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## Curriculum Drama

### An Engaging Approach to Social Studies

*The senate chamber bustled to life as preoccupied members of Congress arrived for a pivotal legislative session. Walking toward their seats, some were hailed by waiting colleagues and huddled in groups for private conversations. Others walked directly to their seats to review their prepared statements and to read over the latest updates on the bill they were to debate on the senate floor.*

*The week before, the Environmental Affairs Committee had shepherded the Clean Air Act through a somewhat contentious hearing process, and committee members were anxious to bring the legislation to a vote.*

*With the decisive tap of the gavel against the table, the leader called the session to order. The buzz of conversations diminished, and there was momentary silence. Then the debate began.*

**Sen. Santos:** I plan to ratify the Clean Air Act. I feel that the nation's air being clean far outweighs the bill's drawbacks. I yield the floor.

**Sen. Blitz:** I disagree with my colleague, Sen. Santos. I plan on voting against this legislation. This bill requires factories to use a filter that currently costs \$100 million. To keep businesses running and to be in compliance with this legislation, factory owners will have to fire people so as to keep their profit margins up. Ruining people's lives is not the answer for clean air.

**Sen. Provia:** We should be more concerned about the future than with saving jobs. I plan to vote for this bill.

These senators were not current members of Congress but were classmates participating in a middle school social studies class. Jorge Santos, Mike Blitz, and Emma Provia (all names in this text are pseudonyms) engaged in an intense debate about the feasibility of this environmental legislation. Students explored this issue not from the outside looking in, as mere readers of a civics text on the legislative branch of government, but rather as engaged participants from the inside, as senators concerned with the bottom line of a proposed law. To read details of this legislation, refer to the resource section at the back of this book; Resource I contains details of this student-made bill.

*Civic Literacy Through Curriculum Drama, Grades 6–12* draws from real classrooms with real students. It describes an innovative approach called “curriculum drama” (Franklin, 2003) that engages students in the core practice and mindful activity of related fields within the social studies. Without predetermined outcomes or scripted roles, curriculum drama emerges from the power of student and teacher constructions to a place where class members interact as insiders within a field of practice.

This text provides classroom tested ideas for constructing curriculum drama. Flexible in design, curriculum drama can be constructed for any area of social studies. Chapter 2 describes the inner workings of this approach, so readers can build a viable experience within their own classrooms.

Readers may enjoy examining a detailed account of how to construct an extended curriculum drama on the legislative branch of government. Along with a weekly outline highlighting key tasks and situated events, I have also included ideas on how to extend (or abridge) this experience. In this section I use the created voices of one particular class of students. Essentially, this is a composite sketch drawn from my many years of classroom experience, both in the United States and overseas, where I have successfully used this approach to engage a range of students in understanding units of study within the social studies (see Chapters 3–8).

Readers may also be interested in understanding how curriculum drama can be designed in other social studies areas. Along with the classroom senate, I have included ideas for designing curriculum dramas in current events, history, and law (see Chapter 9). Use of this classroom approach is limited only by your imagination and the imaginations of your students.

This book also includes descriptions of those situations when curriculum drama stuttered, stalled, or fell into a state of disarray within the classroom. How do the students and I, their teacher, work together to bring credibility and rigor back into the experience? To understand these dilemmas and how we worked through them, readers may want to explore “classroom dilemmas” (see Chapters 4–8).

### **Can Curriculum Drama Work in Your Classroom?**

Curriculum drama is an approach to teaching and learning that can work successfully in a range of educational settings. I have constructed curriculum dramas for classes at the middle school level to the college level, in public and private school settings, in classrooms where there is great student homogeneity and in classrooms where there is a wide range of student diversity. I have seen young adults actively engage in curriculum drama who have been classified as emergent English language learners and/or have individualized education programs. I have used this approach for remedial learners and for precocious students.

Whether your school is located in an economically poor urban neighborhood, a working middle class community, or an exclusive suburb, this approach to teaching and learning will be an unforgettable and educative experience for your students. Curriculum drama works within flexible time frames and is highly adaptable to various settings.

### **Understanding Curriculum Drama**

Curriculum drama forms a bridge that links the tasks of teaching, learning, and inquiry to the authentic interests, concerns, and energies of the students. This approach pulls the class together into new ways of being, knowing, and interacting within “the lived situations of life” (Dewey, 1934, p. 263). In this way, students generate complex understandings *as insiders* to the defined unit of study.

