

Scripted Drama Assessment in a Middle School Social Studies Class

Ronald V. Morris

Ball State University

and

Michael Welch

[Return to Articles](#)

Abstract

Students who use drama assess their work through using a science fiction essay to help them look for and make connections between times, places, people, and situations. The students then use assessment guidelines to focus their ideas, stimulate their creativity, and demonstrate minimum standards of excellence. Finally, students have access to scoring rubrics as they complete their projects.

Introduction: Scripted Drama Assessment in a Middle School Social Studies Class

One seventh grade class uses drama nearly every day to improve individual student performance in social studies.¹ The students study ancient world history content, and they read and act out the script. As the story unfolds students move into action in past times and places. Students find drama helpful in learning social studies content and developing thinking skills. Students also use structured role play to learn about people, place, and events from the past. Students empathize with characters from history in these events and spend time anticipating their actions and predicting their next words.

Procedure

Since students have multiple experience with drama in social studies class the teacher draws upon these experience to help students determine the next events in the lessons. The teacher uses assessment to help guide the instructional planning.² For the action to unfold in the classroom requires substantial preparation from the teacher before instruction. First the teacher decides what instructional objectives to include in teaching a unit. After reading multiple sources the teacher writes guiding questions to consult in preparing the script. The questions range from factual recall to evaluation; then the teacher creates the script. The

teacher injects the guiding questions into the margins of the play to get the students to reflect and discuss what they have read. Before the students start reading and acting out the play the students discuss the evaluation rubric. Next, the class chooses roles through a student run lottery and acts out the play. At the conclusion of the play the students form groups and discuss the scoring rubric their teachers prepared and how they might make use of it. During these discussions students exchange ideas about the content, examples, and process they might use in answering the questions. Many times students work in small groups and exchange answers with several group before debriefing with the whole class.

Example

Students became the character everyday from the beginning to the unit to the assessment, and in a series of role plays students learned about the Age of Exploration. In this particular example the students learned about Spanish, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and English exploration of the Americas. The topics of the chapters included: early explorers, Cortes and Mexico, Spanish Explorers, and searching for the Northwest Passage. After the students acted out a scripted play on this topic, they were given the following science fiction article to read.

Exploring the Planet AMI

In the year 2050 one political nation exists on the surface of Earth, and all Earth people believe that only democracy allows each person a meaningful life. However, twenty billion people pack onto Earth's very crowded artificial islands, so that they do not waste land. The people of Earth find minerals scarce especially iron and uranium.

People explored space for the last quarter century. No intelligent life other than that of Earth exists in the solar system, but a recent discovery led to a new way to power space ships, allowing people to travel to the stars. The advanced technology of 2050 also allows a space ship to monitor what occurs on a planet with out people from Earth actually going down to it.

Last year, in 2049, scientists discovered a new planet, AMI; this planet seems like a possible solution to the people of Earth's problems. The planet resembles Earth in its climate, atmosphere, plants, and animals; it contains unique things too. The planet AMI possesses large amounts of natural resources Earth lacks, including iron, uranium, zinc, gold, and many more minerals. Even better, many people dot the surface of AMI. The electronic technology shows that the people of AMI resemble the size of sixth grade students on Earth, but have absolutely no hair, and usually have yellow, cat -- like eyes. They also manifest different shades of skin pigmentation ranging from light blue to very dark indigo.

The people of AMI live in many different cultures. Twenty separate cultures represent the northern continent, and most of these use a hunting and gathering economy. Some of these cultures also farm a crop not farmed on earth. This crop, that they called JO, seems to grow easily and produces a great deal of food; it might make an excellent crop to help feed Earth's every-growing vast population. These people of the northern continent use a very simple technology; they use stone tools and weapons only. They base their society on

tribes that include about 1000 people, and a few people called Dreamers seem to rule the tribes. These Dreamers do not hunt, gather, or farm JO; instead they act as the priest and the doctor to their people. When a depressed, sick, or worried person goes to the Dreamer, the Dreamer dreams about the patient to find a cure. The dreams of these Dreamers seem to become real in some way the scientists of Earth do not understand. The tribes regard these "real" dreams as their group's most advanced technology. Each tribe prizes its Dreamer's skills, and people often use the "real" dreams in their attacks on each other.

