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Slide-Tape Dramatization as a Way of Teaching Literature

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I teach language arts to students who score slightly below average on standardized tests of mental ability. Although they range in chronological age from fourteen to twenty, their grade level in reading is from second to sixth grade. This underachievement is due to a wide variety of reasons ranging from psychological problems to overly limited experiential backgrounds. Most of my students share these similarities: They dislike reading, they derive pleasure from simple routine exercises, they work below their capacities, and they enjoy film, film strips, and demonstrations.

Of the sixty-four students I teach, the following two case studies are typical. Mary Doe is a fifteen-year-old sophomore who is interested in modeling as a career. Although she scores average on the verbal section of intelligence test, Mary reads on a third grade level. Word attack and word recognition skills, along with poor study habits, seem to be her problem on the surface. But other factors may be involved. For example, she shares four rooms with two sisters, age twelve and sixteen, who fight often; and two brothers, ages ten and seventeen. The older brother entertains his friends at home while his mother works.

Mary is the oldest girl of the children, she finds herself saddled with the housecleaning, cooking, and peace-making. She finds little time to complete her studies or to give school serious thought.

My second study is John Smith, a seventeen-year-old junior. Although John attends class regularly, he dislikes school. He would rather work full time to buy a second-hand car, but he is fully aware that his parents would not allow him to quit school. John's interest—other than cars—is “hanging with the boys.” They like going to movies and parties. John has a serious interest in music and many times mentions that he would like to be a disc jockey. John scored 73 on a test of mental ability and reads on a third grade level. He is embarrassed to read aloud in class, even though he claims he could be a public speaker.

My approach to testing John and Mary is one which enables them to develop self-confidence and incentive. I find that slide-tape dramatization is one method of achieving these aims. I have had reasonable success with this method; and I hope to share with other teachers the many rewards of being able to reach the underachieving student. This technique may not solve Mary's need for a suitable environment for study, or John's desire for a car, but can help him to become a better speaker and might give Mary the incentive to walk five blocks to the public library or a friend's house to study.

A slide-tape dramatization is a group of slides and sounds arranged to tell a story. The slides are pictures of the students, who are dressed to represent a particular character from a story. The sounds are their recorded

voices. Although the students have fun, they are learning to be free from stereotyped roles, and learning to recognize the value both of others and themselves. Last, they will improve communication and comprehension skills, which are essential in learning to read and appreciate literature. The teacher is the controlling factor. If ever there were an opportunity for teacher and student to share a common goal, it is here.

The basic step in organizing a slide-tape dramatization is to bring a camera to school with color film. Any camera, whether an instamatic or 35mm, is suitable. A flash should be used to take indoor shots.

Ektachrome 64 or Kodachrome 25 are excellent films to use. For a twenty-minute presentation, one needs between fifty and sixty exposures. (Two rolls of 36 exposures would be sufficient.) The next piece of equipment needed is a cassette recorder. Although most portable cassette recorders come with a built-in microphone, a separate microphone is advised. Recording details will be mentioned in a section devoted to "how to." Basically any 40-minute low-noise cassette tape will do. A slide sorter is the only other piece of equipment needed in your production. A sorter enables one to organize the slides. It also allows the students to re-create stories using available slides. This important feature will be elaborated on in another section.

The following is a list of the roles which the students assume: actors and actresses, narrators, audio engineers, properties personnel, photographer, and director.

The actors and actresses act out the scenes by using facial and body gestures. The Narrators speak the lines in the story; the sound engineer records the voices along with sound effects, a theme song, and appropriate mood music. The properties personnel are responsible for creating a set and costumes. The camera people photograph the scenes on color slide film. The director is responsible for staging, editing, and synchronizing the slides with the sound and the script.

The sequence in which to begin a slide-tape dramatization is as follows: The students are first given various activities which help them to build confidence in themselves and teach them how to work together as a team. In one such activity, the teacher brings a couple of popular songs on a cassette to class. After listening, the class selects one song and writes the lyrics on the blackboard. The students then segment the lyrics into meaningful phrases or sentences. The students suggest, at this point, ways they could visualize each unit of meaning to convey the message of the song. The class is divided into small groups of three or four, and each group selects a different song and studies the lyrics. Their task is to act out the message of the song. This time a cassette recorder is used to record their voices.

After the students have built up some confidence by hearing their own voices played back to them, the time is ripe to begin a little role-playing. Students should be encouraged to use both expressive body and facial gestures. Short plays, stories, scenes from more lengthy works—such as *Don Quixote* or *The Enemy of the People* by Henry Ibsen—and even news stories and commercials are good subjects for re-enactment. Students are assigned roles. While the actors and narrators learn the script, the other students can begin work in their assigned areas. Even though the actors are only posing for still shots, they must know how to appropriately portray the characters for the slide portion. The same or other students can be used to read the script for the cassette tape portion of the production. The sound engineer prepares a sound track consisting of a theme song, sound effects and mood music—whatever sounds are required in the production.

