Breathing Life into History: Using Role-Playing to Engage Students

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The classroom is buzzing with energy and excitement as some students huddle in groups and practice saying their speeches to each other. Other students are busy sharing their props and costumes. The teacher circulates around the room offering suggestions to improve a speech here, and costume ideas there. This fourth grade class is gearing up for its upcoming presentation of a Living History Museum, a form of historical role-playing.

Many teachers shy away from historical role-playing because they are worried about obstacles such as time constraints, resistance by students, and classroom management issues. We have found, however, that this strategy can be extremely engaging and is particularly well suited for the elementary school classroom. With a bit of careful preparation, forethought, and planning, teachers can effectively utilize children’s natural affinity for dramatic play while teaching about historical events and people.

How Can It Work?

Alternately referred to as historical role-playing, dramatic improvisation, sociodrama, or first-person characterization, role playing is a teaching strategy that often uses official accounts, personal narratives, and diaries to recreate a particular time period, specific event, or breathe life into a character from history. Drama in the social studies classroom can be used for the learning of historical events as well as learning about current issues. It is especially effective for conveying social history, not the views of “the generals or the political leaders, but rather of the people who do their jobs—those the headlines usually miss.”

Incorporating social history into the social studies is especially important because the voices of women and ethnic minorities can be heard. It also helps students develop empathy and understanding of the challenges and opportunities of living in another era.

Moreover, role-playing naturally highlights the intrinsic affective content of the social studies, thereby engaging students and helping them explore and present alternative perspectives by temporarily adopting them as their own. Virtually all students can be guided to learn complex, sophisticated material via this pedagogical strategy. Many educators believe that these active experiences not only enhance learning but can also improve student attitudes toward peers and teachers as well.

Children “are naturally drawn to stories because stories have characters with feelings, conflicts, and dilemmas that engage their interest.” Historical role-playing helps students tap into this inherent interest in historical events and the people that experienced them. As students take on the feelings and voices of peoples of other times and places, the learning of historical content becomes more natural.

What follows are descriptions of two historical role-playing projects conducted in a fourth grade classroom in Tampa, Florida.

“Dear America” First-Person Narratives

The “Dear America” series, which is published by Scholastic, features adventure-filled, historical fiction “diaries” that reflect common experiences of American citizens from the Colonial era up through the Vietnam War. Students kept a separate notebook for this project and met weekly to discuss their progress and to engage in a series of enrichment activities. The entire project lasted one nine-week grading period.

We started off by reviewing the interactive timeline on the Scholastic web site (more on that topic below). This activity gives the students an overview of the time periods that will be studied and serves as a graphic organizer for
the main eras in U.S. history covered by the series. Students then select a book from a time period that appeals to them. We have found that girls tend to prefer books with central characters who are female; boys tend to prefer male central characters. Fortunately, there are an abundance of books and historical figures to accommodate children’s preferences in this regard.

As they read, students noted their reactions to the readings in their journals. We would meet once a day for fifteen minutes for students to discuss their reactions to the stories.

We enhanced the readings by watching a few of the 30-minute videos from the series. Many of these videos are owned by school and public libraries and thus are easily obtained. One work the students found particularly riveting was *A Journey to the New World: The Story of Remember Patience Whipple, Plymouth, Massachusetts, 1620*.

Students also use the computer lab to explore the Scholastic web site (scholastic.com/dearamerica). This user-friendly site offers a plethora of resources for educators, including an interactive timeline, discussion guides, and downloadable handouts. Students also appreciate the video clips, links to other associated sites, and ideas for related crafts. During the research phase of the project, we make time to have the students visit the web site, play the online games, and encourage them to submit their writing samples to the online “Word Quilt” and “Our Diary.” Although not all submissions are selected for publication, it is thrilling for the entire class when one of their pieces is published on the web site.

After the books have been read, students begin to research the historical period for their specific books. This research provides them an opportunity to become more familiar with a particular era. Background knowledge of the time period is essential for students to write their scripts and to carry out their role-play. They supplement their Internet research with information from their classroom textbooks and encyclopedias. Doing so gives them an opportunity to compare sources and double-check their findings.

**Writing It Down**

After the research has been conducted, students then begin to write their scripts for a “talk show” where the teacher serves as the host and moder-
tor. As such, students write dialogues of questions and answers based on the story line of their books and embellished with details found through their research. Several drafts are submitted with opportunities for refinement. Final drafts are compiled into a script book that students use in rehearsals.

To prepare for the talk show, students memorize as much of their scripts as possible (although during the talk show they are allowed to have the scripts as a “crutch”) and speculate about some of the possible questions that their audience might ask. We emphasize that in order to stay in character, they must know their time period well and they must learn to think like their character. While costumes and props are an important consideration, they can be simply (and inexpensively) made. It is also helpful to make simple signs or placards that identify each of the characters by name and time period.

