

# Curriculum Drama: Using Imagination and Inquiry in a Middle School Social Studies Classroom

catherine franklin

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**CURRICULUM DRAMA:  
USING IMAGINATION AND INQUIRY IN A  
MIDDLE SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM**

catherine franklin

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**Mike:** All that matters is getting this person elected. We want a Democrat to be elected.

**Tom:** Unless all the Republicans vote for their people and then ...

**Mary:** How many more Republicans are there?

This was their first Democratic caucus. With an official press badge in hand, I quickly made my way passed their cluster of chairs and glanced at the preoccupied faces. Twelve Democrats were seated in a loose circle. Most were leaning forward toward the center of the group, listening closely to their colleagues.

**Mike:** They have thirteen; we have twelve. Obviously we are all going to vote Democratic.

*(Everyone nods in assent.)*

**Jesse:** There must be one person that we could sway to vote Democratic.

These “Democrats” were eighth graders in a private elementary school (N-8) in New York City. I was their classroom teacher and taught a core curriculum of social studies and literature. We were engaged in an eight-week study of the legislative branch of government. Created by a colleague at the school, this curriculum was designed as a vehicle for students to experience first-hand the political processes of the U.S. Senate. As the classroom teacher, I adopted this approach for my own class. It made sense to do so. It seemed a more dynamic and accessible way of learning and teaching than simply following the pages in a textbook. Over the course of four years, I began to describe this approach as a “curriculum drama.”

Curriculum drama formed a bridge that linked the task of teaching and learning about a defined unit of study to the authentic interests, concerns, and energies of the students. In the classroom, students worked as Senators. They interacted with each other as a political group and grappled with defining their own political agendas. They participated in legislative hearings, and discussed the cost and benefits of legislative ideas. They engaged in debates and took legislative action.

This essay provides a window into an eighth-grade class engaged in a legislative curriculum drama. As a teacher-researcher, I documented and studied this experience with the consent of the students and their families. Names have been changed to protect student privacy. The majority of the class came from European-American backgrounds. Three students were from multiracial families. They identified themselves as being, respectively, Chinese-American, Latin American, and Dutch-Caribbean American. Most were from upper-middle-class, dual-income families. A quarter received limited financial assistance.

### **LAYING THE GROUNDWORK**

The classroom Senate was not formed overnight. The process was gradual and planned. To prepare for the curriculum drama that was to take place in the spring semester, the students and I laid the groundwork during the fall. Classroom meetings, for example, framed the school day. They occurred within the scheduled homeroom period, and they lasted approximately fifteen to twenty minutes each. Every week a new student led the meetings that opened and closed the day, and called on classmates to carry out their respective responsibilities, e.g., taking attendance in the morning, reviewing homework assignments in the afternoon.

I supported the weekly leader in her/his efforts to manage the meeting. Some weeks I was mostly an observer; other times I was more active. When a leader had difficulty getting peer attention and group collaboration, I used my position as the classroom teacher to ensure order. By spring, the class had had extensive experience with various leadership styles and collaborations.

Discussions about current events were an important component of the classroom meeting. Each week two students were assigned the daily task of providing news summaries. I brought in *The New York Times* to help with this task. Within the public forum of the classroom, students spent time talking about the world around them. They shared their own understanding and posed their own questions (Kuhn, 1986). They had a lot to say, and this often led to debates about national and international events. When it came time for the classroom Senate, students were at ease with discussing current issues in the news, and they were prepared to develop ideas for legislation.

## **SETTING THE STAGE**

In the first two weeks of the classroom Senate, we studied the U.S. Congress and engaged in tasks that helped orient us to the legislative branch of government. Along with reading Article One of the U.S. Constitution (legislative branch) as a blueprint for designing our classroom Senate and reading selected sections from a civics textbook as background material, the students pursued a number of different research activities, including:

- Negotiating with one another to represent and research a state (e.g., geography, people, issues).
- Researching the U.S. Senators (e.g., careers, voting patterns) from the state they were assigned to represent as a frame of reference for their own behavior as Senator.
- Investigating the current ratio of Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. Senate, and determining a similar ratio for the classroom Senate.
- Comparing the way issues were defined in published literature from both political parties.

Along with encyclopedias and state atlases, resources such as the Journal of American Politics and [www.Senate.gov](http://www.Senate.gov), were particularly helpful for these research tasks.

Finally, I divided the class into two working groups. Using the political affiliation of the students' U.S. Senators as a guide, I assigned thirteen students to be Republicans, and twelve to be Democrats. This reflected the same ratio of Republicans to Democrats that were in the U.S. Senate at the time. I also considered such factors as gender balance and group dynamics in creating these parties.

