



From Collaboration to Practice: Using Drama to Explore Global Issues with Pre-Service Teachers & Young Second Language Learners

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Abstract

Global issues can be difficult to discuss with any age group but especially with young children [1]. Time and again, pre-service teachers share fears and anxieties about approaching international topics with children in classroom settings. They note such obstacles as their lack of confidence in introducing potentially controversial topics (e.g., war, religion, immigration), lack of time during the school day that can be dedicated to activities centered on topics such as these, and uncertainty about their own familiarity with hands-on teaching strategies that promote children's critical thinking around global issues and topics [2]. However, once pre-service teachers were given an opportunity to collaborate with a social studies methods course instructor and community partners from a regional theatre, their perspectives shifted as they discovered that drama could be a productive, thought-provoking strategy for exploring global issues with children, especially second language learners. This realization came full circle for the pre-service teachers when they were asked to test the waters in kindergarten through fifth grade classrooms with second language learners. Each intern designed a lesson plan that implemented the use of a drama strategy to explore their selected global issue with young students. Afterwards, in their social studies methods course, interns used technology as a vehicle to share their process and to reflect on their experiences through either a photographic essay or video. This presentation will discuss the formation of a collaborative partnership between a large urban university and an award-winning theatre; drama strategies that were introduced to pre-service teachers (e.g., tableau, newspaper theatre); and an innovative course assignment that asked students to use a drama strategy to explore a global issue with kindergarten through fifth graders who were second language learners.

1. Introduction

"The interactive and visual nature of drama engages all kinds of learners – tactile, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual. [...] Drama draws even the quietest students out from their shells, gets the dreamy students to focus, and enables the hyperactive students to expend their energy in a constructive manner. Because of its fun nature, students associate drama with play; they find it less threatening to take risks, present their opinions, and views; and they are a little more creative in how they express themselves." [3] With this in mind, I designed a project to provide my university students with more intentional experiences in two important areas: global issues and drama strategies. I wanted pre-service teachers to dive deeper into social studies content on a global level. Also, I wanted my students to consider how familiar strategies (drama) used to develop skills and content in other subject areas (literacy) could be used to develop social studies skills and content. My goal was to emphasize theory-into-practice learning by coaching pre-service teachers to use drama strategies as a vehicle for exploring social studies content with their elementary students, specifically English language learners. What emerged from this goal was the *Drama Showcase Project*.

2. Community Collaboration

My University is fortunate to have an established partnership with the Alliance Theatre Institute for Educators and Teaching Artists which is an entity of the Tony award-winning theatre, the Alliance Theatre at the Woodruff in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. [4]. This four-year collaboration has allowed university faculty to team teach with Teaching Artists from the theatre in how to use drama strategies to develop skills and content in literacy and



social studies methodology courses. The following is a sample of key drama strategies shared across our undergraduate program in early childhood and elementary education (pre-Kindergarten through fifth grade).

- **Story Baskets:** Story baskets are sets of small props compiled to reflect the elements of a specific story (e.g., characters, setting, plot). Props are used by the teacher and/or students as visual cues for retelling.
- **Puppetry:** Shadow puppetry is a simple way to assist students in exploring a variety of topics through improvisations or scripts.
- **Tableaux:** Students read/listen to and discuss a picture book, select significant scenes, and create “frozen” representations (i.e., tableaux) of those key moments.
- **Newspaper Theatre:** Like tableaux, students read/listen to, discuss, and select significant moments from a *news article* that could be reflected within frozen images. [5]

During our team-teaching course sessions, the Teaching Artist introduces a drama strategy to the pre-service teachers and invites them to try it. Essentially, the pre-service teachers are provided the opportunity to think like a student by participating in a drama strategy. Later in the class session, the university faculty member coaches the pre-service teachers to hypothetically explore what the strategy could look like in an elementary classroom (Kindergarten through fifth grade); thus, they are encouraged to shift to thinking like teachers. During this part of the class session, pre-service teachers consider what specific literacy skills (e.g., comprehension, sequence) and/or social studies content (e.g., vocabulary, historical knowledge) are developed. They also contemplate how the drama strategy positively supports second language learners and students with disabilities.

3. Drama Showcase Project Preparation & Description

Time and again, pre-service teachers shared with me that they utilized the story basket strategy in their field placements. I found this to be encouraging but wanted to provide more intentional support for the pre-service teachers. To this end, I developed a project that requires pre-service teachers to 1) try a drama strategy in their field placement; 2) share a formal reflection with me about how it went; and 3) share a formal presentation with classmates about their process. This approach provided me with more details about how the drama strategy was used in elementary classrooms and allowed me to provide feedback and suggestions to the pre-service teacher. Additionally, it required the pre-service teacher to be intentional about the choices she made and thoughtful when considering strengths as well as areas for improvements.