We recommend doing the talk show twice: the first time during the day for their classmates; the second time, after school for family and friends. Although not essential, preparing an invitation and a paper program for the events is a nice touch, as is having refreshments for guests.

A Living History Museum

The Living History Museum is a finale to our unit on biographies. As part of this unit students choose a famous person they would like to know more about, either a contemporary or historical figure. They then research the lives of these famous individuals by reading biographies as well as doing research on the Internet. As students read the biographies they are taught note-taking skills that will assist them in creating an outline about the life of the person they are studying. Students use their outlines to write short monologues in the voice of these individuals, and present them as part of a Living History Museum exhibit. Students also draw portraits of their character, wear costumes, and display props to complement the monologue during their presentations.

The Living History Museum project is an alternative to traditional forms of reading responses such as book reports or summaries. The hands-on nature of the project also taps into the different learning styles of the students. The project allows the teacher to integrate reading with social studies, research skills, art, and drama thereby incorporating reading, writing, listening, and speaking into one enriching activity.

This project is also incredibly effective for developing perspective and empathy in students. By taking on the role of the historical figure, students can begin to understand the motivations and feelings of people in other places and in other times. By doing so, the content becomes meaningful and students can see the connections between the past and the present.6

The project culminates with the actual Living History Museum in the school’s assembly hall. Each student is assigned a place by a table (for props and a placard bearing their character’s name). By inviting third graders at our school to visit our museum, students have a built-in audience (family members are also invited) and the third graders have an activity to look forward to in the coming year. Students thoroughly enjoy participating in the Living History Museum and even write about their positive experiences in their writer’s notebooks long after the event is over.

Reflections and Caveats

As with any teaching methodology, historical role-playing has its caveats. Here are some things we have learned to keep in mind to maximize success of a lesson plan using role play:

• Careful Planning: As with any active learning strategy or project, careful planning on the part of the teacher is essential. Resources, time allocation, special needs of students, and integration of content and skills all must be considered and prepared for ahead of time. We found that collaborating with the school’s media specialist was critical in securing research materials, computer space, and ultimately, access to media equipment that enhanced the projects.

• Student choice: We feel it is important to allow students to select the books, time periods, and historical personages of their own choosing. In addition to conferring a certain degree of autonomy and “voice” in the classroom, it is imperative that students be highly interested and motivated in their topic given the intensity and extended nature of these projects. The more input students have, the more engagement and involvement they will feel.

• Expectations for learning: Historical role-playing can be so enjoyable that sometimes students might think they’re “just having fun” and not realize the amount of learning that is occurring. Making expectations clear—for both social and academic goals—is an important step in ensuring success with this strategy.7

• Student reluctance: While some educators have noted that students often exhibit a natural reluctance to engage in anything resembling public speaking, this resistance can effectively be reduced (or even prevented) by careful preparation and lots of practice within the safe environment of the classroom before students role-play for a wider audience.8

• Classroom management: A critical component for a successful experience is the teacher’s management of the event.9 One can enter into a “social contract” with students at the beginning of the year - that is, the teacher promises to treat students like mature learners if students in turn demonstrate a positive attitude and play by the rules. Ultimately, teachers need to see themselves as facilitators.
Why you should consider using historical role-playing in your classroom

- It is an excellent way to integrate language arts and social studies.
- Thus, it supports academic learning and cognitive development.
- It promotes affective and kinesthetic modes of learning.
- Multiple intelligences can be developed and strengthened.
- It helps to develop in children all the modes of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
- It takes advantage of children’s natural proclivity for play; they find it fun.
- Students develop a wide range of skills including research, writing, speaking, and social.
- Deeper, enhanced understanding of historical events and time periods can be achieved.
- It is an opportunity to involve families in children's schoolwork.

Recommended Reading


who have limited involvement in the final production and maintain flexibility throughout the process.

- Assessment: Assessing living history projects can be tricky. Since such projects are a fairly unfamiliar teaching strategy to many parents and even administrators, it is important to demonstrate that students are learning the material and “not just having fun.” So, in addition to alternative assessment strategies, teachers would be wise to build in some traditional assessments such as reports, papers, or posters. The notes students take as they research famous individuals and time periods, as well as the speeches they write, can be used as formal assessments using a rubric.

- Closure: Although it is tempting to have the culminating activity be the final step in the instructional sequence, bringing closure to the experience should include a formal closure or debriefing session. Sometimes, unfamiliar feelings surface and students need help in processing those emotions. Often, students have questions about the motivations of their characters or the time period in which they lived. The teacher must help students bring closure to the experience to bring their learning full circle.

Notes
6. Ronald V. Morris, How to Perform Acting Out History in the Classroom to Enrich Social Studies Education (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2000).

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