Students did not necessarily adopt the existing platform of their party, nor did they take on the identity of one of their U.S. Senators. Instead, they used their research about political parties and individual voting records as a frame of reference to construct their own political agendas and identities.

## **BUILDING BELIEF: COLLECTIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING**

Once students understood some background about the legislative process and understood their own political affiliations, we began the task of building belief in their work as Senators. Both individually and collectively, the students were supposed to take themselves, their peers, and their political situations seriously.

In the dialogue that opens this essay, the Democrats are discussing their strategy for winning the President Pro Tempore election. Unlike the U.S. Senate, where this position is typically given to the longest-seated member of the majority party, the classroom Senate planned to elect their own leader in a secret-ballot election. The dialogue from their initial strategy meeting continues:

**Mike:** They have thirteen, we have twelve. Obviously we are all going to vote Democratic.

*(Everyone nods in assent.)*

**Jesse:** There must be one person that we could sway to vote Democratic.

**Sue:** I think that Emma (a member of the opposing party) would vote Democratic, and for certain reasons Vivian (another member of the opposing party) could also vote Democratic.

**Bill:** I think that even though they (the Republicans) have more people, they all really have Democratic views. So we should make them remember that.

Early on, the Democrats were preoccupied with their minority position within the classroom Senate. They recognized this political disadvantage and began to discuss ways of changing the situation. Using the power of imagination, they went beyond their current status as a minority party and began to envision other possibilities. They engaged in a focused inquiry to determine the parameters of their political power. Through discussion and shared information about members of the opposing party, the Democrats began to scheme. In doing so, they recognized the sometimes-tentative nature of political labels and memberships. They planned to exploit the contradiction with those Senators who were in the Republican Party, but who actually held Democratic views. Located in a neighborhood with a rich tradition of liberal views and politics, most families at this school were active Democrats. The students recognized this and began to use it to their advantage. They envisioned the possibility of obtaining crossover votes from the other party.

### **AN UNEXPECTED CONFLICT: THE ROLE OF TEACHER-RESEARCHER**

As teacher-researcher, I was behind the video camera recording this proceeding. To the student-Senators, I was taping their session in my position as a member of the press. Suddenly, the conversation shifted.

**Mike:** We are making it clear right, that we are voting for our leader, Pat.

**Jesse:** *(Looking around at nodding heads in affirmation.)*

Everyone here is voting for Pat.

**Pat:** *(Looking directly at me.)* Can we, like, ask you to leave?  
Would that be too offensive?

Pat was the party's candidate for the President Pro Tempore, a major leadership position within the Senate. As the elected voice of her party, she recognized the contradiction of having a strategic planning session among her colleagues, and at the same time having a reporter videotape the proceedings. It was also a testament to the power of imagination that Pat felt comfortable enough with her leadership status to be able to ask me, her classroom teacher, to leave the room.

Conversation stopped and I was stunned. In the three years that I had co-constructed the classroom Senate with my students, no one had ever asked me to leave. While they waited for my response, I asked myself a thousand questions. "Doesn't it make sense that Senators would want to meet in a closed-door session to discuss politically sensitive issues? What about my own responsibility as their teacher, would I be setting a precedent for allowing future closed-door sessions? How will I be able to monitor their work in these situations? What about my needs as teacher-researcher; will I lose valuable data by leaving?"

In the end, I ("CF") used my adult authority to assure them of my neutrality as a member of the press.

**CF:** Don't worry. I'm completely neutral. Believe me. I will not spill any confidences. You've got to trust me on this.

*(Someone laughingly called out, "No press! No press!")*

**CF:** I will not spill any confidences.

**Mike:** Can we ask you any questions?

*(Students were aware that I had just come from the Republican caucus.)*

**CF:** *(Laughing along with students.)* No, I will not divulge.

The stress of the situation increased the formality in my speech and brought out a tone of absolute conviction in my voice. No one disputed me. No one insisted that I leave. Mike, the elected party leader, then took control of the discussion. The Democrats resumed their discussion about political strategy. I was no longer the focus of their attention.

This was one of those events that highlighted the complexity and dilemma of being both a teacher and a researcher. In this instance, I had not been clear about my own role within the Senate. If I had actually been a journalist, I would have quickly left the room. This would have validated the authority

and power of the Senators. Nor, for that matter, was I present in the role of teacher. For as the teacher, I would have been impressed with their group management skills and their focused attention to their task. By leaving, I would have supported both the substance and the direction of their work.