The dominant culture of the southern continent organizes its culture around on a much larger social unit -- the kingdom. The Royal Dreamer rules this southern kingdom and lives in a huge palace covered with jewels. The people possess many diamonds, but the people also use two other kinds of jewels not found on Earth. These jewels are very beautiful and glow like cold fire. The Royal Dreamer only eats from gold dishes and the drinks a rare drink not found on Earth made from the red berry of a small bush. His 2000 wives and he wear lovely clothes that look like the constructions of clouds.

The large city with gleaming white and blue buildings surrounds his palace. Busy people all fill the market place buying and selling many different well-made trade goods. Although these people live in a large, beautiful city, they only use stone weapons. They enjoy war, however, and the Royal Dreamer sacrifices a human being every morning from one of the tribes he conquered. He believes the blood of the sacrificed person that he drinks helps his dreams become "real." Recently the a nightmare woke the Royal Dreamer from a deep sleep, and the dream returns night after night showing ugly new gods coming from the sky. He fears these ugly brown, white, and yellow gods may destroy his blue people and the whole world he knows.

The students get into small groups and discuss their opinion of the story, and then the students share with the whole class their ideas about the story. Next the students get the series of questions that guides their evaluation of this unit.

Assignment Rubric

The assignment rubric helps the students to consider topics and construct a response. The students integrate their knowledge of history, written communication, and incorporate new knowledge to form a response.

As a member of the Earth ship watching the blue people of AMI from near their moon you fulfill your duties as a historian. As a result of past human failures to learn from their past by 2050 a professional historian goes on every space expedition; the historian's duties include writing a report to the captain.

In the historian's report, the captain expects to find the following information:

- I. Please consider both technology and motivation in the first paragraph in answering these questions:
 - A. How does the Earth expedition to AMI compare to the European

explorers who sailed to America just after 1492?

- II. Please consider economic, social organization, and technology in the second paragraph when answering these questions:
 - A. How does the culture of AMI's northern continent compare to the culture of North America before 1492?

- III. Please consider economy, social organization, belief systems, and technology in the third paragraph when answering these questions:
 - A. In what way is the main culture of the southern continent of AMI like the culture of the Aztecs of Mexico before 1492?

- IV. The fourth paragraph should answer these questions:
 - A. When the Europeans contacted the hunting and gathering culture of America, what happened?
 - B. When the Europeans met the advanced Mexico culture, what happened?
 - C. What effect did this have on the Native American peoples?
 - D. What effect did this have on the Europeans? Why?

- V. In the last paragraph answer these questions:
 - A. Considering all this history make a recommendation to the captain. Should the captain order the space ship to land? Why or why not?
 - B. If the recommendation is to land where should the ship land? Why do you recommend this spot?
 - C. What precautions should a landing party take? Why do you recommend this?
 - D. Please consider Earth's need for more resources and new crops to feed Earth's vast population.
 - E. Consider how much this expedition cost and how it looks if you do not land.
 - F. Consider what might happen to the blue people and to the Earth people if landing does occur

Students first use historic precedent to interpret future possibilities, they then focus their response around concepts. Finally, students must evaluate situations and make recommendations. Students speculate about ideas to create products that require the students to examine and interpret controversial or value based issues.

Scoring Rubric

Students may use the scoring rubric while they construct their responses. The students demonstrate that they master basic minimum competencies in comprehension and thinking.

- I. A. How does the technology of Earth expedition to AMI compare to the technology of the European explores who sailed to America just after 1492?
_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples

_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

How does the motivation of the Earth expedition to AMI compare to the motivation of the European explorers who sailed to America just after 1492?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

_____ (+6) Total

II. A. How does the culture of AMI's northern continent compare to the culture of North America before 1492?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Economic

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Social Organization

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Technology

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

_____ (+12) Total

III. A. In what way is the main culture of the southern continent of AMI like the culture of the Aztecs of Mexico before 1492?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Economy

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples

_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Social Organization

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Belief Systems

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

Technology

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

_____ (+15) Total

IV. A. When the Europeans contacted the hunting and gathering culture of America, what happened?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

B. When the Europeans met the advanced Mexico culture, what happened?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

