

Decidedly Dramatic!

The Power of Creative Drama in Social Studies

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Excitement fills the air as I place a crown on my head and prepare to address the American colonies. “I, King George III, have issued a new tax called the Tea Act. You are hereby required to purchase your tea only from Great Britain. You shall pay a tax upon every purchase of this tea.” Before I even finish speaking, my fourth grade students are calling out complaints of unfairness and grumbling to each other. As a class, we talk about the colonists’ perspectives, as well as those of the British, before we move to the corner of the classroom to meet as the Sons of Liberty. After I provide students with some information about three ships carrying tea in the Boston Harbor and outline some of the ways that they can respond to the situation, students consult one another. The decision is unanimous: they are going to dump the tea and teach King George a lesson. We pantomime disguising ourselves, turn off the lights, and creep silently to the “harbor” in the center of the room. Students begin throwing “crates of tea” off the “ship” and then quickly run back to safety. When we get back, King George is angry and declares that Boston Harbor will be closed and the colonists will pay for the tea.

Will these students remember this historic event and understand its significance in the events leading to the Revolutionary War? Most definitely. They had a chance to become immersed in recreating history. Time spent? 15 minutes.

Creative dramatics, a highly effective method for integrating arts education into core curriculum, produces a positive and lasting impact on student learning, in terms of creative and critical thinking, language development, listening, comprehension, retention, cooperation, and empathy and awareness of others.¹ Creative dramatics not only has the power to bring curriculum to life, but also to stimulate active involvement in the development of conceptual understandings.



The Difference Between Drama and Theatre

Creative drama does not involve choosing a script, assigning roles, memorizing lines, rehearsing parts, sewing costumes, and building a set. Those activities come under the heading of “theater,” and, while theater has its benefits and can be used for teaching many things, it is not practical as an everyday activity in the elementary classroom.

Creative drama is a process that can be utilized effectively on a daily basis. Dramatics are focused on self-expression, movement, and creativity. Dramatics do not need to be scripted, and are usually improvisational.² Unlike theater, creative dramatics focus on those who are participating, rather than on an end product or a final performance. Utilizing drama in the classroom builds community, engages students in content, builds focus and concentration, and can create real and meaningful experiences that help students understand abstract concepts.³ Creative dramatics also have the potential for integrating other arts. Music, dance, and visual arts can often be found in many creative drama games and activities. “If they [teachers] are provided with even a few classroom strategies that can be used in a variety of ways, then drama is no longer a frightening endeavor, but rather a rewarding and exhilarating experience for everyone involved.”⁴ Creative drama is a do-able, manageable, and time efficient strategy in everyday classroom practices.

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In the following section, I'll briefly review types of creative dramatics that teachers can employ to create educational activities in their classrooms.

Pantomime

Pantomime is much like a silent film. Participants create a scene or series of scenes that involve motion but no sound, and each participant creates a role to play. Pantomime can be utilized to re-enact history, create visual scenes for literature, or explain or describe mathematical or scientific concepts. In one history lesson, students pantomimed life on the frontier. Looking around the room as students pantomimed activities, students were seen gathering wood, chopping down trees, cooking, churning butter, building homes, and various other tasks. They were selected at random to freeze and determine what others around them were doing. After the pantomime, audience members discussed what they had seen, and actors discussed what they were doing. In an essay question concerning what life was like for settlers on the frontier, all students were able to give a variety of details and convey an understanding of what we had discussed in class.

Tableaux

A tableau is a still picture created by participants to represent a single scene. Each participant strikes a pose, and, together, the historical re-enactors create a living picture, lasting for maybe 30 seconds. Audience members try to determine what the picture represents and what role each participant plays.

Tableaux can be used to represent events, but also concepts, or even words. Students can also create a tableau and then “add a line,” each participant speaking a line or making a sound that further explains the scene.

In a lesson on westward expansion, students read short books in small groups, then worked for five minutes to create tableaux, depicting some aspect of westward expansion that they learned about from their reading. One group created a scene showing Sacagawea leading Lewis and Clark, while another showed mountain men warning settlers of the dangers of the Oregon Trail. Another group depicted a campfire scene that included wagon members cooking and watching out for attack. As students attempted to figure out what the various scenes represented, they engaged in higher-level thinking, using prior knowledge from their own reading, connecting pictorial representations and written information, and making inferences about historical events.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a virtual tour, where students can visualize or discuss events. This type of activity can be done in several ways. First, tours can be read while students close their eyes, listen, and visualize what they are hearing. When the narration is finished, they open their eyes and discuss how they felt and what their interpretations were of the event. Second, students can go on tours set up around the room with different stopping points at which to discuss pictures and/or information.

