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Using solo drama to make the teaching of social studies engaging for students

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Abstract

Social studies is a major subject taught in schools in the United States. Research shows lack of interest in the subject by most school children. The author reflects on how he prepares teachers in a graduate drama course to use solo drama as another instructional option to address the problem. The paper also examines integrated solo drama projects by four students in their respective classrooms as case studies. The findings are synthesized to demonstrate the efficacy of this drama strategy for classroom teachers and teacher educators to adopt in making social studies meaningful and engaging for learners.

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1. Introduction

The US like many other countries worldwide believe in excellent education of children upon whom a vibrant national growth depends during this 21st century and beyond. For this reason, social studies is an integral part of the elementary and high school curriculum. The general purpose for teaching this subject is to equip children with requisite knowledge and understanding of who they are; the social, historical, political, economic, and cultural heritage of their own people; about their communities, this nation and the world around them. These children are also expected to learn and have full awareness of the democratic practices and ideals including the core values of good citizenship. As a result, they will be adequately prepared to have the knowledge, values and skill set necessary

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for them to negotiate life successfully when they become adults. In the same vein, they will be able to contribute their quota as responsible citizens towards a more robust economic, democratic and technological advancement of the nation and the global society at large (Schell & Fisher, 2007). Unfortunately, most schools are not attaining the expected goals for teaching social studies today. Many students are increasingly getting disengaged from it. They consider it boring. This attitude on the part of students is engendered by several factors. These include the employment of conventional instructional methods which promote too much teacher talk, memorization of facts, over use of work sheets, and lack of content relevance to the personal lives of students as well as their culture and community (Seefeldt, 2005; Sunal & Hass, 2005).

It is obvious that how the subject is generally taught is a problem. The negative perception that students have about social studies will never change unless it is made appealing and relevant to them. To reverse this trend, concerted effort is being made by many teacher education institutions to orient in-service and graduate students to alternative instructional methods. The arts including a variety of drama approaches are amongst such pragmatic teaching methods considered appropriate for invigorating and engaging students in the study of social studies. However, one aspect of drama that has not been fully tapped as a tool kit for this is solo drama. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate the potential of this art form as a useful educational tool for social studies. First, a brief overview of solo drama and how it became part of my drama course will be presented. This will be followed by a nutshell account of how students are prepared to use solo drama method for teaching social studies in the classroom. Next, I will draw from integrated solo drama projects done by four students in their classrooms as case studies to examine the impact of the process on the learning of their students. Finally, I will synthesize my own thoughts from the findings about the efficacy of the medium to revitalize students' love for social studies.

2. Meaning, nature and functions of solo drama

Solo drama, as the name implies, is simply a play performed by an actor for an audience. It is an interactive performance piece which enables the player to involve audience members in the dramatic action (Catron, 2000). The form and content of solo drama does not necessarily conform to the conventional structure of a play. Also, the length of a performance can vary from two minutes to over one hour. This type of drama is generally used to raise awareness and educate people. The works of Saldana (2005) and Catron (2000) reveal that solo drama has other by-names like monologue, solo play, one-woman show, mono drama and one-person show. But in this paper the term monologue and solo drama will be used interchangeably.

Solo drama enjoys huge popularity in academia and in circles of amateur and professional theatre artists. For example, in *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century*, Boney (2002) demonstrates how more than forty nationally acclaimed solo dramatists including Whoopi Goldberg, John Fleck, Anna Deveare Smith, have used solo dramas to sensitize society. Solo drama also features prominently in training students in the fields of acting, playwriting, and directing in theatre studies department of many colleges and universities. They are often used for audition purposes by student actors and amateur artists to contest for a role or a job (Catron, 2000). Occasionally local professional artists take solo dramas into schools. But there is little research about how classroom teacher are prepared to use solo drama as a catalyst for teaching subjects in the school curriculum including social studies. According to Sunal & Hass (2005), experiential learning which engages different modes of interaction with content, artifacts, people and events in an out of the classroom is great for making social studies meaningful to students. They also believe that this kind of learning leads to better understanding of concepts, development of critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and attitude transformation. So does solo drama have what it takes to foster this kind of learning? Can teachers design and implement integrated solo drama lessons which make social studies purposeful and engaging? What is the evidence? These are the essential questions which guide the purpose of the paper.

