

The Forgotten Subjects: Teaching Science and Social Studies Through Drama

By Jacob Watson

“Who knew science could make me tired?” responded one classroom teacher as we returned to the drama circle to reflect on the day’s work. It had been a full six hours of playing through science-based drama lessons (or should I say drama-based science lessons?), which ran the gamut from physicalizing simple machines with the body to exploring hibernation through story drama.

The event was a professional development institute—my first as a new staff member with Creative Directions in Evanston, IL. Now in its fifth year, Creative Directions’ annual Summer Drama Institute is an opportunity for Chicago-area teachers to learn hands-on strategies for incorporating drama into their



Teacher participants in the Summer Drama Institute workshop “Bursting with Creativity” create a forest scene.



photos courtesy of Jacob Watson

classrooms. Each year focuses on a different topic, and this year’s title was “Bursting with Creativity: Connecting Drama to Science and Social Studies.”

Early in our planning process, the question emerged: why science and social studies? The previous year’s institute had focused on the relationship between drama and literacy. This seemed a natural partnership, given both subjects’ roots in story and narrative. Indeed, as theatre practitioners, the skills of reading and literary analysis are at the very core of our art form.

So what’s so special about science and social studies? Well, that’s exactly the problem. We seem to have forgotten. As preparation for standardized testing continues to dominate curriculum, schools across the country are spending less time on the sciences (social, physical, and life). With this overemphasis on reading and math, we are missing out on the insight that the sciences offer students about the ways in which individuals and communities function.

And what better way to learn about community than through drama?

The sense of interdependence that we cultivate as directors and teaching artists—what we refer to as ensemble—operates on the same principles as any community, from the early Native American civilizations to the herds of the animal kingdom.

By teaching students about science and social studies, we are giving them the chance to discover what it means to be part of something larger than themselves. Enacting these ideas allows students to understand first-hand the nature of relationships, cause and effect, conflict, and countless other phenomena. Through drama, they can come to see themselves as connected to the world around them, and powerful enough to write their own narratives.

After all, so much of social studies has to do with taking a critical look at what we call “history” (literally, “his story”), much in the same way that drama asks us to look critically at the stories we inherit. And so, too, in science do we find lessons in critical thinking. From physical science to biology, we are continually faced with the inevitability of actions and reactions. Anyone ever heard the

phrase “acting is reacting?” The reason these skills integrate so effectively is because they are so universal. Science gives us an explanation for the way our world functions, and art gives us the opportunity to remake that world.

And so, with these ideas in mind, we set out to engage our workshop participants in three days of interactive, integrated lessons. Together, the group of 11 classroom teachers moved from an exploration of Creative Directions’ Getting Started with Drama curriculum to practical applications of drama strategies in specific content areas. Each lesson was presented to the group as it would be taught to students and was followed by a brief reflection in which teachers could ask questions, share ideas, and brainstorm ways to adapt the lesson for use in their own classrooms.

But the most powerful moment of the entire institute for me occurred during a lesson focusing on the pioneers of the westward movement.

The emphasis was on the importance of risk-taking, both historically and artistically. In this activity, participants were asked to consider the many risks taken by the pioneers (such as facing wild animals, unclean water, or harsh weather conditions), as well as artistic risks that an actor might take (showing extreme emotion, making physical contact, and so on). Working in small groups, they combined these two ideas by taking a risk as an actor in the creation of a scene about one of the pioneers’ historical risks.

In a world where young people are continually pressured to conform to the mainstream—in clothing, ideas, behavior—the benefits of risk-taking are paramount. When our schools spend so much time focusing on the “right answer,” students begin to lose the desire to try something new or different, for fear of failure. As teachers, how do we honor the risks inherent in making creative choices and encourage

our students to try something risky in the safety of our classrooms?

As we packed up to leave the institute, we all carried with us a shared sense of determination. Our time together provided insight, knowledge, and inspiration. It would now be up to us, as teachers, to take the risk—to try that new lesson or incorporate that drama skill—and to remind our students and ourselves what it means to be part of a beautiful, creative, and endlessly fascinating world.

Jacob Watson is a director, designer, and teaching artist in Chicago, IL. He currently serves as the Arts Education Consultant with Creative Directions and an Illinois State Representative for AATE. Jacob received his B.A. in Theatre from Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, where he was a recipient of the Aurand Harris Award for excellence in TYA.

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