### **Breaking Out of the Conventional**

Curriculum drama disrupts the taken-for-granted ways of classroom interactions. Individuals break out of conventional classroom roles and work with each other and the curriculum in new ways. Activities take on a deeper meaning, and students become motivated to learn more about a topic not because of an impending test, but because they have become deeply engaged in its relevance.

For instance, in the case of the legislative drama, students as senators become motivated to conduct research and devise their own legislation based on national, regional, and/or personal concerns about contemporary society. Working in committee, they discuss and revise this legislation. In this way, students become provoked to use the power of imagination to “reach beyond where they are” (Greene, 2005, p. 116) as young members of society.

At the same time, curriculum drama helps to situate individuals in a learning context that matters. Within the legislative drama, students as senators engage in lawmaking activities, and they live through the consequences of their collective, legislative decisions. This participatory experience connects students with one another, and, at the same time, it challenges the individual to develop informed positions and to envision possible solutions about the issues that confront society.

## **A Coconstructed Process**

Curriculum drama is a coconstructed process. Rather than being directed, powered, or shaped by the adult in charge, students are partners in the construction process. Freed from following any pre-existing story line, students have a broad landscape, albeit within a defined context, to explore their roles as members of an emerging community within the classroom setting.

Through the course of this experience, students become involved in lived inquiries that reflect “real topics contemplated in everyday life” (Kuhn, 1986, p. 501). For instance, reflecting upon the senate debate and the cost factors involved with the Clean Air Act, one student wrote,

We are saying how we feel pretty much. I mean we know about the situation. We know about our economy and how we are in debt. I mean some people might have had their parents lose jobs and how hard it is to get another one. We realize how hard it is for them. We don't want people to lose their jobs. We are really thinking about this stuff. We are doing this from our own experience. (Katie)

Because it is coconstructed by teacher and student engagement, negotiation, and activity, curriculum drama puts into practice constructivist pedagogy. Brooks and Brooks (1993) list five guiding

principles for a constructivist approach (p. 33), and these principles are weaved throughout the lifespan of an ongoing curriculum drama:

- Posing problems of emerging relevance to students
- Structuring learning around primary concepts
- Seeking and valuing students' points of view
- Adapting curriculum to address students' suppositions
- Assessing student learning in the context of teaching

## **Learning New Ways of Being**

While there is certainly an imaginary element to curriculum drama, in that the class is envisioning itself not as students but as inside participants of a defined community, this approach is grounded in real world issues and pragmatic applications. This provides an appropriate way for young adolescents to develop experience in taking a public stance and talking back to the world. Moreover, they engage in efforts not only to appraise the world around them and identify complex problems facing contemporary society but to work together to take responsible action to address these issues. In the case of the classroom senate, they gain both access to and insight into how democratic structures function within our system of government.

### ***Shift in Classroom Roles***

In curriculum drama the class members move away from their predictable positions as students and teacher to interacting in an entirely new context. For instance, in a curriculum drama based on the legislative branch of government, students work as senators to construct legislation. In this setting, the teacher may strategically decide to work as senate clerk, senior advisor, or political consultant. In a curriculum drama designed around a historical event, the class might decide to transform the room to a courtroom and work in legal teams to bring charges against a controversial leader. In this setting, the teacher might decide to interact as judge, bailiff, or legal counsel. Or for yet another example, in current events the class could receive an invitation to attend a "World Summit on Peace." Each student could then conduct research on a well-known advocate for peace and work to construct a way to represent that individual for this upcoming event. Within this context, the teacher might work as lead conference planner, keynote speaker, or news reporter.

### ***Shift in Classroom Texts***

Along with a shift in classroom roles, the position of the textbook moves as well. Rather than being at the center of teacher-student activity, it is now used as one of several frames of reference. For instance, in the classroom senate, students use their civics textbook to examine the U.S. Constitution, Article 1 (legislative branch) for ideas on how to construct their senate. In their criminal trial of a historical figure, students use their history books to access primary documents (e.g., speeches, declarations) that can serve as evidence in their legal case and use the Bill of Rights (e.g., rights of the accused) to structure their trial. With preparations for the World Summit in their current events drama, the class could report on current news articles or images that relate in some way to peace or the need for peace.