3. Exploring the uncharted field of solo drama pedagogy

I teach the Drama and Critical Literacy graduate course in the Integrated Teaching through the Arts program. I junket regularly across the country like my colleagues to teach my drama course in an 8-week term model. The purpose of the course is to guide students to acquire the craft of using drama as a teaching tool across the

curriculum. Solo drama constitutes the core of the course. Initially, I was not aware of any precise model which teacher educators could use for preparing teachers in the theory and practice of solo drama when I thought about including it in my course. Therefore shifting the focus of the course to solo drama pedagogy was tantamount to exploring an uncharted territory. But I was able to redesign the course that has since been appropriate for the experimentation. This dream became a reality through research, personal association with professional solo drama artists in Cambridge, MA, collaboration with fellow core faculty/drama professors, and adjuncts who have dabbled in solo drama at some point in their careers.

4. Theoretical framework and immersion process

My first college preparation to become a teacher got me deeply interested in Vygotsky. Since then I have been a passionate believer in his social constructivist theory. Social constructivist theorists advocate for collaborative, interactive learning processes which allow students to dig deep into understanding and constructing new knowledge from experiential activities through practical involvement, reflection, and questioning. The constructivist teacher therefore is a facilitator whose role is to support, guide, coach and co-construct learning with students (Vygotsky, 1978; Wright, 2003). These conceptualizations are also in sync with meaningful and engaged teaching of social studies (Sunal and Hass, 2005; Provenzo, Butin & Angelini, 2008). Therefore I approach the facilitation of the course through the lens of a social constructivist. There are several stages through which I take students so that they can have full orientation in the theory and practice of solo drama pedagogy. This portion of the paper provides a snapshot of the hybrid format that I use.

Online assignment prior to formal class session: This usually takes the form of a survey to find out information from my students about the grade levels they teach; demographic of students in their classes; location of their schools; their background knowledge in drama and theatre in education; and what they expect to learn from the course. This survey is posted on the Discussion Board of the course website several weeks before the class meets. The responses I get give me some useful information about the composition of the class, needs and expectations. I am able to tweak my activities and pedagogical approaches. This helps me to cater to the needs of the mix of teachers from elementary, middle, to high school; and sometimes college instructors.

First weekend of class session: The class meets face-to-face on Saturday and Sunday for the first weekend of the term. Students begin to learn the theory and practice of drama/solo drama integration into the curriculum. The process encompasses a review of the syllabus (class protocol, objectives, assigned readings, individual and group assignments, assessment, and final project); drama games; examining the place of drama in school and community education; pantomime; improvisation; elements of drama; explorations of drama strategies taken from process drama such as hot seat; tableau; questioning; writing; role play; and reflection. Students are also guided to learn the skills of drama infused lesson structures connected to the curriculum.

During this foundational stage, progression of learning experiences gradually shifts to solo drama. I introduce the students to three types of solo drama: 1) social issue monologue (deals with school, community, national and global issues of concern), 2) historical/biographical monologue (an enactment of the life of a person, past or present, who has made a difference in the lives of others) and 3) a missing voice monologue. The missing voice monologue is often based on literature: fiction or non-fiction. The intent is to give voice and visibility to any character in a text who says little or nothing at all in relationship to the adventures of the hero who represents the author's agenda. At the heart of this monologue is the application of critical literacy concept to promote diversity, multiple perspectives and social justice. Students learn to question sources of authority, power, the author or character's perspectives in a text or performance. Then they can have the opportunity to reconstruct their own meaning in relation to the realities of the world. This concept of critical literacy if applied to all three types of solo drama leads students to a point of discernment, action and transformation (Schneider, Crumple & Rogers, 2006). The students and I work together to identify sources from which to generate ideas for solo drama. For example, subjects in the school curriculum, plays, children's story books, literature, and the local newspaper. We also look for current social, cultural, economic, political, sexism and environmental issues or events.

Writing a monologue script, creating and portraying a realistic character and performance techniques are essential components of solo drama which students also learn at this phase. I find the basic guidelines about these

elements suggested by Catron (2000) and Peters (2006) for actors and playwrights very useful. I adapt some of their activities and reinforce them by using the concept of 5Ws: What, Who, Where, Why and When to coach students to acquire the skills for writing and performing a monologue. Another important aspect is the schema for integrating solo drama into a lesson. I invite students to share in small groups how they write lesson plans for the subjects they teach in their classrooms. I build upon the feedback from the groups to guide students to structure a lesson plan which incorporates the following additional elements: strategies for a monologue performance by the teacher; learner involvement through questioning; hot seating; reflection; keeping journal; writing and role play. They also learn how to apply other activities like poetry, music, storytelling, visual arts and technology in the interdisciplinary lesson to deepen the learning experience.