At that moment, however, I was preoccupied with the role of teacher-researcher. I was concerned about the data I would lose if I left. Up to that point, I had thought that as a teacher-researcher I would support the students' experiences as Senators and "work to stay out of the limelight" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 42). I realized I had done just the opposite. My response did not support their position as Senators; in fact my reaction to them came close to obstructing their work. Furthermore, rather than being "backstage" as a researcher and documenting the experience of the Senate, I was now in the uncomfortable position of being in the spotlight. I was now the one scrutinized.

This was a defining moment for me. I could not simply observe from a detached and neutral vantage point. The nature of curriculum drama demands full engagement and interaction. Furthermore, data collection has to occur in such a way that it deepens the believability of the curriculum drama, not distract from it. My approach shifted as a result of this experience. I took a more careful look at the emerging events within the classroom Senate and allowed them to guide a more responsive approach to data collection.

That evening, for a homework assignment, students reflected upon their experience during their party's first meeting. One student from the group remarked on the need for privacy in political decision making. Mary wrote, "If we want to meet alone, I think the press should respect that." While I did not receive similar feedback from the other Democrats, I paid attention to this comment. It was a clear reminder that, as teacher-researcher, I needed to do my part in helping to build belief in this legislative community.

### **DEEPENING THE DRAMA: MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS**

On the day of the secret ballot election, one Republican was absent. This meant that there were an equal number of Republicans and Democrats. Despite the Democrats' call for loyalty and unity within its ranks, one Democrat voted for the Republican candidate. The classroom Senate now had elected a Republican leader.

When the results were made public, the class erupted into chaos. Students sprang from their seats and began to talk with one another. In a short

while, it seemed as though the room had taken on a more social tone than a political one. Students no longer seemed to be thinking or talking as Senators.

Wanting them to actively reflect upon this Senate experience, I decided to hold a roving press conference. With one of my students, Lee, as a cameraperson, I conducted on-the-spot interviews with Senators.

This appeared to be a good role for Lee. In the classroom setting, he was typically marginalized; he had difficulty reading social cues and was often teased by his peers. At the same time, he was skilled with all things mechanical. He willingly accepted the role as cameraperson. With video camera in hand, he achieved a different status within the room. When Senators waited to be interviewed, they listened to him and followed his advice.

**Lee:** *(Talking to two Senators.)* Could you two stand closer together? I want you both to be in the picture.

**Sen. Cape:** *(Standing closer to his colleague)* How is this?

**Lee:** Great.

With press pass hanging from a string around my neck, I introduced myself as a reporter from a local news channel and interviewed Jim, as Republican Senator Cape, and Mike, as Democrat Senator Blitz.

**CF:** Senator Cape, how are you feeling about the Republican Party?

**Sen. Cape:** Well, I think that it is going to be a great new day for the Senate. *(Looking directly at the camera.)* With Alex Koch in office, I think he is really going to do a lot for people in the Senate....

At this point, Mike as Senator Blitz, the leader of the Democrats, interrupted.

**Sen. Blitz:** I disagree with what Senator Cape said. I think he is against our party overall. I don't think he believes everything he said. ... Plus, I'm very disappointed with that one person in our party who crossed over to the Republican side. I thought we'd stick together, but...

**CF:** Any idea, who that person is?

**Sen. Blitz:** Yes. We do know who that person is. But that person will remain anonymous.

From the statements they made, it was evident that the students were thinking and speaking as Senators who were bound by the positions of their respective parties. Jim, as Republican Senator Cape, used political rhetoric to

express his excitement with the election results (e.g., "...a great new day for the Senate."). Mike, as Democrat Senator Blitz, conveyed disappointment with the election and skepticism about the newly elected Senate leader (e.g., "I don't think he believes everything he said.").

Students were interacting with one another in a new way. While they were friends as classmates, they stood apart from each other as Senators. Senator Blitz voiced his disagreement with Senator Cape to the camera. Neither one spoke directly to the other, even though they stood next to each other; instead they directed their comments to the media. Both referred to classmates in new ways. Jim, as Senator Cape, mentioned both the first and last name of the new leader of the Senate (e.g., Alex Koch); Mike, as Senator Blitz, referred to Jim as "Senator Cape."

Students also were interacting with me in a different way. They were the ones who had the story. I, as a member of the press, was the one who had to learn from them. Moreover, the presence of the media provided a platform for students to show their understandings of the emerging drama and to decide what they wanted to reveal or not reveal (e.g., "We do know who that person is. That person will remain anonymous."). They had control of what "facts" they wanted to make public.

