

How Teachers Can Conduct Historical Reenactments in Their Own Schools

The flames spring up igniting the tinder and sending out wood smoke; the eight-year-old students automatically move back from the cooking fire. When the coals are ready, a French marble cake will cook in a Dutch Oven. A few feet away in the next group the shuttle slips between the threads before being pulled tight. Inch by inch, the garter tape grows until it is long enough to hold the stockings of a nine-year-old student in place. These are just a few of the daily tasks undertaken by elementary school students experiencing a historical reenactment.

If you want us to like history . . . put visualizations and activities [into it] . . . don't keep it in the textbook . . . don't have it all reading and writing and . . . essays and tests . . . what you've got to do is . . . take them out and show them how it was. How it was done. Let them do it themselves . . . active fun things to do make it exciting. -- Nathaniel, a student reflecting on his reenactment experience.

Educational Reenactment

A reenactment is the recreation of a scene, time period, or event as authentically as possible by a group of people. When people attempt to go back in time through reenactment, they experience a culture that is alien to them. The people of the past are not only different in attitudes and values but in customs as well, making it very difficult for elementary students of the twenty-first century to interpret their lives. Students must construct their knowledge about the past by deconstructing their understandings of the present. This poses particular problems for social education in that students have limited understandings of the present and few understandings of the past because of their limited

number of experiences. To work backward from those limited understandings presents multiple opportunities for misconceptions.

An educational reenactment takes the in-depth cultural experience of participating in a reenactment and joins it with the educational structure of a social studies classroom. Students learn not only about events, but also the people and the broader time period. The goal is to make the life of the student approximate life in a past time period as much as possible. In a reenactment, students take on daily jobs and activities that are similar to what the people of that time had to do, primarily centered around making sure that they have food, fuel, shelter, and clothing. The students also must understand the conflicts, political issues, and community problems from the era.

Reenactments can be as varied as historical interpretation and imagination allow. Open-air museums such as Greenfield Village, Michigan, attempt to recreate a historic landscape, thus setting people in a historic context. Living history farms such as the Lincoln Boyhood National Memorial in Indiana attempt to demonstrate human interaction with the land. At some historical sites such as Williamsburg families can muster with the militia. Old Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts, offers programs in which costumed students play the game of Graces on the village green. Conner Prairie offers a glimpse into pioneer day through first-person historical presentations. Many Civil War sites reenact famous battles, including Perryville (in Kentucky) and Gettysburg (in Pennsylvania). Festivals such as the Feast of the Hunter's Moon at Fort Ouiatenon allow history clubs and student groups, to visit, trade, and rub shoulders with French, Indians, and English of the 1750s.

Although many family vacations have made reenactment sites their destination of their vacations, and history clubs and gifted students have flirted with reenactment, there remains great untapped potential for use of historical reenactments as a way to teach about social studies. This article, while providing general guidelines for doing reenactment, focuses on the French Colonial days. Of course, teachers may tailor these suggestions to suite their own classrooms and reflect the historical significant of their areas.

Reenactments can include a single class, a grade level, or the entire school. Teachers may be able to work with volunteers from a local historical site in creating reenactments. Many local historical societies are looking for this type of collaboration and are open to establish a creative partnership with schools. Collaborative program such as these help the local museum to justify donations, get grants, maintain community support, and fulfill their vital educational mission. Students could perform guard duty around a historic fort, serve a Victorian tea in a house museum, or pump water on the ground of a living history farm. Smaller museums and historical sites are often more receptive to innovation than are larger sites that entertain large groups of children daily.

Working closer to home at a school outdoor education lab or a neighbor with forested land can down on travel time lost. Reenactments do work quite well at school sites which have the advantages of equipment, supplies, first aid food, water, and rest rooms close at hand. The disadvantages include the incongruity of the twentieth-first century surroundings which may take away from the intended experience. While a class does not need the attributes of a reconstructed or preserved pioneer village, farm, or fort for a reenactment, those facilities often do enhance the activity.

French Colonial Reenactment

The reenactment described here focused on a twenty year period of the French colonization in America (1741 - 1761). The French colonies of New France and Louisiana encompassed a large portion of North America -- from the St. Lawrence River to the Great Lakes to the Mississippi watershed. This time period in U. S. history is relatively unexplored by textbooks making it ideal for reenactment. This article explains a teacher-planned reenactment carried out during the school day and offers guidelines for teachers wishing to hold their own reenactments.

When planning a reenactment consider asking former students (now in high school) to serve as mentors; they can model ideas and activities from the time period. Once such reenactments have become a tradition, former students will remember when they were doing the activities and can help their younger charges to succeed. During the work sessions former students can demonstrate difficult tasks such as working with wool. Such mentoring programs help provide important service learning connections and opportunities. Assign the mentors carefully, recognizing that some may be better at working with people, while others may be best at supporting services.

Parents are another great source of help during reenactments; ask them about their hobbies and interests. Some may be reactors themselves, or have friends who pursue the hobby. Parents and school staff members may have applicable skills, such as weaving baskets, storytelling, cooking, building a fire, sewing, singing, or gardening. Some may know folk songs or dances. Local historical societies are a great source of knowledgeable adults.

