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US History Skits: Just a Spoonful of Sugar

Journal Issue:

[Journal for Learning through the Arts, 12\(1\)](#)

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Publication Date:

2016

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fq840k2>

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Keywords:

US History, theater arts, arts integration, middle school, high school

Local Identifier:

class_lta_23385

Abstract:

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U.S. History Skits:

Just a Spoonful of Sugar . . .

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Abstract. *This article suggests the advantages of incorporating brief, informal, yet content-rich classroom history skits as a way to motivate students, generate interest, and ease students into the more "academic" content found in textbooks and primary source documents.*

As Mary Poppins famously said, "In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun. You find the fun, and SNAP! The job's a game." I completely agree with Mary. My philosophy of teaching has always been "learning is fun." To promote my philosophy, I developed a series of content-rich history skits, which incorporate required content, or "medicine," via dialog in short, easy-to-use classroom skits. In the past, I had experienced dissatisfaction with already-published history plays that, for various reasons, were difficult to implement in the classroom. My desire was to create new classroom materials that would transform my students' experience into something not only substantive, but captivating as well.

Textbook Information Presented in a Skit

Consider the following textbook excerpt regarding the Proclamation of 1763, an event leading up to the Revolutionary War:

. . . By the fall, the Native Americans had retreated. Even so, the uprising made the British government see that defending Western lands would be costly. Therefore, the British issued the Proclamation of 1763, which forbade colonists to settle west of the Appalachians. The colonists were very angry. They thought they had won the right to settle the Ohio River Valley. The British government was angry at the colonists, who did not want to pay for their own defense. This hostility helped cause the war for American independence . . . (McDougall Littell, 135).

Now consider how this textbook information could be delivered in a skit. The skit effectively delivers the "medicine" to a group of students with varying learning styles. It concisely reveals significant aspects of the often convoluted topic of conflict and war, while illuminating the hidden underlying motivations and perspectives of major players. Students are empowered to make sense of historical facts as a chain of cause and effect, because they are

learned within the context of a compelling story. Moreover, students are facilitated in analogizing the actions of historical figures to common human behavior that could be found in any setting. The skit is entertaining and effective, and leaves far fewer unanswered questions than the textbook excerpt. It can also spark a sense of wonder regarding what these events may portend for the future:

Reporter, Tim Tattler: Hey, Mr. Jefferson! I'm Tim Tattler, and (**gesturing toward his colleague**) this is Needa Anchor. We're from the Liberty Press. I'm curious...wasn't there something else that caused colonists and their mother country, England, to get all steamed at one another?

Thomas Jefferson: You know it. After the French & Indian War, Great Britain wanted its colonists to stay the heck out of Indian lands to the west of the colonies. They claimed it was to prevent colonists from fighting with Native Americans, because of course they'd have to use the British Army to put a stop to it. But do you think this kept the colonists from going onto the Native lands? Nooo!! They settled on Native lands anyway, and yes, there was fighting between settlers and Natives. But *some* people say it wasn't all about the fighting at all. They say Great Britain had, let's say, *other* motivations.

Reporter TT: Ooooh! Tell me more!!

TJ: Between me and you, there was a lot of talk that some of the wealthy Englishmen wanted to get their paws on the fertile Ohio River Valley...and so they had to keep those pesky colonists out of the area.

Reporter, Needa Anchor: Ha ha! Intriguing . . .

TJ: And remember, the colonists had helped their mother country, Great Britain, win the French & Indian War. Many colonists had even served in the British Army in that war. So, I ask you...shouldn't they be allowed to use the land that Great Britain gained as a result of that war? *Including* the precious Ohio River Valley?

Reporter TT: (in deep thought) Ooh . . .hmm . . .well, you got me there . . .it certainly seems fair . . .but didn't Great Britain...

TJ: (cuts off Reporter TT) Yes, you got it, Mr. Tattler. Great Britain put a stop to any of that nonsense by passing the so-called Proclamation of 1763, which legally forbade, or said "No," to any settlement west of the Proclamation Line of 1763. So, in other words, the colonists now would be breaking the law by going west. Anyway, if the colonists were kept closer to the eastern coast, they'd be easier to control . . .

Reporter NA: (eyes wide with sudden realization) You've made it all very clear to me, Mr. Jefferson! Wow, if I was one of those colonists, I'd be really ticked off at King George III!

TJ: Oh, you have no idea how mad they were. But some of the colonists never gave up on their dreams of owning lands in the West . . .

(For more information on the Proclamation of 1763, see <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1209.html>)

Student Engagement

What I've found over the last few years is that the majority of my students would much prefer something closer to the latter excerpt. While textbooks and primary source documents are integral to our teaching goals, skits can gently ease struggling students into the content they need to know. Skits may help a wide range of students (including English language learners, economically disadvantaged, and at risk), meet the needs of differentiated learners, foster content retention, promote student participation, help to increase standardized test scores, and spark a lifetime love of learning. Furthermore, studies have shown the positive effects that arts integration can have not only on individual students, but on schools and communities Colley (2012); Walker, Tabone, and Weltsek (2011); Nolan and Patterson (2000); Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskava, and Hardiman (2011); Robinson and Schur (2010); Clapper (2010); Brock (2011).

Hassle-free teaching and learning strategy

Classroom arrangements for using these skits are no-fuss and stress-free. First, because the character dialogs are simple enough for students to read aloud directly from the scripts (as in a "readers' theatre" type format), no memorization is necessary. The vast majority of the time, I experience no shortage of students clamoring to read character roles. Sometimes, I choose students who haven't read in a while; other times, I choose the first few students that raise their hands to volunteer. I have even been known to draw names out of a jar to determine roles. No matter which method I use, there are always lots of disappointed students, who often ask if we can "read the skit again" so that they can read their desired parts. Finding space in which to act out the skits has never been a problem, as the front of the classroom usually suffices. (If more space is needed, we temporarily move a few desks.) Props to enhance the skit experience can be acquired cheaply (or for free) either from items lying around the house or by borrowing them from the school's theater arts department. My students and I sometimes push two desks together if we need a "table" . . . nothing fancy required!

The skits can be easily incorporated into absolutely any phase of a lesson, from introduction to review. Moreover, they are magnificent discussion-starters. Upon completion of the performance of the skit, the class is eager to discuss the material. I usually start a discussion with vague questions like, "So...what just happened there?" As the discussion unfolds, I can easily ascertain whether the students grasp the varying points of view that were presented in the dialog. I can also easily create brief "Tickets Out" in which students can give written responses to questions or reflect upon what they've seen. An alternative is to have students complete this in a journal. Another strategy is to provide maps on which students can plot the locations where events depicted in the skits took place. Students often refer back to the events in a skit when working through practice test questions or analyzing reading passages and primary source documents.

Bringing Joy into Teaching and Learning

Using my skits has really made a huge difference in the delight that I experience as a classroom teacher. Classroom hours fly by, and, before I know it, the end of the day has arrived. It gives me a sense of validation when my students ask me, "May we do another skit today?"

If other teachers would like to experiment with the use of classroom skits, I'd be happy to help! My e-mail is saeedskits@gmail.com, and I'll send information as an attachment on

request. Mention a particular US historical era, and I will try to accommodate the request by sending a sample skit about an event from that time period (if available). For those interested in starting to write their own skits, I would love to share some tips that might be of assistance.

My experience with skits has given me confidence that I am not only providing students with essential content, but also making their experience a positive one. For me, skits have turned out to be Mary Poppins' proverbial "spoonful of sugar" that makes the medicine of heavy history content go down smoothly and enjoyably.

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