This was drama. The Democrat who voted for the Republican remained a mystery. While Senator Blitz claimed that he knew who had switched, it was still speculation. The election occurred through a secret ballot and we all shared a common sense of "not knowing."

Furthermore, there were multiple entry points into the curriculum drama. While some students had designated leadership roles within the Senate (e.g., party leaders) the generative nature of this drama created opportunities for all members of the class to become involved. Lee, as cameraperson, had heightened status and power. As a journalist, scrambling to understand the emerging story, I also had a different status and power within the room. Constructed roles emerged from the spontaneous demands of the situation and the authentic interests and skills of the students.

In contrast to my experience with the proceedings in the Democratic caucus, I was very successful at this moment. The Senators wanted me there with the video camera. Furthermore, my motivation to hold a roving press conference sprang from my position as a teacher. I was alarmed that after the election results, students seemed to engage in social agendas. I wanted them to sustain further belief in and interaction with the Senate experience. As a

reporter with a camera crew, I was able to re-direct their energies. At the same time, I was able as a teacher-researcher to document student reflections on, and analysis of, their role as Senators.

### **COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY INTO A LEGISLATIVE IDEA**

All the students developed legislation based on the research they conducted on their state and region. Working in party caucuses, they thought further about their ideas. The following is from a Republican session. Emma, the Senator from Arizona, was concerned about the Grand Canyon.

**Emma:** Mine ... pretty much about preserving the Grand Canyon. But it could be used for state parks also. What it is—is a limitation of the number of tourists that can hike in it per day. This is so that the ground won't get ruined. ...

**Leah:** In my state, in Alaska, they have some of the largest national parks in the country and I think that this is a harsh bill.

**Emma:** Why is it harsh?

**Leah:** Well, because you will be taking a lot of money from the park.

Leah, as Senator from Alaska, made connections with her state research and this legislation. She envisioned its economic impact on her state, and this concerned her.

**Abigail:** From professional experience, I've been on trails that were totally eroded, really messed up, there were too many hikers, but I think that the limit should be set by a specialist ... we have to do more research into this ...

**Emma:** (Confused tone.) But I don't see how . . .

**Jorge:** (Interjecting.) Well, because a lot of people make money from tourism ...

**Emma:** Right, well, I understand that, but if people don't spend time cleaning up the parks, the parks will get ruined and there would be no money left in tourism.

**Jorge:** I don't know. I really don't know.

Students were engaged in the business of constructing legislation. Multiple viewpoints were shared. Leah made connections with her state research on Alaska and voiced objections to the idea. Abigail spoke from “professional experience” about making trails and proposed that further research

needed to be done. Jorge recognized the impact that this would have on the tourist industry and voiced uncertainty about the overall legislative idea.

The discussion continued, and eventually Jorge, as majority leader, called for a vote. This was a way to provide the legislature with a sense of how the party aligned itself with the bill. Seven people supported the idea, and four were against it. Taking a leadership role, one of the students posed the following question to those who were opposed to this legislation:

**Amanda:** Do you have any ideas on ways to improve this legislation?

**Leah:** I don't see it as being a big issue really...because we have so many problems. I mean I understand our national parks are important and all, but how much of an issue is it? How bad are they, really?

This discussion included many opposing viewpoints. Disagreement did not destabilize the line of inquiry. It provided a way to clarify areas of confusion and disagreement.

When her bill was assigned to the Public Works Committee, Emma worked further on her legislation. In a letter to her constituents, she wrote:

Dear Fellow Citizens of Arizona,

I am currently in the process of writing a bill. It was inspired by our own Grand Canyon, and if passed would greatly benefit it.

The bill was originally based solely on the preservation of the Grand Canyon. After much consideration with my fellow Senators, I chose to combine it with another bill. The bill will have three parts to it ....

Eventually the Senate decided to focus on one bill that was prioritized within the Rules and Administration Committee. This bill was called "Crime Stopper" and its purpose was "to cut back on crime across the United States...by hiring more police officers, and to provide more money for improved police training."

## **STUDENTS AS WITNESSES: BREAKDOWN OF BELIEF**

Through the course of a week, the five members of the Rules and Administration Committee took turns being witnesses and providing testimony to the Senate about the crime legislation. Their testimony conveyed a variety of perspectives on the bill. Some of the roles they assumed were those of a retired senior citizen, a crime victim, and a medical doctor. Each witness developed

his/her own role and prepared a written statement for the Senate hearing. After the witness read his/her prepared statement, the committee then posed questions. When the committee members were finished with their questions, the other Senators were invited to ask questions of the witness.

