

Learning through Process Drama in the First Grade

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IT was an important budget meeting. “Yes,” one legislator explained, “We need to fund the police and fire department, but what about housing for the poor?” “Well,” responded another, “We can’t forget about the schools, either.”

We listened with fascination as the first grade “legislators” struggled with the problem of allocating limited resources. This was the culminating activity of our study of government. The students were learning how difficult it is to divide scarce tax dollars among a multitude of important needs. They were developing important critical thinking and problem solving skills while they grappled with real world problems and limited resources. The students were also practicing essential communication skills as they explained the reasons for their positions.

Relevance

Our teaching team of three teachers aims to prepare students for 21st Century Learning Outcomes, which includes critical thinking, problem solving, and communication skills.¹ Yet classroom experience has taught us that one of the most difficult aspects of teaching young children is that they have few experiences or prior knowledge to make sense of new information. Unless there is a way to make this information relevant to our students’ lives, there is little possibility of them developing a true understanding of a concept. So we began our journey to explore several economic concepts as well as government, laws, and leadership through imagination and exploration.

Specifically, the content of our unit of study included teaching about economic wants, resources, scarcity, choice, goods and services, specialization, division of labor, price, representative government, taxation, and the difference between rules and laws. Our teaching team shared an enthusiastic belief in the use of process drama as a means for students to make sense of unfamiliar and complex concepts. In process drama pedagogy, the teacher encourages imagination and makes available a range of learning possibilities. We led our students through the steps of speculation, interpretation, evaluation, and reflection, which are all demanding cognitive activities.²

This article describes the various structures or drama “frames” developed for the children to explore these new social studies concepts. A total of 6 hours was allocated for this learning

experience, using a two-hour time block for three consecutive days. The students completed three drama frames in each time block. This provided our students with the necessary time to deeply engage in the issues, discuss the activities in each step, and reflect on what they were learning.

Drama Frame One: Long Ago

We asked our students to use their imagination to travel back to the “olden days.” Picture books depicting the Colonial period were used to act as a springboard for thinking about how life back then was different from today. For example, Edric asked, “What things do we have now that people didn’t have a long time ago? For example, did people have cars back then?” After a chorus of “no’s” the students generated a long list of items that included airplanes, televisions, radios, computer games, telephones, microwave ovens, and refrigerators. In this drama frame, our instructional goal was to have the children compare and contrast similarities and differences between “long ago” and “current times,” while also beginning to imagine life in a different era. Our focus was to have the students think in terms of goods and services.

Drama Frame Two: Specific Jobs

We asked students to think about some of the jobs that were needed in this earlier era, again using the picture books as a basis for generating ideas. They brainstormed a list of jobs that included hunter, seamstress, tailor, blacksmith, farmer, carriage driver, and stable keeper and explained why each particular job would be important. For example, one student said, “We have to have farmers because people need food.” Then the students chose a job and began imagining that they were now living in this long-ago era. Working in role, the students developed a series of movements to pantomime their job and sang a song that included a verse for each specific job title. (SIDEBAR, page 20) After completing this activity, students each received an envelope containing \$10.00 salary (in pretend money) for their work.

The instructional purpose in this drama frame was to address the economic concept of specialization. We wanted to engage the students both mentally and physically in performing their “job.” We also wanted them to have a “financial interest” in the taxation issue that was about to evolve.

Drama Frame Three: Taxation

We introduced students to the concept of economic needs by discussing reasons that they would need money, for expenses such as housing, food, clothing, and to purchase job-related materials. For example, farmers would need to purchase tools and seeds; tailors would need to purchase fabric, needles, and thread, etc. The teachers explained that the King also requires that they pay taxes. Edric (the teacher) assumes the role of the King and enters the classroom wearing a crown. He explains to the workers that he appreciates all of their fine work, but he has many expenses in the kingdom and needs to collect some of their earnings for taxes to pay for roads, soldiers, and upkeep on his fine palace. He orders his assistants (Lois, Jennifer, and Katie) to collect \$8.00 in taxes from each worker. The students were surprised by this amount, but paid the tax collectors, although with some complaints. One student said, "But that's almost all of it! That's not fair." Another protested, "Hey, we need some for us, too!"

Our instructional purpose in this drama frame was to help students understand the types of expenses needed for various types of jobs and to begin to understand the concept of excessive taxation without representation.

Drama Frame Four: Limited Resources

Working in role, the "workers" decided that they needed more money for living and working expenses. They explored the issues of costs, expenses, and limited resources and generated some possible solutions. One student said, "What if we put all our money together?" Another agreed, saying, "Yeah, if we put it all together, then we might have enough." Another said, "Like a community." We added up our costs and combined dollars and realized that pooling our resources would not resolve the overall shortage of money. The students then decided to work together to petition the king for a reduction in taxes.

Our goal in this drama frame was to provide students with time to explore the concepts of needs, wants, and limited resources and to begin to explore possible solutions to the problem of excessive taxation.

Drama Frame Five: Petitioning

Small groups, organized by occupation, brainstormed reasons why they thought the king should reduce their taxes. Each group worked together to write a petition to the king. The students discussed how the language and tone of the petition could influence the king's response.