At every phase, I use modeling to demonstrate the concept, context and process. The text books I use for the course are *Creative Drama in the Classroom* by Nellie McCaslin and *The Power of One: The Solo Play for playwrights, Actors, and Directors* by Louis Catron. I guide students to read appropriate chapters to review theories and practical approaches for foundational educational drama work and solo drama experience from the respective books. I also use videos for further illustration, reflection, and discussion. For instance, I show the video titled “*Fires in the Mirror*” by Anna Devere Smith as an example of a social issue monologue. I pose questions for students to investigate the themes for her performance, how she devises monologues, and her purpose for using solo drama. We review her acting style, use of language, and production technique. To illustrate a missing voice monologue I simulate an integrated solo drama lesson based on *Corduroy* by Don Freeman. I scaffold the progression of activities which range from reading and interpreting author’s intent; identifying missing voices in the story including Lisa; making predictions and assumptions about Lisa and her family; and performing Lisa’s monologue. This is followed by hot seating Lisa in character by the rest of the class to find out more information about her feelings, behavior, values, family and relationships with other community members that surfaced in her monologue but not shared in the original story. Students are guided to ask open-ended questions during the hot seating in order to elicit constructive responses.

Reflection after the experience often leads students to discover themes such as friendship, selflessness, family values and responsibility. I organize students into groups of three and challenge them to dialogue about the importance of these qualities for parents, educators, school kids and of course, good citizenship. I do this primarily for students to realize the importance of making connection between written text, performance, school learning, and the real world. I also coach students to write short monologues for any missing voice of their choice from the original story like the toys, the night watchman and the sales lady. They configure themselves into groups of four to begin the project. First, each person explains why he or she has chosen a particular characters as missing voice. Then they take turns to practice performing the monologue and the hot seating. When the demonstration is over, I invite students to critique the strength and weakness of the process. I also encourage to suggest alternatives for what needs to be fixed. Finally, I break them into grade level groups to discuss insights they have gained from the experience; and how they might use this pedagogy for other subjects in the curriculum.

Between Weekend Online Assignments: Students return to school after their weekend class for three weeks to continue their normal professional responsibilities in their schools. At the same time, I facilitate online study of theorists, scholars and practitioners like Dorothy Heathcote, Piaget, Froebel, Dewey, Freire, Boal, Vygotsky, and Cecily O’Neill. Students also have the freedom to choose any theorist of their choice. They do research, write a reading log to post on the class wiki. This helps them to have better understanding of educational theories and practices which would best inform their own teaching philosophy. Students also do online article review of multicultural education, critical literacy concepts and practices. This is followed by analytical, collaborative conversation and response to questions set on the discussion board by the instructor. The goal here is to have students digest these concepts in relation to how drama/solo drama can be applied to foster culturally responsive teaching that will cater to all learners including English Language Learners.

Finally, students are required to research and write a monologue script based on a proposed lesson plan to be taught in their own classrooms. Each student is expected to come to the next class prepared with props and costumes to perform the monologue. The student should also present a proposed lesson structure which includes lesson objectives, demographics of students, grade level, duration of lesson, strategies to weave in the monologue performance, hot seating, open-ended questions to engage students, supplemental creative activities to deepen further student learning and reflection.

Weekend two class session: On the Saturday and Sunday of this weekend, drama games are used to start each day. Students continue to be immersed in more drama-based approaches, multimedia application in drama, arts-based assessment methods, class text discussions, strategies for parents, family, and community involvement in student learning, integrated group drama lesson projects and presentations. But a good chunk of the week is allocated for students to perform their monologues and to share ideas about their lesson plans. Each performance is critiqued by peers and me. Feedback and constructive suggestions are also provided immediately on the structure and content of the proposed lesson plan. I create space for students to have voice to ask questions; and at the same time contribute ideas to help their colleagues. This gesture is to acknowledge their expertise as classroom teachers. I also do this kind of acknowledgement when I am facilitating practical activities or discussions. The process for performing the monologues and peer critique is carefully interspersed with the activities described above. The goal is to have students hone their instructional skills in solo drama in lieu of the actual implementation of the lessons in their respective classrooms.

Key assignment implementation project: After the end of the second weekend session, students have three weeks to fine tune their monologue scripts and lesson plans. Within this time frame, they teach the interdisciplinary solo drama lesson in their classrooms. This can either be a social issue monologue, historical/biographical monologue or a missing voice monologue that could be integrated into any subject including social studies. Each student is expected to submit the following documentation for assessment: a lesson plan, monologue script, a 6-8 page reflection paper, video clips, photographs and selected samples of student works.