To create an environment that would support this event, the classroom was rearranged to resemble a hearing room. The committee sat in front of the room. The witness sat behind a table facing the committee. On the table was a pitcher of water and a drinking glass. On one side of the room sat the Republicans, on the other side sat the Democrats.

The Crime Stopper Bill included a provision to reduce federal spending of the Health and Human Services Agency so as to pay for increased police protection around the country. The committee constructed this provision after analyzing a chart they located in the World Almanac, which summarized federal spending by agency. They were astounded that of all the federal agencies, Health and Human Services had the highest reported amount of spending—one trillion dollars.

Alex, as Dr. Van Schick, played a medical doctor opposed to this legislation. However, before he gave his testimony, Dr. Van Schick's credibility became suspect. Copies of his written statement had been distributed to the members of the Senate. People quickly point out grammar and spelling errors within the text.

Bill, one of the committee members, chaired this session. As Senator Belt, he greeted Dr. Van Schick at the classroom door and led him to his seat in the center of the room.

**Senator Belt:** Welcome doctor. (They shake hands.) Doctor, would you care to read your testimony?

**Dr. Schick:** First, I would like to apologize for my grammar. (Smiling and looking around the room.) I wrote this when rushed, as I had to do a heart transplant. (Senators chuckle in response; the doctor begins to read aloud his opening statement.) Hello, my name is Dr. Van Schick. I have dealt with many old people who do not have enough health care coverage....

When he finished reading, the Senators began to ask Dr. Van Schick questions:

- Sen.. Belt:** Dr. Schick, when you do your average surgery, what does that usually cost the patient?
- Dr. Schick:** It depends on the type of surgery.
- Sen. Belt:** The average?
- Dr. Schick:** Well, there is no average surgery.
- Sen. Belt:** *(Smiling.)* Every surgery you did and add them together and then divide them by the number of surgeries that you did, approximately what would that come out to?
- Dr. Schick:** *(Looking around the room and laughing.)* I couldn't answer that.
- (Scattered laughter in the room.)*
- Sen. Belt:** Approximately?
- Dr. Schick:** \$8,000.

Dr. Schick turns away from Senator Belt, covers his eyes and begins to laugh uncontrollably. The Senator soon bursts out laughing and the entire class joins.

The experience had become a joke. In a debriefing session afterward, students explained their difficulty with engaging in this experience. Amanda summed up the class's reaction by stating, "Alex is not a doctor. It is not like he has all these facts that he knows. He can't be making guesses. You can't expect him to become a doctor for the day and know all this stuff."

Even if Alex were able to imagine himself as a doctor, he was still unprepared for the questions that the Senate had asked. He was unable to tap into either his life experiences or knowledge base for plausible answers. He was stuck. In this instance, the building of belief broke down. In the debriefing session, Sue questioned the idea of having students as witnesses: "Even if he did ask two or three doctors, you can't just think that he knows. I mean, we are trying to get more information out of him that he knows."

While the other witnesses had more success in bringing credibility to their role, the Senate had serious reservations about Crime Stopper legislation. The majority of the Senators were opposed to the idea of cutting the federal budget of the Health and Human Services agency to pay for an increased police force in states with high crime rates. After hearing the concerns expressed in the Senate, the committee decided that the bill was not ready to be voted upon by the Senate. Rather than risk defeat, they dropped the bill. Alex justified the committee's decision: "The reason that we dropped the bill is

because we really didn't think that anybody would vote for it. I don't think that we could have made enough changes."

### **STUDENTS AS WITNESSES: BUILDING BELIEF**

The second legislation that the Senate examined was the Clean Air Act. Due in part to the experience of the previous legislation, where there seemed to be limited understanding about the intricacies of the bill, I decided that we needed to spend time as a class conducting research on clean air legislation. I wanted the group to build a collective knowledge base about this issue.

Students worked in teams, doing searches on the internet, exploring reference sources in the library, or closely reading an article that analyzed the benefits and costs of environmental policies. After spending two periods on this research, the class came together and students presented their findings.

One student pair discovered a news article about a West Virginia coal mine that closed down because of clean air regulations. They asked the Environmental Affairs Committee if they could be witnesses who provided testimony critical of this legislation. The committee agreed. The committee was confident that while the testimony from these coal miners would be negative, it would, in the long run, be neutralized by subsequent witnesses, who would testify in favor of the legislation.

Mike, as John McGrag, and Amanda, as Will Cart, loaded their opening statements to the committee with details from the news article they had researched. The following is an excerpt from Will Cart: "Last December we were shut down by the Peabody Holding Company, the largest coal company in the country. Why did this happen? The 1990 Clean Air Act. One of the provisions said those coal mines...had to get 'scrubbers' in their smokestacks to reduce the pollution. These scrubbers cost \$100 million or more. We couldn't afford a scrubber, so every person in the mine lost their job."