Edric then returned in role as the king, and the groups presented their petitions. They explained their reasoning for requesting this reduction in taxes. The different groups provided multiple perspectives on why the king should consider their request. For example, one farmer explained, "If we don't have enough money for seeds, then the people



SIDEBAR

I'm Working!

The class sings this song together while pantomiming the various "jobs." Listen to a podcast posted by our class at http://web.me.com/sbeckers54/Mary_Kathleen_Barnes/Podcast/Podcast.html

I'm working as a *tailor*,
What do you think about that?
I wear a *tailor's* collar,
I wear a *tailor's* hat.
I wear a *tailor's* raincoat,
I wear a *tailor's* shoes.
And every Saturday evening,
I read the *Tailors' News*.
And some day - ay- ay
If I can - an- an
I'll work hard to be the best *tailor*!
The best *tailor* that I can!

Verse and Job

Tailor
Farmer
Hunter
Seamstress
Blacksmith
Carriage driver
Stable keeper

Possible Pantomime

Cutting with scissors
Swinging a scythe
Firing a musket
Sewing
Hammering metal
Holding the reins
Filling a water bucket

in the kingdom will be hungry ‘cuz there won’t be any food. “One of the tailors said, “If we can’t buy the stuff to make clothes, then people will be cold in the winter. They might even freeze.”

The instructional purpose in this drama frame was to provide students with opportunities to problem-solve and to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives to the king in a respectful manner.

Drama Frame Six: Priorities

“King Edric” listened to the petitioners present their cases, and then responded a bit angrily. He told the students that he had not collected enough taxes to cover the expenses of the kingdom, and that he needed to cover some additional expenses for the palace garden and the annual palace festival. He then ordered his assistants to collect an additional dollar from each citizen.

In this frame, the students began to explore multiple perspectives on allocating tax money and also examined the concepts of needs and wants. For example, the students spent considerable time discussing their opinions of the king’s decision to spend their hard-earned tax dollars on the annual palace festival. They were also beginning to understand why fair representation in government decision-making is so important.

Drama Frame Seven: Immigration

The class discussed their dire financial situation and brainstormed some possible options to consider. This provided a great opportunity for students to experience decision-making and opportunity costs. One of the options suggested by the students was immigrating to a new homeland, and the students ultimately decided to explore this option. Edric asked the children to pretend to pack what they would need for the trip and then using a rhythmic, repetitive chant with pantomimed movements, he led a guided imagery experience with the students as they “traveled” to their new homeland. His chant was somewhat similar to the classic “bear hunt” chant, but he used geography vocabulary to build the imagery. For example, “Look, there’s a river! Can’t go over it, can’t go under it. Must ford it on a raft!” The students repeated the chant and pantomimed poling and paddling the river.

The students needed to think about wants and needs related to selecting a location for building a home and the elements that would be essential for a settlement. We asked questions such as, “What would be a good place for you to build a house? Why?” We asked them to describe the area they had chosen, using the geography vocabulary. The students also drew maps and pictures that indicated the geographic setting of their new homes.

Drama Frame Eight: Government

The students then imagined that as time passed, more and more immigrants were coming to settle in the area, and there was a need to decide how decisions would be made about the laws and taxes for the community. We asked each student to tell why he/she might be a good leader who would accurately

represent the people in their village. For example, one student said, “People in the village tell me things.” We discussed how this meant that the people felt she was a good listener, which would be an important skill. Another student said, “They picked me because I’m fair. You have to be fair to write good laws so they’ll be good for everyone.” Other students mentioned “being smart” and a willingness to think about others’ ideas.

The students worked in small groups to brainstorm laws that would be helpful to our community, then decided on a final list that they would present to the entire class for a vote. Some of the laws they voted on included: “No stealing,” “Don’t shoot other hunters or people,” and “Sign up for our army.”

In the class discussion, the students offered reasons why some groups proposed similar laws and why some groups suggested different laws. It was important for the students to gain experience in listening to and evaluating different ideas and perspectives, and to gain practice in communicating their ideas to others. Several groups included laws about taxation.

Drama Frame Nine: Budgeting

We wanted students to apply what they were learning about community needs, taxation, representation, and multiple perspectives to current day issues, so our final frame was designed to provide them with experiences of legislative apportionment. In this frame, the students imagined that they were present-day legislators deciding how to spend tax dollars. We gave each student a list of services that are commonly paid for by taxes and that students are likely to have some experience with (**Handout**, page 22). We instructed them to imagine that they had \$5.00 in taxes that had been collected, and to decide how the tax money should be spent. Students had to consider options and make decisions about which categories to fund and how much to apportion for each item.

After students completed their individual apportionments, they met in small groups to explain the reasons for their choices and to discuss the differences in each student’s apportionment decisions. For example, some students allocated dollars to a few categories, and others funded many different categories. In the first grade, a few students may know how to divide dollars into cents, allowing them to allocate some money to every category. They should be encouraged to do so. Toward the end of the activity, the teacher may sum all of the students’ individual contributions, and the likely outcome will be that all of the categories received some funding. (That is, none of the public services have to be entirely cut from the budget.) While engaged in this task, the students were developing an understanding of the difficulty and complexity in allocating limited resources for community needs and wants.