Some of my students initially disliked reading simply because they failed to comprehend what they read. They are now able to grasp the author's purpose and organization plan; they know how to draw conclusions and how to generalize from what they have read. It is my belief that if disabled readers would learn to apply to

written sentences what they have learned in oral expression, many problems in comprehension could be eliminated.

A very important feature in working with slides and tape is that nothing is wasted. The cassette tape can be erased if desired, and the slides can be re-used to tell another story. With a slide sorter students can see forty to fifty slides at one time. Seeing slides makes it easy for students to write their own material (short stories, plays, etc.). A small section of the classroom should be set aside to house materials and to provide a spot for students to work. A card file or loose-leaf notebook is helpful in organizing equipment—the projector, tape recorder, movie screen, slide sorter and slide viewers—and the other materials necessary for this project—film, records, slides, tapes, scripts and notes. It is especially important that these things be returned to their proper places.

A drama lends itself to creative expression which frees the mind from reality. Students gain confidence when they learn that the rules of reality do not apply to the imagination. Slide-tape can develop a student's imagination by posing problems and letting him do his own thinking. Through acting students also have a chance to compare real and hypothetical events. This process in turn improves their ability to associate knowledge gained from various sources and to make real-life decisions.

Another weak point of poorer readers is their inability to visualize detail from the printed word; for example, they often do not understand how facial expressions affect spoken words. To improve this condition, I use an activity such as the following: We begin by discussing terms that indicate a wide range of emotional experiences—sadness, fear, worry, happiness, excitement, and anger. We demonstrate that facial expressions change with these emotions and actually communicate how we feel. The class makes a list of all these emotions. We next explore how voices change with different emotions; they go up or down, they get louder or softer, etc. We then use a tape recorder to show how the same words (“Turn the television down!”) sound quite different when the speaker's emotions change from surprise to anger to joy to sorrow, and so on. After this, the students are assigned a brief paragraph—the morning's weather forecast, for example—to read using different tones of voice.

Slide-tape dramatization can also be used for news stories, commercials, soap operas, quiz shows and thus address itself to many subject areas. For a news drama my entire class would be involved. I would select (2) news broadcasters, (4) reporters, (1) sports broadcaster, (4) field reporters, (1) weather person, (2) editors, (2) actors, and (2) researchers for a commercial.

My approach would be to first assign news stories to cover. Reporters would cover assignments by looking for stories in books, newspapers, magazines, or by conducting personal interviews (done by field reporters). When they discover their source, the researchers dig up facts; reporters then shape these facts into prose, which is proofread by the editors. The news broadcasters come to school dressed to be filmed by the photographers; later they are recorded on a cassette tape by the sound engineer. The weather person tries to predict the weather for the next day. (It will take a week for the slides to be processed, but the audience viewing the dramatization knows this). The sportscaster reports on school sports. This dramatization should be twenty minutes long, and the cost about twelve dollars (including the price of a mail-order cassette).

For a quiz show dramatization I would use a television format like “What's My Line?” I would use a panel of four—three guests and a mystery guest. Script writers are assigned a topic; reporters become researchers of questions and answers; the layout artist tries to simulate the physical appearance of a television studio; and the editors proofread the script. The director is responsible for timing each segment and for directing the photographer(s) by means of instructions written on planning cards.

This is the way the quiz show works:

The actors will read a script which the panel has not seen. One of the three actors will be given correct facts to answer. The other two actors will be given false information. It is the panel members' job to decide which actor is the "real" guest, based on their own knowledge. The slides from the quiz show can be used again with another cassette of different questions and answers.

Here are some general hints for making a slide-tape production: first, it is important that the camera be held steady when shooting pictures, since movement causes blurred pictures. Keep your subject simple. Choose a simple uncluttered background to give your picture more power and more relevance to your subject. Add scenic pictures (a sunrise or sunset) to give your drama a feeling of time and space. Table-top techniques can be used when a particular scene is impossible to shoot. (A scene from a movie like *Airport* is easy to fake: A model airplane hanging from a thin piece of wire is photographed against a blue background; the tower and runway are also models.) Title slides can be made by cutting letters out from a magazine or using colored construction paper; colored crayons, a fine-point pen, or professional plastic letters will also be good for this purpose. A rear projection screen could be made to look like a television by using a cardboard box and construction paper.

There are many commercially-prepared records of sound effects, but it is more exciting when students can create their own. Here are a few suggestions:.

Wind—Fill a ballon with air and slowly let the air blow out of the ballon onto the microphone.

Fire—Crumple some cellophane paper near the microphone.

Rain—Make a chute out of wax paper and pour some sugar down the chute.