Chris, as Senator King, and as chairperson of the Environmental Affairs Committee, presided over the hearing.

**Sen. King:** Senator Wright.

**Sen. Wright:** First of all, I would like to remind you that our bill was not passed in 1990, and it is not the Clean Air Act that you are referring to, so that stuff is not relevant.

**Mr. McGrag:** It is similar to the Clean Air Act, but in your bill I believe it says that you have to have filters and these

filters are relevant. They do cost \$100 million dollars and up. And the point is they are not going to be able to afford it, or if they can afford it, somehow they are going to make no profit at all, unless they are very big companies.

**Sen. Wright:** But it is tax-deductible.

**Mr. McGrag:** But that doesn't matter. It is \$100 million dollars and up!

**Mr. Cart:** It is a lot of money.

Long after they gave their testimony, the positions of the coal miners continued to dominate the Clean Air Hearing. In subsequent sessions with other witnesses, the Senate continued to bring up the cost of air filters. This became an issue that would not go away.

With the exception of the two students who gave testimony as coal miners, the rest of the witnesses were adults. I made the decision to have adults as witnesses based in part on student feedback from the hearing on the Crime Stopper bill. A number of students felt that the witnesses in that hearing did not have the necessary background to provide expert testimony. With the support of the Senate, I asked faculty from the math and science department to become witnesses with a defined position on the Clean Air Act. The students and I felt that these teachers would bring informed perspectives about the bill. Each witness had read the Clean Air Act and wrote a one-page witness statement. Students read these statements and prepared questions.

One witness, Mr. Leaf, was a worker from a chemical processing plant. Mr. Leaf testified in favor of the Clean Air Act. Mr. Leaf was Bob, their math and science teacher.

**Sen. Cape:** Filters are quite expensive; they cost \$100 million. Aren't you worried that you will lose your job?

**Mr. Leaf:** Sure, I'm worried about losing my job, but I think I'm more worried about the effect that pollution has on the environment.

**Sen. Blitz:** ... A lot of these people like the Clean Air idea, but they will be losing their jobs.

**Mr. Leaf:** Well, I think it is the government's responsibility to help smaller companies stay in business.

**Sen. Blitz:** To help these companies costs a lot of money. It is many millions of dollars ... the government is going to have to pay a lot of money.

Another witness who came to testify was Mr. Wilk, an environmental scientist.

Mr. Wilk was actually Brett, their environmental science teacher in the sixth grade. The following dialogue took place after Mr. Wilk delivered his witness statement:

**Sen. Mix:** What do you think is an appropriate cost of a filter?

**Mr. Wilk:** Well, since we live in a free market society, it is what the market will bear.

**Sen. Mix:** Well, right now they are selling for \$100 million dollars....Not many factories can purchase these, because the price is so high.

Despite the testimony of the bill's supporters, the testimony of the coal miners continued to prevail. The day before the expected floor debate and vote, the committee met and raised the possibility of revising the legislation. Members of the Environmental Affairs Committee were willing to address and change the smokestack provision of the bill. Unfortunately, the day of the vote, the bill had not been revised to reflect this decision.

The hearings about the Crime Stopper Bill and the Clean Air Act provided an interesting point of comparison. In the Crime Stopper hearing, Dr. Van Schick had a familiar profession, medical doctor. Nonetheless, Alex had great difficulty in bringing this role to life. He could not develop the character into a believable person. When Senators questioned him, he did not have the resources to respond. He could not bring depth to his character. As a result, Dr. Van Schick lacked credibility.

In contrast, two students constructed compelling testimonies during the Clean Air Act hearing, despite the fact that neither one had ever met a coal miner. Furthermore, when questioned by the Senators, the coal miners began to expand upon their identities. At one point, Mike, as John McGrag, mentioned that because his coal mine had closed down, his children no longer had enough to eat. He became not only a coal miner, but also a father trying to feed his family. Amanda, as Will Cart, testified that the surrounding communities were also economically depressed. Both these witnesses imbedded their identity within a larger frame of reference.

Mike and Amanda grounded their testimony in facts gathered from an article about a West Virginian coal mine. This background research guided them in constructing identities as coal miners. When they wrote their testimonies, their identities as coal miners were rooted in an authentic frame of

reference. Their imaginations were powered by their own understanding of the facts reported in the news article. In both their statements before the Senate and their responses to the Senators' questions, Mike and Amanda successfully portrayed the life experiences of two coal miners and the position of a group of people who were against the Clean Air Act.

