enunciation, but an imagined reality, the focus on role-playing the historical characters in a “fictional now time.”² Without knowing how the event plays out, the students throw themselves into it with joy and excitement, savoring the surprises that come.

Through a series of imagined experiences based on historical realities, the students thoroughly explore the sequence of events. They emotionally invest in the characters and their destinies. When young students feel a sense of ownership over the event, they are generally more interested in learning about the details of the event. Ultimately, they develop a deeper understanding of the historical event because they have formed an emotional tie with the characters and their situation.³

Background

The first step in the Hudson lesson set a context for the students, to help them understand the characters they would be role-playing. I found a geographical map of North America, but did not just show

them the map at first, as I wanted them to get a sense of “unexplored territory.” In-role as Hudson, I rang a bell calling the students, in-role as sailors, together and inviting them to join “my” upcoming expedition. I/Hudson outlined the purpose of the trip—to search for a new route to the Orient and to return home with the ship’s hold full of spices.

“Who among you have had the pleasure of cinnamon? Of cardamom?” I passed around a few lunch bags with spices at the bottom for students to smell. “Where do we get these exotic spices that tickle our senses? This expedition is set to find a new way to reach Asia for spices, which command a high price in the market. There will be riches for all of us if we can find the passage. Who will sail with us?”

I introduced a map, showing the uncharted, imagined route we might take, which could make us all famous. I also showed a picture of our craft to make the students/sailors feel comfortable about signing on. They then had an opportunity to ask questions and decide whether they would accompany Hudson. They all did.

The students made a list of what they would bring. I showed them a sack that was the size they were allowed to bring. Some listed modern objects such as Walkmans, Game Boys, and the like. I responded as Captain Hudson might have, expressing my confusion over the named objects and suggesting more practical ideas, such as clothing, blankets, and hobbies (such as music and wood craft) to fill their time. Since this first part of the lesson was all about establishing context, it was important for me to stay in-role to demonstrate the seriousness of the process and to encourage students to help create the mood of the situation. The students then had a chance to rewrite their packing lists and share them.

A Ship to Sail

Out-of-role, the students designed the shape and size of our ship, outlining it on the floor with rope. With a few five-gallon paint buckets, volunteers defined the placement of the masts and other main parts of the ship. We then made a list of jobs the sailors might have had on the ship, which included swabbing the desk, hoisting sails, steering the ship, and keeping a lookout for land and icebergs, as well as cooking. We then studied pictures of life aboard ship. The students “tried on” the different jobs by first creating auto-images (frozen statues) and then pantomiming the action, focusing on details of the action in order to make the job feel real. Each then chose one of the jobs. Individuals with similar jobs created a tableau showing how their group worked together. They then pantomimed the action together. Finally, each group chose a place on the ship and together we brought life to the ship by performing all of the activities simultaneously.

At each step we stopped to reflect, the students sharing thoughts and feelings about each situation, what they were imagining and what else we might do as an ensemble to create our reality. The reflection is a key aspect of the process. In the reflection the students contextualize the learning for themselves, seek out information that helps deepen their understanding of the situation and discover clues to making their role-play more genuine.

Back on the ship, I wanted the students to feel a sense of the monotony of a voyage. Several times during our journey, I, in-role

Books for Children

- Asimov, Isaac. *Henry Hudson, Arctic Explorer and North American Adventurer*. Milwaukee, WI: Gareth Stevens, 1991.
- Goodman, Joan. *Beyond the Sea of Ice: The Voyages of Henry Hudson*. New York: Mikaya Press, 1999.
- Molzahn, Arlene Bourgeois. *Henry Hudson: Explorer of the Hudson River*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow, 2003.
- Weiner, Eric. *The Story of Henry Hudson, Master Explorer*. New York: Dell, 1991.

Background for Teachers

- Delgado, James. *Across the Top of the World: The Quest for the Northwest Passage*. New York: Checkmark Books, 1999.
- Johnson, Donald S. *Charting the Sea of Darkness: The Four Voyages of Henry Hudson*. Camden, ME: International Marine Books, 1992.
- Life and Voyages of Henry Hudson, www.ianchadwick.com/hudson/
- Millman, Lawrence. “Looking for Henry Hudson,” *Smithsonian* (October 1999).

as Hudson’s first mate, called out that I saw land. The entire ship came to a stop and everyone searched the horizon to look for what I had seen. Each time I corrected myself, noting that I had seen a cloud, mirage, or something glinting off the water. Each time the students had to take up sailing the ship once again, until finally land was actually sighted.