C. What effect did this have on the Native American peoples?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

D. What effect did this have on the Europeans? Why?

_____ (+3) Three or more examples
_____ (+2) Two examples
_____ (+1) One example
_____ (0) No examples

_____ (+12) Total

V. A. Should the captain order the space ship to land? Why or why not?

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

B. If the recommendation is to land where should the ship land? Why do you recommend this spot?

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

C. What precautions should a landing party take? Why do you recommend this?

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

D. Please consider Earth's need for more resources and new crops to feed Earth's vast population.

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

E. Consider how much this expedition cost and how it looks if you do not land.

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

F. Consider what might happen to the blue people and to the Earth people if landing does occur.

- _____ (+3) Three or more examples
- _____ (+2) Two examples
- _____ (+1) One example
- _____ (0) No examples

_____ (+18) Total

_____ (+53) Total

Students complete each area of assessment with a rubric. The students know where to develop their thoughts and where to provide multiple examples; students must consistently apply their historical knowledge to future situations. The teacher guides the students toward developing thoughts in certain areas, but the students have multiple ways to elaborate and improvise with

in the expectations.

Conclusions

In this example of assessment students in a seventh grade class learn about world history, and they combine that knowledge with a science fiction essay. They use an assignment and a scoring rubric to apply their knowledge. Many times teacher say they ask students to see connections between, people, places, events, present political situation and historical occurrences; however, teachers rarely assess these connections or abilities to see interactions. By asking students to make connections in an assessments to science fiction the educational community can perceive how well the students transfer knowledge in problem situations. When students work to find solution to problems they must use real life skills and demonstrate how they will use them now and possibly in the future.

Curriculum development and assessment rubrics remain contingent upon the initiative of teachers to read multiple sources before constructing materials. Teachers have this time to read and create imaginative methods, but they must have creative time to study their topics of individual interest. Some teachers will want to work in groups for mutual support in exploring common interests. The learning and working style needs to remain the choice of the teacher, but time for individual study needs to remain present. Teachers need individual and group planning time, and the more people they work with the more time they will need to plan.

Teachers need to help students look for connections between historical events and situations where students may apply their knowledge of the past. Teachers need to look at current events and future scenarios; both provide examples for comparison. The teacher uses assessments to help the students understand what they learned in social studies class. In an assessment process such as the one described here, students who use social studies can see connections across time. Students used enactive experiences and then continue to interpret think, and talk about the experiences through the assessment.

Notes

¹ Ronald V. Morris, "The Gifted and Talented Profit from the Social Studies." *Southern Social Studies Journal* 23(1) (1997, Fall): 19-29; Ronald V. Morris, "Common Threads: How to Translate Best Practices into Teaching." *Journal of Social Studies Research* 22(2) (1998): 11-18; Denee J. Mattioli and Fredrick Drake, "Acting Out History: From the Ice Age to the Modern Age." *Middle Level Learning* 4 (1999): M9-M11; Ronald V. Morris and Michael Welch, *How to Perform Acting out History to Enrich Social Studies Classrooms* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2000); Ronald V. Morris, "Achieving Democratic Habits through a Sense of Community." *The Texan* 16(3) (2001): 63-65; Ronald V. Morris, "Teaching Social Studies through Drama: Student Meanings," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 25(1) (2001): 3-15; Michael Welch and Ronald V. Morris, *Plays for an ethical world.* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 2001); Ronald V. Morris, "How to Use Artifacts to Teach Ancient History in the Elementary Classroom." *Social Studies Review* 42(1) (2002): 70-74; Ronald V. Morris, "Acting Out History: Students Reach across Time and Space." *The International Journal of Social Education* (in press 2003); Ronald V. Morris, "Using Social Studies and Art to Nourish the Spirit." *MSCSS Journal.* (in press 2003); Ronald V. Morris, and M. Gail Hickey, "Writing Plays for the Middle School Social Studies Class: A Case Study in Seventh Grade." *International Journal of Social Education* (in press 2003).

² Dana G. Kurfman, "Testing as Context for Social Education," in Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 310-320; Sandra Mathison, "Assessment in Social Studies: Moving toward Authenticity" in The Social Studies Curriculum: Purpose, Problems, and Possibilities (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1997) 213-224; Ronald V. Morris, "Drama and Authentic Assessment in a Social Studies Classroom," Social Studies 92(1), (2001): 41-44.

Ronald V. Morris is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at Ball State University

[Return to Articles](#)