5. Method

Qualitative research can be conducted in a variety of ways including case study. Case studies are useful for a detailed investigation of a single case with the intention of providing some description or theory. Guba & Lincoln (1981) state that the purpose of a case study determines its content. This may be to teach, provide knowledge or to test. Lightfoot (1978), and Bogdan & Biklen (1992) also point out that multi-case studies can be done for generalizability, comparison and contrasting or integration. I used the multi case studies approach for this study. The rationale was to compare and contrast solo drama integration in a social studies lesson by classroom teachers to generate data. The information gathered would be synthesized to illuminate any contributions solo drama might make to learning social studies.

5.1. Participants

Participants in this study were four, certified practicing teachers who took my drama and critical literacy course class as students. All of them but one was male. Their ages range between 25 and 40. The male teacher taught grade 9. One female taught kindergarten, the other taught grade 3. But the third person taught grade 4. They all taught in school districts located in different states. The population of students in their respective classrooms were diverse. I prepared them to use solo drama method to enhance student learning in any curriculum subject according to the process, theory and practice described above. I chose them as participants for the study because they integrated solo drama in interdisciplinary social studies lessons in their classrooms to fulfill the final course requirement. Their projects were a good fit for the purpose of this study. They signed a consent form for me to use them for my investigation.

5.2. Data gathering and analysis

Borg & Gall (1989) endorse the use of interviews, questionnaires, participant observation, examination of documents, artifacts, video and audio recording and field notes as tools for collecting data for case studies. Therefore, I used materials the teachers provided me from their key assignments as sources for the data. From each student, I collected the following: a written reflective paper between 6 and 8 pages, a lesson plan, a video clip of the teaching and learning process within the classroom context, several samples of student works, photographs of students doing individual and group projects; and photographs of the teacher performing or interacting with students.

The kindergarten teacher had predominantly white kids. There was only one kid of color in her class. However, the class was heterogeneous in terms of gender. The topic for her lesson was “Differences and Similarities” She researched and wrote her own original monologue script on Rosa Parks. She incorporated it in the lesson as a historical/biographical monologue. The 4th grade teacher had a mixed group of 19 students. There were 5 gifted students and 6 English Language Learners. There were also more girls than boys. She did an interdisciplinary social studies lesson about human needs and wants. She created a missing voice monologue for the steer skull from “Through Georgia’s Eyes” which she infused into the lesson. The 3rd grade teacher had 20 students. There were 8 students of color and 5 of them were English Language Learners. Her lesson was about “American Symbols.” She used the missing voice monologue for the integration process. The character for her monologue was the Statue of Liberty. The 9th grade teacher had 20 students in his class. There were 9 boys and 11 girls. There were also 6 students of color. His interdisciplinary social studies lesson was about “World Peace.” He wrote a monologue about the life of Mahatma Gandhi and performed it for and with the students.

I began the analysis after I had collected all the data in my possession. I sorted the lesson plans, reflection paper, video clips, photographs, monologue scripts and samples of student work according to grade levels. I examined all the written texts, watched the videos, scrutinized the photographs and took notes. I followed the approach recommended by Bogdan & Biklen (1992) to code the data according to emerging patterns. Lincoln & Guba (1985) recommend triangulation of data to sustain credibility of the study. The multiple sources from which I generated the data enabled me to compare and contrast all data while doing the analysis to validate the credibility of the study.

6. Results

Four thematic strands emerged from the analysis. The first one showed that monologue enactment was a hook. There was consensus among all the teachers about this. The video clips and photographs also provided additional validation. Regardless of the age differences of students in each class, students in all classes were found to be excited. They were also riveted to the unfolding monologue performance. The teacher had no behavior issues to deal with. In her reflection she stated:

My solo drama made an impact on the children. I have a class of fourteen very young, very talkative, and active five and six year olds. They were excited and listened carefully. There were many hands up showing their eagerness to ask me “Rosa Parks” questions.

All four teachers also reported that students kept asking them about when they would do the drama again. These appeals were made several days after the lessons were over.