Decisions

Upon arriving at a bay of any size, a decision must be made: Do we proceed to explore the interior coastline, looking for an outlet on the other side, or stop there? I asked the students to imagine, for a moment, that the decision will be made democratically. The students then decided not to take the chance, as they could not be sure what we might encounter further up the river.

Out-of-role, I informed them about the historical events: The decision rested with Hudson, who decided to turn back, disappointed at the dead-end, but having named the river at the source of the bay for himself. Had the students decided to continue on, it would have been interesting to see what their response would have been if we had proceeded up the river. What if the ship had grounded on a rock or shallow water? What if the river narrowed quickly? Oh the other hand, what if the river had allowed inland navigation for miles and miles (as the Hudson River, in fact, does)?

It was a simple task to prepare for a second voyage, as the students were well invested in the characters and a wish to succeed with our intended goal. Building on the ritual we had established earlier, I rang the bell, calling the students together to look at a second map, showing another possible passage, this one far north, through the “Furious Overfall.” I noted where our earlier trip had taken us, pointing out the mistakes of sailing too far south.

Try, Try Again

For this last voyage (corresponding to Hudson’s voyage of 1610–11),

I conducted a visualization, having the student “see” the journey in their imaginations as I described it. First, the students once again set up the parameters of our ship. They then sat, closed their eyes and visualized the second sailing. I provided some descriptions, but even more so, I asked questions that encouraged students to envision what surrounded them. “You are standing on the deck when you hear someone yell ‘Land!’ In the distance, what do you see? Maybe you have to squint or shade your eyes, but something is there. What is it? What colors do you see? How are you feeling seeing land again after weeks at sea?”

When ending the activity, building the emotion and quickening the rhythm helps create a sense of expectation, “The ship sails into a large body of water. Large, white mountains surround the ship. They are icebergs floating by. What can you see past the ice mountains? Is there a way through? One big one blocks your view, but the ship keeps sailing. Have you found it? Will a clear passage to the Indian Ocean appear around the next bend? Then the ship passes round and iceberg and there is only more ice. Ice closes in behind the ship. You’re trapped.”

Stuck with Failure

Immediately following the Hudson visualization, groups of students discussed how they now felt about our journey at this moment. As the students made their verbal tableaux, I noted their emotional reactions. One boy actually seemed happy about being trapped, which opened up a useful discussion. He noted that being trapped meant they could stay still for a while, find food and fresh water and maybe conduct searches with smaller groups. The discussion continued, with others expressing their opinions about the situation. I asked what they thought might happen. Answers ranged from the ship being destroyed by the ice, to freezing to death, to running out of food.

Although I had not planned on the specific answers that students gave, they segued nicely into the next section. Historically, Hudson did not want to stay, but at some point realized the difficulty of the situation. He ordered his carpenter to build a shelter on the snow-covered, icy land for part of the crew. Although the carpenter explained the impossibility of the task, Hudson, angered, forced him to do it as best he could. I related this story to the students to demonstrate the rising tensions between the captain and the crew.

Following this story, I handed out the little slips of paper, several marked with a small black dot. As I passed out the paper, I told the students not to open them until everyone had one. While they held them, waiting, I related that several of the sailors died from the severe cold. The students then opened the papers to find out who had died. A couple of yelps followed, as those with the symbols discovered their fate. The reactions were strong,



indicating the students' deep interest and commitment to the unfolding story. This was no longer just an exercise; it was now a gripping, exciting, surprise-filled story in which the students were emotionally involved. (Please note if any student really has experienced a death in his or her family recently, the teacher should not give the marked slip to that student. If desired, the teacher could modify the activity so that non-lethal hardships befall the sailors, such as "sick with scurvy," or "frostbite on the nose.")

I rang the bell. The students gathered near me as I announced that the ice was crushing the ship. They needed to break the ice and push the ship forward. Students volunteered for cracking ice and pushing or pulling the ship. Out-of-role, I asked them to pantomime the action of the work. Once they had repeated the action several times, I stepped into role as a sailor and struck up a conversation with them. I complained about the work, the cold and Hudson's decision to stay in this place. I encouraged others to express their opinions. Several agreed with me, a couple of them voiced their fear of dying, and at least one said we should just stay in the ship until the winter passed. I asked what we should do about Hudson. Someone suggested we should talk with him. I declined, stating my fear of him. No one else volunteered.

