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LIVING HISTORY: USING DRAMA IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

RATIONALE

Teachers hear the term “differentiated instruction” more and more these days, and administrators expect it to be an everyday occurrence. Using drama in conjunction with other strategies is an effective way to utilize various learning styles to help students process content. One such strategy is “Living History.”

Being able to “live” history allows students to immerse themselves in a particular place and time and take on the mindset of someone who lived then. In this way students are engaged and interacting with the material rather than passively watching and listening.

After the dramatic representation, students’ discussions, writings and understanding of that historical place and time are much deeper than when they simply read about it or watched a film.

WHAT TO DO

1. The teacher projects an image from the historical period being studied onto a large white bed sheet or piece of paper using either an overhead projector or document camera. The sheet should be hung from about six feet high down to the floor, and the image should be life-sized.
2. Students “step into the picture” by creating a tableau in the poses of the projected images right in front of the sheet in order to take on the voice of the person/people in the setting. The dialogue can be done in many ways, but the most common is to let the students stay in the pose for a few seconds and try to “become” the person in the photograph and to feel what he or she would be feeling.
3. Students are then asked to begin a dialogue with one another as these people and to discuss what is going on both inside their heads and around them. In this way students can demonstrate knowledge of content, creativity and even empathy.
4. After students have had the opportunity to voice their subjects, the instructor may follow up with discussion, readings and writing assignments.

This strategy can also be used as a preview for new teaching material when the students are asked to do this before they have learned about the historical events

J.K. Dowdy and S. Kaplan, Teaching Drama in the Classroom, 175–177.
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of the period. They see if they can figure out what is going on and what these people might be thinking about and saying to one another. It might be interesting to see how the dialogue changes if this strategy is used both before and after the students are familiar with the material. In essence, this strategy works well either as a preview or review of a lesson and may even be used as an assessment of comprehension.

It is important to note that the first time this strategy is used in the classroom, the students may be a bit shy or may not know what to say; therefore, it is key for the teacher to model it for the students. Once they have an idea of how this works, they will love “living” history.

SAMPLE

This lesson was used in a fourth-grade classroom in a cross-curricular Science/Social Studies unit. We had been studying the effects of weather on land and learning about the 1930s.

![Figure 1. Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress](image)

**THE DUST BOWL**

After reading about the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s, I projected the picture shown above onto a sheet to make it life-sized. In groups of four, the students took turns stepping into the picture and taking on the poses of the projected images to become a still tableau, giving them time to become the character.

Once comfortable in their new skin, they used their new knowledge from the reading material and our classroom discussions to actually voice what these people might be thinking.