Acting Out History
from the Ice Age to the Modern Age

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What needs to happen in a classroom to make students like history? Seventh grade teacher Michael Welch appears to know a secret: how to get young adolescents—so often self-conscious in front of their peers—to throw off their inhibitions and get into acting out the past. It may be in the role of a Japanese child emperor, a horse being traded by Moroccans, or sirens calling to Ulysses. And, it may be that this teacher’s secret of success is getting onto the floor and into the spirit of things along with his students.

A common criticism of history teaching in our schools is not that the subject matter is beyond students’ comprehension, but that it may be difficult to understand when presented solely as it is in textbooks—with names, dates, timelines, and endless streams of information. While textbooks have been criticized for having achieved a uniform dullness, we must acknowledge that a textbook’s purpose is to present information. Most do that.

One way to overcome the sameness of this form of presentation is through the incorporation of the humanities: literature, dance, music, drama, and the visual arts. Such content is not only valuable in itself, but can serve as another vehicle to help students learn to question, think analytically, solve problems, and make decisions—all skills required for students to construct their own knowledge.

In seeking examples of how to integrate the humanities into regular class work, we spent a month observing Welch’s seventh grade world history class. Our goal was to identify the conditions and practices that lead to high achieving students who regularly rank social studies as their favorite subject.

Our fear was that we would find a charismatic teacher to whom students were drawn, and that it alone would explain the reason for the strong responses of class members. We did find that. But we also found well-known, proven methods of teaching that were held together with some exciting—yes, even inspiring—“glue.”

Classroom Atmosphere

Mr. Welch’s classroom appears different from most seventh grade social studies classrooms. Probably the most obvious difference is the arrangement of the desks in clusters around three sides of the room, leaving wide open floor space. This arrangement gives the room a casual appearance. More importantly, it allows students to move freely to act out the lesson and to form discussion groups.

Often, music (usually related to the lesson) is playing softly as students enter the classroom. The room is always an object-rich environment where students can see tangible connections to the far-off times and places they are studying. The room is further inviting because of its smells. The teacher often uses oils that give the room a subtle but pleasant aroma.

To encourage students to get into the lesson’s drama, the teacher helps them move beyond any discomfort about their bodies by getting down on the floor and involving himself in the processes he expects of them. Finally, students are encouraged to talk and express their feelings about what is happening in class.

To the casual observer, this classroom may appear very unstructured. On closer observation, it becomes clear that it is highly organized, and that planning a unit of this type takes a great deal more time than a traditional lesson. However, there is much less time spent in correcting paperwork.

The requirements of the teacher are:

1. Develop an inviting and comfortable atmosphere.
2. Provide objects (or pictures of objects) that allow students to develop skills of analysis and interpretation.
3. Make long range plans in order to link lessons and provide the context for students to make connections.
4. Use questions that lead students to continue questioning and to make predictions.

Students mourn the loss of community members.

Ronald L. Morris
1. Think, plan, and present history as action requiring student participation.

5. Be confident enough to provide opportunities for students to make decisions, solve problems, and carry out discussions.

6. Think, plan, and present history as action requiring student participation.

The Day’s Lesson
The Use of Objectives
Each day begins with five to seven minutes of review of the previous day’s lesson, followed by two or three minutes used for stating the objectives of this day’s class. These objectives are stated as questions in language students can understand, and represent the crucial center of any lesson. The objectives are listed on posters, arranged in an order that follows the flow of the lesson, and attached to classroom walls. The brief review and the overview of objectives are well planned and flow so that students can understand the connection between lessons.

Review takes place with a partner or in small groups of three or four, so that every student can respond to every question. Seventh graders are generally very social beings, and the teacher capitalizes on this by inviting them to talk. The discussion is raised to a higher level by asking students not only what they think about an issue, but how they would justify their opinion. For example: Was the introduction of iron into Japanese culture an advantage or a disadvantage? Why? After students discuss this within their groups, one student in each group is called upon to summarize their response. This may be followed up with another question.

Setting the Scene
During the next few minutes of class, students in small groups rotate to stations. Typically, there are three stations with eight students (two groups of four) at each station. The stations include photographs, art reproductions, sculpture, poetry, pottery, lines from literature, or some other kind of artifact accompanied by questions for students to discuss as a group. These well-planned questions may require photo interpretation, analysis of an artifact, or interpretation of a written piece. This often results in students developing questions of their own and making predictions as to what will happen during the lesson to come.

