

PROMISING PRACTICE

Using Tableau Theater in the Integrated Reading and Writing Classroom

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Tableau Theatre is an instructional method that fulfills two of the most timely needs in developmental education today: enhancing student motivation and providing engaging learning activities (Saxon et al., 2015). As a form of highly contextualized learning, the use of total body engagement, or, what Asher (1969) referred to as *total body response* (TPR) stimulates brain activity, a prerequisite for learning (Hinton et al., 2012; Rinne et al., 2011; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012), and allows space for a uniquely student-constructed response to the text as opposed to a traditional lecture-style class.

In our tableau study, students' written responses to the activity revealed that their physical involvement with the texts greatly impacted their intellectual and personal engagement evidenced by written responses. Students wrote from a position of having a personal stake in the text and used strong, persuasive language in their responses. Students also creatively reworked plots to give agency to their own characters and demonstrated increased empathy as they identified with several characters in one piece rather than taking one specific side. Several students were particularly engaged and were moved to recreate entire story endings. One did so not only by creating a novel ending, but also employed Biblical allegory in the process.

What is Tableau Theatre?

Tableau is an instructional technique in which students physically recreate *frozen statues* of a literary event from their reading. Also referred to as *freeze-frame*, the idea is to engage the student physically in the activity and to allow time and space in the curriculum for a deeper physical and mental experience of the text. In the moment of *freeze* (approximately 10 seconds), time is essentially suspended. During this time, a space is created between the in-take portion of the assignment (reading) and the output portion of the assignment (response/writing). This allows students time to experience and internalize the literary moment and to begin constructing responses based upon their personalized interpretations of the moment.

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Introducing Tableau to the Class

As an instructional method that students may not be familiar with, and one which requires students to get out of their comfort zones and out from behind their desks, we recommend that several scaffolded instructional phases be used to introduce the concept progressively. We introduced this classroom activity about three to four weeks into the semester, after some classroom cohesion had occurred and we had become acquainted with the students and their work.

First, we verbally led the students through the tableau steps (detailed below) and informed them that participation was entirely voluntary. This was in accordance with our IRB consent agreement and affirms our belief as researchers that participation in research should be voluntary. This also underscored our belief as instructors that a student putting up resistance to the activity might negatively influence the free participation of others. Students were informed that if they did not wish to participate for any reason, they would be given an alternative assignment and they would not be penalized in any manner.

Next in the process of beginning the actual tableau activity, we facilitated an example that would be readily accessible and familiar to a wide audience: a job interview. We were also aware that a majority of the students in the class had actually discussed their job experiences, so we felt this was an apt example for this class in particular.

The Job Interview

We arranged a portion of the classroom to simulate the setting of a job interview. We randomly picked students to fulfill certain roles by drawing numbers, and had them occupy different spaces in the setting: the *Interviewee* sat across from a group of three *Interviewers*; the interviewers consisted of two *Little Bosses* and one *Big Boss* who stood over the shoulders of the other three. Additionally, other *Candidates* sat in a group simulating a waiting area, which was presided over by a *Secretary*. As we progressed through the activity, students switched out roles and spaces so they gained different perspectives.

The students were not required to do anything other than assume and consider the positions randomly assigned to them. At each freeze-frame, students were reminded to reflect on their position. Depending on the situation, we

prompted other reflection cues as well. To create moments of action, we introduced narrative elements to which they responded such as; “you are in the middle of your interview when your cell phone rings and the ring tone is ‘take this job and shove it.’” As students heard the prompt, the instructor gave the instruction to FREEZE in mid reaction. The instructor then internally counted to ten (time passes very slowly in a frozen state, so this part is crucial!), and then gave the instruction UNFREEZE (or relax).

We asked students to talk about how they felt in their various positions and the scenarios we had created. We tried to keep this very lighthearted so they would feel good about the activity as we moved forward. The students were fully engaged in this activity, and the classroom atmosphere was positive and productive. The activity also helped the students relax around each other; however, we did not measure those affective aspects.

Tableau with Literature

After completing the interview tableau, including post-class reflective writing, we moved on to facilitating a tableau using scenes from texts the students read for class. We began with a short story completed as a self-contained tableau exercise, and then proceeded to a full-length novel with tableau exercises inserted intermittently. Our short story selection was “The Lottery,” written by Shirley Jackson in the 1940s and based upon a semi-dystopian society in which a yearly lottery is drawn, and the winner, in an unexpected twist, is stoned to death. Our full-length novel was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee. Both

of these texts were well-suited for tableau as they included several scenes with engaging group dynamics as well as insight into individuals’ perspectives within the groups.

When selecting scenes in which to create tableau, consider tensions, power plays, and any scene in which different characters in the scene would have differing perspectives. The idea is to help students put themselves in the shoes of someone else and consider multiple perspectives, not merely to have them get up and move around. Prompts for written responses might include references to feelings or motivations of those in the scene, asking students to consider how they would have reacted in that situation, or think about reasons the character in the scene reacted in a certain way. An example response to the

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prompt *Imagine yourself in the story was*

Bill Hutchinson is the husband of Tessie Hutchinson and as I read “The Lottery” I kept thinking how this is impacting him. He may have came [sic] into that day thinking it was going to be him and everything would be okay as long as it was not his children or his wife.

Indeed, the person killed was Bill Hutchinson’s wife, and this student thought through some critical inferences of the literature as a result of the entire tableau exercise.

The final step in the tableau process is helping the students understand that the process of considering multiple perspectives can take place within the mind using mental imagery (Pearson et al., 2015). Our final tableau assignment did not include tableau per se, but rather led the students through a series of imagining scenes, or, in other words, conducting tableau in their minds.

In sum, our experience shows that tableau theater activities in a developmental literacy class engage students in texts and helps their motivation to learn and connect to class concepts. Students contextualized their reading both through the interactive classroom exercise as well as empathetically with their own lived experiences.

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