Hail—Use the same chute, substituting rice for the sugar.

Thunder—Use a sheet of tin suspended from a wooden frame. Bend the sheet with your hands to create a rumbling effect or strike it with a dull object.

Rushing Brook—Fill a glass with water. Blow into the glass with a straw.

Horse Galloping—Cut a rubber ball in half and pound the halves against your chest.

I repeat: one of the first things a teacher must do is build his students' confidence. Then he should try to get the students to work with each other by suggesting group activities. One activity I find especially good in the hypothetical murder. ¹ Students are given a case to solve as a group. Isolated clues are given to each student, and they are instructed to pool their information to solve the mystery. They must find the murderer, the weapon, the time of the murder, the place of the murder, and the motive. The students may organize themselves in any way they like. The teacher acts as a monitor; he explains the rules and passes out the clues. The number of clues is determined by the number of students in the class. The clues may be something like this:.

- a. When he was discovered dead, Mr. Kelley had a bullet hole in his thigh and a knife wound in his back.
- b. Mr. Jones shot at an intruder in his apartment building at 12:00 midnight.
- c. The elevator operator reported to police that he saw Mr. Kelley at 12:11 A.M.
- d. The bullet taken from Mr. Kelley's thigh matched the gun owned by Mr. Jones.
- e. Only one bullet had been fired from Mr. Jones' gun.
- f. When the elevator man saw Mr. Kelley, Mr. Kelley was bleeding slightly, but he did not seem too badly hurt.

Of course, more clues than these would be given the class; but at the end of the period, the students will have had to work with each other in order to solve the mystery. The answer to this particular mystery is: After receiving a superficial gunshot wound from Mr. Jones, Mr. Kelley went to Mr. Scott's apartment where he was killed by Mr. Scott with a knife at 12:30 A.M. because Mr. Scott was in love with Mr. Kelley's wife.

The teacher should follow up by discussing the reasons for the students success or failure in solving the mystery. He should ask them questions like: Was a leader needed? How was time lost in getting organized? Why was it ineffective for everyone to try to talk at once?

After students have learned to value each other's opinions and contributions, then the teacher is ready to introduce the steps leading to the slide-tape dramatization.

Last year, I had much success with a story called "The Day After Tomorrow." First of all, I gave the students a summary of the story.

Bonnie's father died. Her mother has married again. Bonnie hates her new stepfather. She feels that nothing has gone right since he came to live with them. So she decides to run away. She talks Kevin into driving her to New York. They try to sneak away late one night. But Bonnie's parents follow them. Kevin speeds up to try to get away, but finally he stops. Bonnie is turned over to her parents, and Kevin faces charges of resisting arrest. Bonnie, after talking to her brother, decides to seek help from Ray. Through a lawyer friend's help Ray is able to get Kevin a reduced sentence.

The characters' names were read to the students and placed on the blackboard so that students could distinguish between the different characters.

At this point the class discussed the basic elements of a story. I helped students to arrive at definitions of plot, character, and theme by referring to "The Day After Tomorrow." It is important to discuss each area thoroughly. That night's assignment was to watch a television program that clearly illustrated these elements. For example, they watched *Charlie's Angels* and completed the following list of questions after the television program:.

1. Is there suspense in the story?
2. Does it keep you on edge?
3. If so, how is it done?
4. Prepare for someone a plot summary of the episode.
5. How does the main character solve his (or her) problem?
6. Does the ending satisfy you?

When the students next came to class, we discussed the questions they completed. The teacher should familiarize the students with some of the terminology of television, movie or drama production. People who work on *Charlie's Angels* might use the following terms:

1. props
2. scene
3. dialogue
4. script
5. director
6. sound track
7. motivation
8. suspense
9. costumes
10. musical theme
11. overture
12. climax
13. theme, etc.

(I usually give students a list of ten of these vocabulary words a week. These words will help them understand the dramatization we plan to do).

Next I gave the students a copy of the play, "The Day After Tomorrow." This play was taken home and read with emphasis on the plot, character, and theme. The students were given a ditto sheet with the following questions:

1. Does the author let you know what kind of people the characters are?
2. Do any of the characters change what they like or how they feel during the course of the story?
3. What is the theme of the story?
4. Who are the main characters?

The slide-tape dramatization "The Day After Tomorrow" was successfully performed after this last exercise. The scenes were located in a house, and on a highway. The bedroom, living room and kitchen scenes were shot at a furniture store. The props were two aprons, a robe, a newspaper, a pipe, and a record jacket. This drama which took three weeks to prepare, involved nineteen students: Two set designers, two camera personnel, a director, seven narrators and six actors. Two of the six were John Smith and Mary Doe.

Notes

1. Gene Stanford and Barbara Dodds Stanford, *Learning Discussion Skills* (New York: Citation Press, 1969), pp. 24-5.

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