My fourth graders have gone on “tours” of a native Cherokee village, a de Soto museum, and a Mayan city. In each journey, photographs and information are placed around the room. As music plays softly, students travel with their clipboards to the different stops and jot notes. Information and understandings gleaned from the guided tours can then be used in writing activities to cement understandings.

For example, after touring the Cherokee village (ca. 1700 C.E.), students created magazine articles (in the style of *National Geographic* magazine) for each stop. At the Hernando de Soto Museum, students first worked in groups to become experts at one particular station in the museum. Then groups were mixed, and each expert became the tour guide for that stop as students traveled to the different stations in the museum.

Drama Games

Drama games have a variety of purposes in the classroom and can be adapted to suit various needs. Certainly, the physical movement can help students memorize the academic content, from people and events in history to the three branches of government. Many games focus on building community, developing an environment of trust, focusing attention, developing concentration skills, and developing vocabulary. While games can be found on the Internet, I think that the best sources are books devoted to the topic, such as *The Creative Classroom: A guide for Using Creative Drama in the Classroom, PreK-6*; *The Power of Story: Teaching through Storytelling*; and *Too Much Drama: A Book of Dramatic Games & Activities*.⁵ The games in these books are simple, quick, and fast-paced, and instructions are very easy to follow. For example, take the game What Are You Doing? First, participants stand in a circle. Then the instructor begins to pantomime an activity (playing basketball), and the student to the right asks, “Mrs. Smith, what are you doing?” The instructor announces another activity (different from what she’s actually mimicking!), such as, “Brushing my teeth!” The student pantomimes brushing his teeth, and the next student to the right asks, “Tom, what are you doing?” This pattern continues around the circle.

In games like this, students can assume a variety of historical roles, like pioneers or colonists, colonial judges, ship captains, and indentured servants. Prepare students for the game by reviewing tasks that people at various levels of society might have done during a specific historical period.

Puppetry

Puppetry can be a quick and engaging way to study curriculum. The simplest form of puppetry is shadow puppetry. Students can easily create silhouettes of characters and props with black paper that can be attached to skewers with tape. A puppet screen can be easily assembled with white butcher paper and a foam board frame. A light shining behind the screen is all that is needed to make the show come to life. Students can create short puppet skits quickly or they can research information and

create more lengthy productions. Students in my fourth grade class created shadow puppets and wrote short skits to explain the role of each branch of government. On a written assessment, all students mastered the branch of government for which they were responsible, and the majority of the class mastered the other two as well. The students who did not fully master the material remembered the roles of the other two branches, but mixed up the names. In previous years, I did not have nearly the level of mastery on this topic as I did when using dramatics. Puppetry can also be used to create visual images of poems, representations of novel scenes, or historical events.

Integrating Drama into Everyday Practices

Creative drama can be effectively utilized in the classroom in a variety of ways. Perhaps the best way to get started is to incorporate short dramatic activities, such as pantomime or tableaux, into a lesson. Both of these methods enhance instruction across the curriculum. They also require a minimal amount of time. Once students have taken some time to try out one or two pantomimes or tableaux in a 10- or 20-minute period, they can easily start creating them within a five-minute time limit. With the presentations and discussions that follow each group, the total time frame for the activities can be limited to ten or twenty minutes, based on the needs of the teacher or objectives of the lesson.

Many social studies passages can be read by students and then dramatized in a pantomime, or a scene from the passage can be developed into a tableau. In my fourth grade classroom, students were given a weekly newspaper, *Tennessee Studies Weekly*, that focused on state history. Sections of the paper were read in multiple formats (paired reading, small group reading, echo reading) and, after each article was read, students determined the most important information to recall. They then engaged in some type of dramatic activity to illustrate these points. After one section, students pantomimed scenes depicting Daniel Boone and the Long Hunters traversing through Tennessee, hunting for animals to skin and trade. Student groups can create a tableau showing colonists as they cross the Proclamation Line (as decreed by King George III) into Native American-held lands in the mid-1700s. Another tableau can show a Native American family watching from a hill as whites begin to clear land that was once the site of their summer village.