### ***Shift in Teacher and Student Relationships***

In curriculum drama, students and their teacher work in concert and negotiate with one another. While there are shifts in classroom roles and status, this does not imply that the teacher has given up adult authority. But rather, the teacher collaboratively works with the class to build collective belief in this new classroom environment.

At times, curriculum drama makes strategic leaps into the world of imagination. Within this realm, both the students and their teacher step into and take seriously their constructed positions, responsibilities, and status. At other times, curriculum drama takes a leap back into the classroom setting. Taking off their constructed roles, the class reflects upon this classroom drama and draws comparisons to its counterpart in society (or history).

Curriculum drama is placed alongside the topic under study. Students move away from *studying about* a topic as detached observers to *learning within* the topic as informed insiders. The class works on tasks within a constructed community of practice that is aligned in some way to key concepts and facts within the intended focus.

### **Like an Accordion in Design**

Curriculum drama can fit into varying time frames and schedules. For instance, as a social studies teacher I have teamed with the English language arts teacher to create a purposeful block of time with my students. I have designed curriculum drama at other schools, where social studies is scheduled throughout the week in both 45 minute and 90 minute periods. Curriculum drama could even

be organized as an ongoing Friday afternoon event. Obviously, the more time that can be devoted to this approach, the more likely students will take it seriously and will take ownership of it. In this way, they will develop complex understandings from the experience. Curriculum drama thrives in those settings where there is genuine attention placed on providing an educational environment, not a scripted one, and where students have the time to truly engage in the business of deep learning.

## Using Curriculum Drama to Meet Standards

Curriculum drama, with its emphasis on peer interactions, participatory learning, and active use of imagination and inquiry, is well suited to adolescent and adult learners. This approach to teaching and learning has the potential to disrupt the prevailing climate of social alienation and academic disengagement that has too often characterized the educational experience for our nation's students (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004).

At the same time, this approach brings to the fore the relevancy of social studies content and the need to critically inquire about the world. Sadly, one of the unintended consequences of recent educational policy at the federal level is the narrowing of curricular focus and teaching within the school day (Neill, 2003) so as to prepare students for high-stakes tests in reading and math. The field of social studies in particular has been seriously marginalized with this current testing frenzy (VanFossen, 2005; von Zastrow & Janc, 2004).

Classrooms, particularly at the middle and secondary school levels, have become disconnected environments where the emphasis is placed not on students but rather on performance outcomes numerically measured by paper-and-pencil tests during a timed session. In compliance with current educational policy, many schools relegate our students to peering *at* the world through the fuzzy lens of scripted curriculum or from assigned chapter readings from a textbook. With mounting pressures to go along with the ever present and ever changing climate of top-down mandates, our nation's schools run the risk of placing social studies on the back burner or worse still in a locked and forgotten storage room!

The field of social studies works to teach students to be critically minded and to take active notice of the world so as to participate as informed citizens. Freire (1973) reminds us that "to be human is to engage in relationships *with* others and *with* the world" (p. 3)

(italics mine). Social studies is a unique field of study in that it pays close attention to the human experience. This connects to its purpose as a discipline, as noted by the National Council for the Social Studies:

The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (1994, p. 3)

Students and their teachers need time to examine the world and to engage with the world in both a rigorous and playful way. By using curriculum drama, students and their teachers will be able to meet defined standards within their social studies unit. Over a decade ago, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (1994) identified 10 thematic strands that served as the bedrock for social studies curricular standards. Three of these strands are particularly relevant to the curriculum dramas explored within this text:

- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions*. (p. 25)

- Power, Authority, and Governance

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *how people create and change structures of power, authority, and governance*. (p. 26)

- Civic Ideals and Practices

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of *the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic*. (p. 30)

Whether the curriculum drama is based on the legislative branch of government or on current events, history, or law, this approach reflects serious attention to the power and relevance of NCSS standards. For more information about these curricular standards, please visit the NCSS Web site at <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards>.

Furthermore, this approach with its emphasis on spoken and written expression and the value it places on doing inquiry and conducting research also integrates key English language arts standards as designed by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (1996). Three standards in particular connect to social studies based curriculum dramas:

- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions and by posing questions.
- Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

For more information on these standards, please visit the NCTE Web site at <http://www.ncte.org>.