Acting Out the Lesson
The largest amount of the class period is used to act out the history lesson—something that engenders enthusiasm on the part of teacher and students alike. The teacher delivers a well-planned lecture in a storytelling format, acting simultaneously as the director of a drama. Students play the roles of people, animals, and objects, acting out the events the teacher is narrating. The teacher stops regularly to ask students what their characters are thinking about or what they think might happen next. For example, if the objective is to understand a slave revolt, a student playing a slave may be asked, “How do you like being treated like dirt? What do you want to do to your master?”

The use of space depends on the lesson being taught. If it is about the war between Sparta and Athens, for example, the space will be divided in two. Space can also be used vertically. When examining the social structure of ancient Egypt, the teacher asks Pharaoh to sit on a desk, nobles and priests to sit on desks, and peasants to sit on the floor.

Gestures and Mnemonic Devices
Acting out the lesson entails use of mnemonic devices, hand actions, and gestures used to help students remember names, terms, and vocabulary. Signs are used to identify not only important figures (the main characters in the drama) but nameless, ordinary people like the merchants of Athens or the women of Sparta. Each student should have a sign, since this helps the student to feel recognized and a part of the lesson, as well as making visible the history of common people. The signs may also include simple drawings that symbolize the role of a character, such as a crown for a monarch or a cross for a clergyman.

This use of classroom drama certainly demonstrates Seymour Papert’s thesis that when learning something abstract or remote, children should be able to put their whole bodies through some kind of experience before moving to paper and pencil or computer and monitor applications. As each objective is addressed during the acting out of the lesson, it is checked off the posted list.

Lesson Summary
The last five minutes of the class period are spent in summarizing the day’s lesson. Literature or poetry is often used, and there is usually an attempt to tie what has been learned to the lives of the students. During this summary, the students return to their desks. The teacher focuses the discussion on questions that require students to state opinions, make judgments, and evaluate the actions and consequences learned in the lesson. Again, students talk over their responses with a partner or in their small group.

Ending a Unit
World History Timeline
At the end of each unit, students identify the major events within it, and create a segment to be added to a world history timeline that grows as the year progresses. This serves as a constant review for students and is a graphic representation of the chronology of these studies.

Forms of Review
The end of unit review is based on the same objectives used to guide students throughout the unit. For some of the units, students
A pine scent wafts through the air, creating a positive mood and suggesting the natural environment of the Ice Age. As the students enter the classroom, they hear music from the long-preserved culture of Australian aborigines, which evokes ancient times.

The students sit in groups of four and build an answer in their minds to the questions: What do you think the natural environment was like in the Ice Age, about 30,000 B.C.? What do you think the people then were like?

Twenty-two unit objectives are introduced. For example, students are to find answers to the questions: What two things was the economy of these people based on? What kind of social group did these prehistoric people live in? Why that size of group?

Students begin to act the roles of the people. They learn about the climate (“Shiver! Make your teeth chatter!”) and plant life. Some students portray animals of the time—ibexes, mammoths, and saber-toothed tigers. (Teachers may need to point out that dinosaurs lived so long before the Ice Age that no human being ever saw a living dinosaur.)

Questions about how Ice Age people made a living are used to introduce the concepts of an economy and technology. Three stations in the classroom have prehistoric tools: an ax and stone spear; a simple basket made of twigs; and a stone grinding set. Students decide what the tools are made of and what purpose they served, and then act out hunting and gathering roles.

The study of social groups starts with the family, as students build an understanding of the roles that had to be performed by different family members to guarantee survival. They examine different gender roles and the way children were brought up. Students come to realize that each family on its own was unable to ensure its survival. Families had to combine with others into bands, which needed a ruler (a “government”) to make decisions affecting the welfare of all.

The students also consider the kind of religion that people practiced in prehistoric days, and the answers that prehistoric people may have believed they had to the great questions of life. As groups visit stations with examples of prehistoric art, they are able to see what features of life Ice Age peoples thought were worth recording and to consider why.

At the start of the unit, students write down their preliminary ideas about prehistoric people. Later, they are required to write an essay on the subject that shows an understanding of eleven concepts: climate, plants, animals, technology, social groups, government, education, gender roles, religion, and art.

To show students how to do it, Michael Welch writes a model essay incorporating his thoughts about his seventh-grade class, using each of these concepts.

Other assignments include the performance of scenes from a novel about prehistoric people, and a choice between creating a song about the prehistoric way of life and making a mini-museum of Prehistoric People.