The second strand was student’s content knowledge and study habit. There was strong indication from all the class experiences that students’ interest in the lessons went up. So was the level of student focus and knowledge retention. There was noticeable depth to what students said and did especially grades 3, 4, and 9 students. Three things appeared to be the contributive factors: 1) the hot seating experience which gave voice to the students to ask questions or express their feelings, 2) variety of age appropriate creative arts activities and group projects, and 3) the reflection activities. The level of questioning was not deep enough from the kindergarten kids. But they were more task oriented. The 3rd grade teacher commented:

My monologue and hot seat experience hooked the class into this new unit of study. When I immediately returned to class in my own clothes, students were anxious to tell me what they remembered from our “visitor.” Following my monologue presentation, students wrote observation notes in their journals recording what they had learned during the presentation. Students drew pictures of the statue, labeled parts on their drawings, made notes, clarified with their neighbors and table groups ... wrote personal opinion of who had come to class that day.

The third strand was inspiration and empathetic awakening. Poignant evidence was available from all four classes that students’ hearts and emotions were touched profoundly as they interacted with characters. There was an instance in the video when a kindergarten kid could not hold back his feelings. That was when he heard that the bus

driver was not going to let Rosa Parks get on the bus because she was black. He screamed with sincerity, “Oh, that’s not fair!” Students in the 9th grade class were asked to write a letter to Gandhi about their impressions of his life. Below is an excerpt from one of the students:

Dear Gandhi,

I am writing this letter to you because I would like to remind you of what you did and also ask you a few questions. So here I go! ... Then later in 1915 you returned to India. To be moving around all the time I would like to know how your wife is feeling about this. Later in September 1924 you started a 21-day fast for Hindu-Muslim Unity. Now that sure makes a statement but isn’t that very bad for your health? Also, how did that feel for you? I would like to ask you how could you bear to be in jail for all that time and more than once? I could never do that. You are very brave. I look up to you. I wish I could make a change in the world like you did.

Throughout all of the brave things that you have done, I look up to you and again I wish that I could do something even close to what you have done throughout out your life. Fasting and stuff must have been hard. Although you got through it all although it was all for the better of the people. Thank you for all that you have done.

Sincerely,
Signed

The last strand was about family and community participation. With the exception of the 9th grade class, students in the three other classes had opportunities to interact with parents and community members. The kindergarten teacher had her integrated solo drama and social studies lesson during the Martin Luther King Week. She invited the parents of students to join the kids for an anchor presentation in her class. This was followed by discussion about friendship and acceptance with parents, family members and the kids. The teacher was the one who facilitated the discussion. Grade three students did an immigration project. They had to interview parents, a family member or someone in the community about how they got into the US. They were asked to present their findings in class. English Language Learners were allowed to do the interview with their parents in their native language. Grade four students did fund raising in collaboration with their teacher to support Home-Water for South Sudan a non-profit organization. The class teacher reported that:

It was the children who decided to do the fund raising to help provide clean drinking water for Sudan. Students collected change from parents, teachers, community members and gave of themselves.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that solo drama has the potential to stimulate active learning in social studies. The novelty about the double role of the teacher as a performer and facilitator does the magic. It sparks curiosity in students. It also sets the tone for strong motivation to engage students in the learning process. The level of collaboration between teacher and students; and among students themselves could be high especially during project-based activities. Students are able to demonstrate their academic knowledge through oral, written and creative projects instead of regurgitating isolated facts. They can synthesize information from the monologue performances, the assignments, collaboration with colleagues, and interactions with family and community members to acquire deeper understanding of concepts, issues, and values. The findings also show that solo drama thrives as a strong educational tool only if it is purposefully integrated into the curriculum with the support of other arts forms and creative projects. However, its efficacy for classroom learning could diminish if it is used solely for performance sake – that is, to entertain. This should not be the goal.

Another important discovery from the study is that the process enables students to see real nexus between home, school, and community values. I feel that when students’ hearts and souls are touched they could go to any length to work towards the improvement of the lives of those who need help locally, nationally and globally. This aligns with the social action and responsible citizenship expectations of schools enshrined in the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) report. It is also clear that teachers who receive the right preparation in solo drama for classroom education could also contribute to raising the stakes for students to be engaged learners.

According to Jones, Valdez, Nowakowski, & Rasmussen (1994), the hallmark for meaningful and engaged learning are: interactive learning, asking questions, partnership between teacher and students to construct knowledge, problem solving, collaboration with people in school, family, community and the world as well as application of academic knowledge in real life. Erikson (2014) also draws attention to social action projects by students to affect change as an important criteria for engaged learning. By comparing and contrasting these claims, I feel solo drama has some promise for the field. First of all, the study has its limitations. But the modest insight that it has provided about the efficacy of the medium is vital. It would attract further research into solo drama pedagogy in future by educational researchers. Consequently, classroom teachers and teacher educators would begin to adopt it for making social studies a pleasant, relevant learning experience for students.

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