Thinking on the Spot

After each dramatic activity, students in the audience identified key elements of the scenes, and students in the performing group explained their scene. For some sections, students pantomimed the passages as they were being read aloud. As they listened to the article, they created motions and movements to accompany it (students were observed trudging across the room and chopping down brush as Daniel Boone forged the Wilderness Road, and hammering and putting up homes as “settlers began building settlements”). Given an assessment following the activities, stu-

dents who were present for the activities showed a significantly higher score than those who were not present and had to read the newspaper articles on their own. Both groups of students were able to use the newspaper as a reference during the test, and students who were present for the dramatic activities were observed easily locating information, while students who were not present struggled to locate needed information.



Caveats

While informal drama can be a lot of fun, we should avoid activities that might be hurtful or perceived as insulting. Re-creating a scene with our bodies can carry an emotional immediacy that exceeds that of reading a passage about, or even viewing images of past events. This is true for children and adults alike. Teachers should use good judgment by avoiding or halting an activity that might be objectionable to some students or their parents. For example, any sort of violent or abusive historical situation – such as slavery, or battles between white settlers and Native Americans, or the beating of women suffragettes by prison guards—should not be mimicked, even in a tableau, at any grade level.

This points to another difference between theater and informal drama (as discussed earlier). The director of a formal play might work with young actors over several weeks to memorize and bring to life a script that recalls a violent event in our history. A social studies class might view a work of art (such a play or a film) that depicts a traumatic event, and then discuss it afterwards – judging its fidelity to the historical record, and exploring its meaning, point of view, and the author's intentions. On the other hand, it would be unfair and insensitive for a teacher to ask students, during class and off the top of their heads, to improvise the look and feel of a violent event. That would seem to trivialize the conflict and the people who did experience it.

A Tool for Learning

As educators and school systems become increasingly aware of the positive impacts that drama and the arts can have in the

classroom, perhaps more schools will participate in professional development opportunities. Teachers can learn how to effectively integrate the arts with their subject content. Glen Rock School in New Jersey, through an Arts Create Excellent Schools grant, implemented a three-year professional development program, guided by Teachers College at Columbia University, to train teachers how to bring the arts into their everyday curriculum. After incorporating some of these strategies into their classroom, participants in the program noted substantial growth in their students in terms of engagement, flexibility in thinking, awareness and respect for multiple points of view, and innovative and creative thinking and exploration.

In a similar program, Imagination Quest, teachers in Maryland learned how to use drama, music, dance, and visual art to help raise the achievement of at-risk students. These teachers learned to use the arts to help students to engage in curriculum, develop thinking skills, and collaborate with peers. After the teachers put their learning into practice, a vocabulary assessment produced student scores that more than doubled, while scores in classes that did not receive integrated arts instruction remained unchanged.⁶

By bringing the methods of drama in to their lessons, teachers can turn their classrooms into exploratory arenas of learning for themselves and their students. Integrating the arts nurtures global intelligence, speaks to emotional literacy, fosters innovative thought processes, and cultivates habits of lifelong learning.⁷ In my own teaching, I find that the more drama activities I am able to use, the more students understand the concepts we are working on and the more cognitively and emotionally engaged they are. Using creative drama is practical and engaging, and it brings the social studies curriculum to life in very meaningful ways. 🎭

Notes

1. Lenore Blank Kelner, *The Creative Classroom: A Guide for Using Creative Drama in the Classroom, PreK-6* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993).
2. John Kornfeld and Georgia Leyden, "Acting Out: Literature, Drama, and Connecting with History," *The Reading Teacher* 230, no. 9 (November 2005): 230-238.
3. Leonora Macy, "A Novel Study Through Drama," *The Reading Teacher* 240, no. 9 (Nov 2004): 240-248.
4. Kelner, 1993.
5. Rives Collins and Pamela Cooper, *The Power of Story: Teaching Through Storytelling* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1997); Elana Lagerquist and C. Poff, *Too Much Drama: A Book of Dramatic Games & Activities* (San Francisco, CA: StageWright, 2006); Kelner, 1993.
6. Gail Humphries Mardirosian and Yvonne Pelletier Lewis, "How to Use Theater to Teach At-Risk Students," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 55, no. 26 (March 6, 2009): 34-37.
7. Joseph S. Amorino, "An Occurrence at Glen Rock: Classroom Educators Learn More About Teaching and Learning from the Arts," *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no. 3 (November 2008): 190-195.

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