As curriculum drama uses standards from both the NCSS and NCTE, this could be an ideal opportunity for colleagues from different disciplines to work together and join forces to construct with students a common classroom experience.

## **Emerging From Educational Drama**

Curriculum drama is closely aligned to the field of educational drama, where the story emerges from the actions generated by the participants. Influenced by the work of individuals such as Dorothy Heathcote (1984) in Great Britain and Winifred Ward (1957) in the United States, this approach is open-ended, not mimetic in design. Similar to “process drama” (O’Neill, 1995), curriculum drama comes from student and teacher constructions that are loosely based on structures or situations conceived as being fundamental to, or characteristic of, a defined topic of study.

Through the task of constructing a particular frame of reference and collaborating with others through this new context, the individual takes part in building collective belief in a “community in the making” (Greene, 2001). Through this process, the individual explores an entirely new way of being with the world. This connects to how the power of imagination can work alongside the development of identity. Madison (1988) notes,

It is through the imagination, the realm of pure possibility that we freely make ourselves to be who or what we are, that we creatively and imaginatively become who we are, while in the process preserving the freedom and possibility to be yet otherwise than what we have become and merely are. (p. 191)

In this situation, middle school and high school students can go far beyond their adolescent worlds and “set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene, 1995, p. 3), which can too often typecast an individual in the classroom setting. How often have we heard our students classify themselves or their peers based on test performance, grade point average, or current reading levels? Curriculum drama provides a welcomed break from that restrictive environment. In this emerging community, participants can begin to take notice of who they are; they are given license to envision who they can become. During the course of this experience, they become motivated to take responsibility for their constructed roles and work with the consequences of their collective actions.

Along with participating in the making of a new classroom community, curriculum drama also begins to emulate a “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Students take on the language, engage in the activity, and begin to develop unique perspectives as “insiders” connected to a field of study within social studies. This then provides a steady source of comparison and inspiration between what is happening in the transformed setting of the classroom and what is happening (or happened) in society.

For instance, in the classroom senate, students as senators develop firsthand experience with legislative practice and encounter complex challenges within its process. This then provides them with a useful context to compare their experience in the classroom senate with what is happening within the U.S. Senate. Throughout this drama, they place their experience alongside legislative events happening in society. They explore such questions as the following:

- How does the *structure* of our classroom world compare with that in the adult world?
- How does our *practice* compare with that in the adult world?

Curriculum drama seeks to ensure that the constructed events within the classroom engage student interests and make sense while at the same time serving as bedrock for delving deep within the

content of a unit of study. In this way viable points of comparison can be made between the constructed classroom setting and its corresponding context in society.

### **Why the Term *Curriculum Drama*?**

I use the term *curriculum drama* because at its core it is about the lived curriculum. This approach incites student interest and compels their engagement to participate within a defined world within social studies. In so doing, students have the opportunity to develop substantive content understandings. This happens in multiple ways—when students develop a viable frame of reference within this constructed setting, when students *step into* and participate within these contexts, and when students *step away from* the enacted experience to reflect upon an emerging situation and its potential meaning.

At the same time, students apply what they know through their participation in the emerging *drama*. This brings an unpredictable and generative dimension to the teaching and learning environment. It complicates what they know and what they may think they know. At the same time, drama brings out a spirit of playfulness and fun. People become emboldened to imagine the possible and to interact in new ways within its world.

This distinguishes curriculum drama from simulation games where roles and situations are largely predetermined, teacher-directed, and prepackaged. Curriculum drama is more constructivist in its design; students work with one another and their teacher to build their frame of reference, and situations emerge from the activities generated within this context. It is also different from theatrical performances in that there are no scripts. For that matter, value is not placed on “acting” but rather on the ability to contribute in a meaningful and credible way to the conversations and tasks happening within the constructed classroom community.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduces curriculum drama, an innovative approach for constructing social studies contexts within the classroom setting. Participants move from their classroom roles as students to a more dynamic position as engaged insiders within a topic of study. Grounded

in actual classroom experiences from a wide range of settings, this approach emerges from the field of educational drama.

### **What's Next?**

The next chapter, “Constructing Curriculum Drama: Exploring Its Structure,” examines the inner workings of this classroom approach. Three processes are examined: using a blueprint, setting the stage, and constructing multiple points of entry.