Out-of-role, I explained there was little food or bread left and the sailors were forced to eat stale crackers full of weevils. I then passed out more slips of paper. Some of the students were reluctant to take them. One blurted out, "Not again." There was a greater sense of tension than the first time. When asked to open the papers to see who had succumbed to starvation, several opened them slowly, as if afraid to look. The groans of discovery were louder this time. Friends reached out to hug those who "died" (or suffered other ailments).

Tensions Rise

I had hoped that the slips of paper would create an atmosphere of mystery, while potentially creating a frustration about Hudson's leadership similar to that which really occurred. The emotional tension certainly exceeded my expectations.

Once again, I rang the bell. I told the gathered students/sailors that someone had stolen some of the bread. I told them to get out their duffels and line up on deck. I then joined the line as a sailor, quickly and quietly accusing a couple of students, complaining they were the cause. The accused defended themselves, one saying it was Hudson who was the really troublemaker.

Pausing the situation long enough to switch back to Hudson, I ordered the students to hold out their duffel bags. I searched, questioning each student, warning them that if no one spoke, they would all be in trouble. No one spoke. Finally, I "found" the bread in a duffel bag. The accused were very vocal about their innocence, but I had the goods and had the accused locked up. As a final warning for all, I cut their rations. Immediately following, I passed out slips of paper, with the results described in the opening paragraph. The students, as the sailors, began to anticipate their future. They were aware of the deterioration of the situation and to perceive Hudson's role in bringing on the crisis. This gave them enough knowledge and personal stake in the situation, and a desire to determine their own fate.

I once again joined them in-role as a sailor, calling a "secret" meeting on deck to discuss both Hudson's attitude and our own worsening situation. I asked them what we should do. Several suggestions came up, including trying to run away, waiting for the ice to thaw, and even killing Hudson. The crew evaluated each, discussing the risks of each choice. During the discussion, one student mentioned taking over the ship. When asked what to do about Hudson, one said we should get rid of him. That sent a ripple of excitement through the group. The crew guessed that if they could send him away, never to be found, they would not get in trouble for his death, and could not be mutiny. We concocted a plan for mutiny, devising a way to trick Hudson into a small boat, thus forcing him to leave.

In the last step, I entered the deck saying, "Why have you called me here? It's cold and I was in the midst of my meal. Speak quickly." The students enacted their plan. Hudson, along with a few supporters, was placed onto a small rowboat. The barely contained excitement of the students was a treat. The frustrations they had experienced gave them the power to take the situation into their own hands and turn it to their advantage.

Reviewing the Role Play

In a final reflection, the students expressed frustration at being ordered around by Hudson who, they noted, never seemed to care about their feelings, concerns, or questions. They also desired to know what the real sailors had done. Hearing that the sailors had successfully mutinied, the students were as pleased as if they had really been participants. We then discussed what happened to the sailors after they returned to England. The students were curious about the aftermath of the voyage, their interest now broadened by their participation. When I pulled out a map showing the Hudson River and Hudson Bay and held up books on the topic of Hudson and his explorations, several students wanted the books to find out more about "their" adventure.

Guiding students through a dramatic exploration of an historical event can elicit strong emotional reactions that can deepen student understanding and interest in the subject matter. Hudson helped discover the New World. As I taught this lesson, it felt like I was helping students discover a living history because they made personal connections to people and events of the past.⁴ 🌐

Notes

1. Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote, *So You Want to Use Role-Play? A New Approach in How to Plan* (Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Trentham Books, 1999).
2. Jonathan Neelands, *Structuring Drama Work: A Handbook of Available Forms in Theatre and Drama* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
3. Bolton and Heathcote, *Drama for Learning* (New York: Heinemann Drama, 1995); Ronald V. Morris, "Outlines of History: Measured Spaces and Kinesthetics," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 13, no. 2 (November/December 2000): 14-16; and Daniel A. Kelin, II, "To Feel the Fear of It," *Talking Points* 14, no. 1 (2002): 10-14.
4. The author would like to thank the Hawaii Alliance for Arts Education and third grade teachers and students at Laie Elementary School in Laie, Hawaii.

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