In preparation for our class session, pre-service teachers were asked to read selected drama-related texts. [7] Next, pre-service teachers experienced in class one strategy that had been described in the readings (tableaux) and a new strategy that built upon the first (newspaper theatre). After listening to and discussing a story about immigration, students were asked to form small groups and select three key scenes that reflected the beginning, middle, and end of the story. The students collaborated to create individual tableaux for each of the selected scenes. In some small groups, all participants represented main or supporting characters while other groups had some participants act as parts of the setting. The Teaching Artist walked around during the presentations and tapped pre-service teachers on their shoulders to “think aloud” on behalf of the character.

Afterwards, the pre-service teachers were able to reflect with the Teaching Artist and me about how the process felt, what literacy skills were being developed (e.g., oral language practice, vocabulary), what social studies connections and potential global issues were explored (e.g., immigration, culture), and how the strategy supported the needs of English language learners and/or students with disabilities (e.g., repetition of content, practice with oral language, collaboration, listening). I wanted pre-service teachers to experience the process and identify the benefits. Finally, I wanted the pre-service teachers to build on what they now knew and try a similar drama strategy, newspaper theatre. To continue with the topic of immigration, the Teaching Artist shared a current news article about several immigrants’ experiences. Each group selected one of the immigrant’s experiences to represent across three tableaux. One team member acted as the narrator and either read phrases directly from the article or read paraphrases that reflected each of the individual tableaux. Additionally, each group was asked to find an image such as a photograph, sign, quotation, or symbol that represented their story overall as well as a song to play in the background during the performance. Groups took turns performing.



After the performances, the Teaching Artist and I hosted a whole-group reflection about what transpired: What did you notice about the group presentations? How did you feel and what prompted that feeling(s)? What did you learn and what do you want to know about immigration? Then, we asked them to think like teachers: How would you try this in the elementary classroom? What would you do to prepare yourself and your students for approaching this strategy and this content? What would you alter so each student could be successful?

To connect the drama strategies pre-service teachers learned in their teacher preparation courses to their work with elementary students, I designed an assignment called the Drama Showcase Project. For this project, pre-service teachers selected a global issue that was appropriate to their students and curricula and related to one of the Ten Themes of the Social Studies [9]. Based on their topic and grade level, they chose from the drama strategies introduced by the Teaching Artists (i.e., story baskets, puppetry, tableaux, newspaper theatre) or from our course texts (e.g., historical characters, historical reenactments, mock trial, reader's theatre, role playing). To help them plan their lesson, they considered the following questions: *Which strategy is the best vehicle for prompting an exploration of the global issue you've selected? Why do you think so?*

After they designed and implemented their lesson in their elementary classrooms, they prepared and submitted a "self-explanatory visual" and "individual reflection." For the visual part of the project, pre-service teachers chose to create either a brief video or a photo book of pictures with descriptive captions that showed their self-selected drama strategy during implementation. Pre-service teachers were required to write an overall reflection paper that addressed what they learned about social studies content (i.e., Describe the global issue. Describe how the global issue connects to one of the "Ten Themes of the Social Studies." Describe why you selected to focus on this issue specifically.), drama strategy (i.e., State the drama strategy selected. Describe why it was selected. How does this strategy support the exploration of the global issue? How does this strategy support your students' learning needs and engagement?), and professional growth (i.e., Describe what you learned about yourself as a teacher as a result of this activity. Describe your strengths, challenges, and future goals).

4. Discussion

Education has a lot to learn from the arts, including drama, visual, music, and technology. Instead of using art as an add-on or a way to embellish curricular studies, it should be an intentional strategy choice. "[T]he arts can serve as a model for teaching the subjects we usually think of as academic." [10] As we seek to develop 21st century skills in young learners, it is important that we provide thoughtful opportunities for thinking creatively and critically as problem-solvers. We need young people who can effectively communicate and collaborate. Plus, our up-and-coming citizens need to be not only globally aware but also committed to making meaningful contributions on local, national, and global levels to maintain and improve the world around us and others. [11] To this end, pre-service teachers need support in experiential opportunities in order to build their confidence and experience as professionals. The Drama Showcase Project prompted pre-service teachers to think outside the box by trying drama strategies to introduce and explore social studies content on a global level. After participating in course readings, in-class activities, and the project, several students shared that they felt more confident using drama strategies, discussing controversial issues with young students, and differentiating. Others shared that they really enjoyed the experience and learned a lot about the global issue they selected. Theory-into-practice assignments like these push pre-service teachers to teach and think in new, engaging ways.

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