Discussion

As schools and teachers strive to prepare students for living and learning in the 21st Century, the discussion has once again pushed to the forefront the critical need for students to

Allocating Government Money

Name _____ Date _____

Imagine that you are a legislator. You have five dollars (\$5) in taxes that you have collected. How will you spend the tax money? Choose among these 8 services. For example, you could spend \$2 for Fairs and Festivals. That would leave \$3 to divide among the other public services.

\$ _____ for **Fairs and Festivals**\$ _____ for **Fire Fighters and Police**\$ _____ for **Food and Free meals**\$ _____ for **Housing and Emergency Shelter**\$ _____ for **Libraries, with Books and Computers**\$ _____ for **Parks and Playgrounds**\$ _____ for **Road and Sidewalk Repair**\$ _____ for **Schools and School Busses**

\$ _____ TOTAL (must equal \$5)

become skilled thinkers and communicators. While there is some debate over whether these are “new” skills or simply “newly important” skills, there is little disagreement among educators and policy makers that students must be prepared to apply what they are learning to solve problems, analyze issues, and develop higher order thinking skills.³

Although we put economics in the forefront, we attempted to carefully integrate the other social sciences into a meaningful process drama that provided learning experiences in representative government, rules and laws, taxation, geography terms and map skills, problem-solving, collaboration, multiple perspective-taking, and critical thinking. We were guided by state and national social studies standards.

Our evaluation of student dialogue indicated that the students were learning effective problem-solving strategies and how to explain and justify their reasoning. For example, one of the problem solving approaches the students explored after the first taxation experience was to pool their resources to address the monetary shortage they were facing. We helped them tally their resources. Then they evaluated their options and made decisions based on the new information they had. The act of having to count out the dollars and hand them over to the tax collectors was a powerful experience that helped to make the concept of taxation a concrete learning experience. Students revisited this complex issue later in the unit when, in the role of legislators, they had to grapple with the very real problem of allocating insufficient tax dollars to pay for essential public services which are funded through tax revenues.

Student Engagement

Lois was especially impressed with how some of her shy, less-confident students assumed leadership positions within the drama structures, openly sharing their ideas, arguing for their positions, and guiding their classmates in some of the problem-solving and decision-making situations. These usually quiet students were developing confidence and communication skills. We also believe that the small group format for many of the tasks also served to support higher levels of engagement and collaboration for all of the students.

By evaluating the dialogue in the drama frames, we learned what background knowledge our students were bringing to the various tasks. For example, when the students were developing laws, one student suggested a “no smoking” law, another argued for a “no poaching” law, and another suggested you should be required to talk to a tree expert before you cut



down a tree. Clearly, these were issues that were meaningful for these students. We were also able to evaluate the students' level of understanding about the differences between rules and laws, and incorporated this information into our discussions, after they had generated their lists of potential laws. This provided us with concrete examples to use that had been created by the students.

Recommended Children's Literature

These books worked well for helping the students use their imaginations to “move back in time.”

Arenstam, Peter. *Mayflower 1620: A New Look at a Pilgrim Voyage*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2007.

Harness, Cheryl. *Three Young Pilgrims*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995 .

McGovern, Ann. *If You Sailed on the Mayflower*. New York: Scholastic, 1991.

Ross, H. L. *The Story of the Pilgrims*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Sewall, Marcia. *The Pilgrims of Plimoth*. New York: Aladdin, 1996.

Waters, Kate. *Sarah Morton's Day: A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim Girl*. New York: Scholastic, 1989.

_____, *Samuel Eaton's Day: A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim Boy*. New York: Scholastic, 1996.

The allocation of tax dollars in the final drama frame also helped us to see which students had begun to develop a sense of empathy for those who are less fortunate. Some students allocated considerable resources for housing and food for needy residents of our community.

Conclusion

About three months after this learning experience, Lois wondered how much the students would remember, so she asked

the children to write about it. One first grader wrote, "Back in the old days, the people had to pay the king and the people almost died so they discovered a new land and they moved there." Another student wrote, "We made maps that showed us the way." Other comments were: "We got to know about the old days." "It was fun." and "We made new laws."

The learning in this unit was more meaningful for the students because they "lived" the experience in the con-



text of the drama frames. Students had a means for making sense of these complex social studies concepts in a way that had relevance for them. If our goal is for students to become skilled in 21st Century Learning Outcomes, then we need to provide the time for learning experiences that foster development of the essential skills of problem-solving, collaboration, analytical and critical thinking. We believe that using process drama to teach social studies is an effective way to meet this goal. 🌐

Notes

1. "21st Century Learning Outcomes," www.21stcenturyskills.org.
2. Jenifer Jasinski Schneider, Thomas P. Crumpler, and Theresa Rogers, *Process Drama and Multiple Literacies: Addressing Social, Cultural, and Ethical Issues* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006), 9.
3. Elena Silva, "Measuring Skills for 21st-Century Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no. 8 (May 2009): 630-634.

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