### **DEEPENING THE DRAMA: TAKING ACTION**

In the final session of the Senate, I was aware that some Senators might want to engage in a filibuster. Therefore, I described to the group how they might use cloture, a procedure to limit debate. In this way, they would have time to bring the Clean Air Act to a vote. On the chalkboard, I noted that two-thirds of the Senate needed to agree to limit debate. As the class had twenty-five Senators, I wrote "sixteen." The correct number was actually seventeen. At the time, no one questioned the math.

As expected, the floor debate was fiery. Alex as Senator Koch called on people to speak.

**Sen. Provia:** Something has to be done before the situation gets worse. It is our responsibility to take care of the environment we live in. If we want to save this earth for our children, then we have to take action ... I yield the floor.

**Sen. Kalin:** ... I think that having a cleaner environment will help to keep our planet preserved for future lives ... I think we should be more concerned about ... the future than about saving jobs. I yield the floor.

**Sen. Cape:** I am against the bill ... the filters for the factory smokestacks are way too expensive. This would force many businesses to close and would send the economy into a tailspin. I yield the floor.

**Sen. East:** ... I am against this bill ... we have a national debt and then to pay all the money to companies (who can't afford to buy the air filter) is really not realistic.

Then Alex recognized a Senator who made the motion for a vote. It was immediately seconded. Now the Senate had to decide whether to continue with the debate or vote for cloture. The Senators voted by a public show of hands. Sixteen were in favor of limiting debate. A Senator, opposed to the legislation and not wanting the Senate to come to a vote, quickly did the math and loudly protested.

Amanda explained that officially the Senate did not have the votes for cloture; they were one vote shy. She got out of her seat and did the math on the board. As the classroom teacher, I recommended that the Senate recognize cloture anyway. I wanted the students to experience a student vote; they did not have this opportunity on the earlier Crime Stopper legislation.

In response to this recommendation, someone cried out, "Let's walk out. That way we won't vote on it." One by one Senators began to leave. Some stood and waited for a friend to accompany them outside to the hallway.

Senators left for a variety of reasons. Jim went beyond his own personal belief and took a position that he did not necessarily support. He described his state of mind: "My personal opinion would have been to vote for the bill ... I don't want to grow up and live in a world that has been destroyed by pollution. The main reason that I was opposed to it was that I was trying to act the way I thought the people of Colorado would want me to act. My state ... has a big mining population. If they went out of business that would seriously compromise the economic well being of my state. I feel that I represented the people of my state when I fought to keep the bill from passing."

There were others who appeared confused as they left. Emma described how she changed her mind during the course of the debate. She said, "During the final moments of the Senate, I walked out. Many people did not understand this, being that I was in favor of the bill. I walked out for two reasons. The first is because the whole meeting was out of control. The second is because I was in favor of the bill, as I had been convinced by a lobbyist. If someone is convinced in this way, they can't really feel that strongly."

Others left for strategic reasons. Leah explained her motives: "I would have voted against it (the Clean Air Act) and it still might have passed. So I felt that if I left, more people might also want to leave, and that would stop the vote."

There were some who stayed and worked to pass the bill. Jorge, the majority leader, formally announced the name of each Senator and recorded his/her vote on the Clean Air Act. Midway through the proceedings, one Senator, Senator Belt, decided to leave. He realized that he was the only one who opposed the bill and he wanted to join his colleagues in the hallway. The Senate now numbered thirteen, just enough for a quorum. There were a few other names that needed to be called and then the voting would be complete. The Clean Air Act would soon be passed.

At that moment, the door opened. One of the Senators who had walked out previously, glanced around at those who were still there. She called upon

one classmate, Vicky, and urged her to leave the Senate. Vicky hesitated. All eyes were upon her; Vicky was a relatively new student at the school—this was her second year. She did not typically attract attention among her peers during the school day. At this instant, however, the focus was centered exclusively upon her. Despite the vocal protests from her colleagues who wanted her to stay and vote for the bill, she stood up, grinned, and left the Senate!

The Senate no longer had a quorum. Voting was suspended. Once they realized this, the protest group from the hallway streamed back into the classroom. They looked pleased by their protest action. Some seemed euphoric; others seemed more subdued. All were eager to return to the room.

The twelve students who had stayed behind to vote for the Clean Air Act expressed disappointment and frustration with the process. They had come so close to passing the bill. The following two responses reflect the group's sentiment:

**Tom:** I think that it was pointless for people to walk out....I don't know why, but at the end of the hearing many people changed their mind and were against the bill. At the beginning of the hearing, we had more than two-thirds of the Senators for the bill. But everyone changed their mind.

