



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume II: Contemporary American Drama: Scripts and Performance

The Amistad Affair: Problem Solving through Theater

Guide for Curriculum Unit 90.02.08

by Jeannette R. Gaffney

“The Amistad Affair” is the story of Cinque and fifty-two others who were kidnapped from Africa to be slaves and successfully defended their right to be free in the Supreme Court of the United States. During the three years of Cinque’s odyssey he was confronted with numerous obstacles. Some he overcame by the strength of his courage and intelligence. Others he surmounted with the help of the community of New Haven, where he and the others were held for two and a half years.

Nineteen-eighty-nine was the beginning of the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Amistad Affair. It was also the first year of the city-wide implementation of the Life Skills program in New Haven, one component of which—problem solving—serves as the process for this course. Problem solving is applied to the Amistad Affair to analyze a complex problem as a series of decisions and choices made by the persons involved. The product of the course is a play which the class writes as it explores the progress of the Amistad captives.

If the process is problem solving, and the content is the Amistad Affair, then the technique to weave them is theater. Each class contains theater games and activities designed or selected to enhance a particular facet of problem solving which is coordinated with the development of the class itself and the problems of the Amistad captives. Each of these three components: the Amistad story, problem-solving skills, and theater activities, contain powerful tools which can be used to lead lives of active choice. Students can learn the strength of community is comprised of the contributions of individuals who have the courage to speak and act against the inertia of accepted practice.

A final purpose for this project is to expose the larger school population to the application of problem-solving skills to a new arena. This will be accomplished not only by the final production, but also through the use of an interdisciplinary teaching technique. Teachers of Social Studies, English, Theater, and Life Skills are invited to cooperate in the teaching of this course.

(Recommended for Life Skills, Drama, History, Social Studies, and English Literature, grade 7, with 6th grade Life Skills prerequisite)

Key Words

Cinque Sengbe Joseph Drama Social Problem Solving History Amistad Afro-American

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