**Brian:** I think that the whole walkout thing was ridiculous. I don't think it should have been allowed. Some of the people who went out did so just because their friends did. I am sure of that because people were out who were for the bill.

This was the first time students engaged in a protest action of this kind. Students do not typically walk out of the classroom! Nor, for that matter, do students typically choose to remain in the room when the rest of the class is outside in the hallway. In this situation, however, students behaved differently. They had the freedom and a sense of conviction about their actions. They had become Senators. Abigail said, "I felt most like it was a real situation during the harrowing floor debate. I was trying desperately to get a vote happening ... People were really sticking up for their beliefs and battling it out."

### **CURRICULUM DRAMA: BEING AT THE CENTER OF LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITY**

Curriculum drama had become an authentic bridge to learning and teaching. The participants had de-centered themselves from their day-to-day

roles as students. Interacting in an entirely new context, they transformed themselves into Senators who spoke the language of the Senate, developed “political relationships” within the Senate, formed positions on issues, and made decisions about legislative activity. Knowing became rooted in activity and reflection (Cobb & Bowers, 1999; Criticos, 1993). Through a variety of experiences and situations, students applied their frame of reference as Senators to make decisions and take political action. Furthermore, they willingly assumed the calculated risk of living through the consequences of their actions as Senators.

In some respects, curriculum drama shares common characteristics with simulation games used in many classrooms. The active learner is emphasized and the participant has a purposeful orientation towards specific action. There is a shared belief in the student’s need and ability to exert some control over his/her environment. Moreover, these experiences provide opportunities to participate for many kinds of children, irrespective of their academic and/or social abilities (Adams, 1973; Becker, 1980; Boocock, 1994; Clegg, 1991; Coleman, 1989; Dukes, 1994; Jones, 1987).

Despite these similarities, other characteristics distinguish curriculum drama from simulation games. Unlike simulation games, which are often directed, powered and shaped by the adult in charge, curriculum drama is constructed by the active engagement of students. Students were not provided scripted roles and positions by the teacher. This was not a pre-designed, packaged program. Instead students had to construct their own frame of reference and point of view. They researched their assigned U.S. Senators, and analyzed their public voting records. This process helped them to develop ownership of their constructed roles as Senators. Lastly, while simulation games have imposed conflicts within a scripted situation, curriculum drama is more generative. Students as Senators explored their own positions and acted upon them. For instance, in the election of the Senate, no one anticipated that a Democrat would vote for a Republican. In the final debate of the Clean Air Act, no one predicted a protest action.

Students engaged in authentic inquiries about constructed legislation. Within the multiple contexts of hearings and debates, and the many discussions that took place in party caucuses, committee meetings, and full Senate sessions, student-Senators became part of a community of legislative practice. They brought forth their own ideas and their authentic concerns about the world around them.

As teacher-researcher, I worked at developing my own role within the classroom Senate. Unlike the teacher-directed techniques developed in educational dramas (Bolton, 1979; Heathcote, 1984; Wagner, 1976; Wagner, 1985) and explored by Towler-Evans (1997), I limited my own direct influence on the curriculum drama. For the most part, I believed that the issues emerging from student interactions were sufficiently relevant and rigorous to define a successful study of the legislative process.

I worked at constructing a role within the classroom Senate that was aligned to the situation and which provided entry into student conversations. There were times, however, when I inadvertently moved from the sidelines to the center of the drama. This occurred when there was conflict between my needs as a teacher-researcher and the needs of students as Senators, e.g., student reaction to my videotaping of the initial Democratic Party caucus. At other times, my role and my words triggered a strong reaction. This was evident in the final session, when some students walked out in protest over my suggestion that cloture be instituted. Emboldened by their positions as Senators, students knew they had the freedom and authority to decide about cloture. They were not going to accept my suggestion passively. This event crystallized the transformation of the student-teacher relationship within the curriculum drama. Students were reacting as Senators deeply involved in the legislative process. Whether they remained in the room to vote, or left in protest, it was evident that students were “getting it.” On their own accord, they took legislative action and were deliberate about the consequences of their collective decisions.

Through the use of curriculum drama, the students and I constructed a new way of being with one another, of interacting in an authentic way within the curriculum. Students went beyond studying *about* the legislative branch of government to learning *within* the legislative experience itself. Curriculum drama became curriculum in action. Through this transformative process, students moved from the margins, looking at the legislative process from a studied, detached distance, to being in the center of legislative activity and practice.

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