Provide a verbal description of the reenactment two weeks before the reenactment, and send written copies home with the student to facilitate their familiarization with the idea and the time period. The teacher should refer to this story periodically and review the information before the students begin the reenactment. Here is one example:

In the year of our Lord 1751 the sun never sets on the realm of the House of Bourbon. Long live Louis King of France! Most of North America is part of either New France or Louisiana. You are a fur trader in training and have great dreams of becoming wealthy from the fur trade. Today you are on the banks of the Wabash River. You are taking time to learn your needed skills, meet people, and learn the way of the woods. It is hard work, but you still find some time for fun. You meet your friends -- Indians that the Jesuits may or may not have converted. To reach this site you made the difficult canoe journey from Quebec by paddling up the St. Lawrence River, crossing Lac Ontario and Lac Erie, moving your canoe up the Maumee portage at Miami Town, and continuing down the Ouabache past Ouiatenon.

The reenactment setting will give the students an idea of important issues international political situation, the place, and the time. The students determine what their roles will be in the reenactment, and they will get an idea of the people that they will portray and meet. Finally, they determine how they will be traveling in the wilderness and how the transportation system works of their time.

Reenactment experiences allow students to become immersed in a particular time and to learn what it would be like to live then as a common person. During the

reenactment, students labor as people did then, as well as participating in authentic games, dances, and amusements. The students work together as explore the daily activities of the people through round-robin sessions. These activities give the students directly experience of life in a different time and a hands-on involvement with a different culture.

For the French Colonial reenactment, one group of students studied how to build a home in New France. The particular house they studied looks much like a European home – built by placing logs vertically on a log sill. The owner of the house trades in the French town of Vincennes. After completing the day’s work, scary stories were told, including New France include the “Red Dwarf,” “Devil Comes Courting,” “Loup-garou,” and “Fe’efile’.” Adults present information about clothing and the students modeling each item. The clothing illustrates regional differences, classes, and occupations, and also demonstrate the extent of a worldwide trade network that reached to the fringes of this new civilization. Period clothing adds much to the whole endeavor. Clothing projects should be simple but authentic – moccasins, garter tape, sash, and bead necklace (see Figure 1).

First person historical presentations, in which adult volunteers portray an individual or represent a group, serve as a general kind of presentation needed for all reenactments. The elementary students play the role of engaging guests helping with the activities. Two key characters in the French Colonial reenactment were a priest and a voyageur (someone hired by a fur company to transport goods and workers between sites). They needed to build a lean-to shelter, dry their possessions, and repack their canoe for the rest of their journey. The French Lady would talk about the journey to the

new world and the world she left behind. She would describe how the community is growing, how it has changed, and how it is still on the edge of the wilderness. She could show the students her fine clothes from France and her work clothes; the Native American would give a brief demonstration of sign language and finger weaving. The French Marine shows the students how to load and fire the flintlock and how to make a fire with flint and steel. The French farmer could talk about his wooden shoes and village life. Each character starts with an article representative of his or her position in the colony and from there move into narrative content that illustrates the story.

Avoid first-person presentations that are meant to represent famous people; few historical figures left enough documentation for us to know everything about their everyday lives. In addition it is too difficult to stay in character. Avoid negative stereotypes and weak attempts at humor. Presentations are better if they are short, and to the point. Always provide the opportunity for students to demonstrate or try part of what they just learned.

Benefits to the Learner

Historical reenactments, as in role-playing activities, are flexible enough to reflect students' interest and to capitalize on local resources. Although no research has been conducted specifically on reenactment program many researchers have pointed to the benefits of dramatic experience, which share some elementary of reenactments.¹

Historical reenactments are valuable because they offer opportunities for students to synthesize information, role-play, discover what people value at a given point in time, and participate in recreated historical events.

Dramatic reenactments offer multiple ways for students to learn and organize content and skills, benefits that were given prominence in standards published by the National Council for the Social Studies describes five key features of powerful social studies teaching: learning must be meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active.² Reenactments can incorporate all five of these elements.

Strategies for Reenactment

The content of reenactments should be tied to the National Council for the Social Studies *Standards*.³ Post-reenactment discussion question can be related to one or more of the standards (see Figure 2). By incorporating the NCSS standards in an educational reenactment, students do more than just experience what life in the past may have been like; they can examine content and relate issues. Reenactment must have definite goals with strong ties to academic objectives.

An ideal topic for a reenactment is an event that had a significant impact. You may want to select events that are part of local history, which gives you potentially greater access to people who are knowledgeable resources. Good topics will have documentation (found in museums, archives, and libraries), but little or no previous interpretation. The information from museums, archives, and libraries provide the background information students use to develop their own interpretations through reenactment. As they do so, they will learn particularly useful strategies for illustrating conflict and cooperation between people, as well as demonstrating contrasting points of view.

As preparation, the teacher may travel to historical sites, visits museums, and view professional reenactments. Local and state historical societies are helpful in the

case of New France, the available resource include the Tippecanoe County Historical Association, Fort Ouiatenon, Fort Niagara, Old French House, and Fort Michilimackinac. Other valuable assets include local high school French teachers, university French professors, and reenactors. Next, the teacher should locate sources of accurate information for presenters to study and use, after which the students begin reading on the subject. A detailed plan may be submitted to the administrator.

To help offset some of the expenses associate with reenactment, teachers may want to apply for grants from the state humanities council, arts council, or a state department of education, to name a few possibilities. Contributions from families, or gathered through a fundraiser, are other solutions. Museum or local civic or historical group also may be able to make donations.

Typically, the students stay in small groups, and rotate to all the different planned activities. The first group in a rotation always takes longer to get going; everyone will want to do everything. With practice, the time periods will gradually grow shorter; if running short on time, cut the last session very short. For round-robin sessions fifteen minutes to fifty minutes is long enough for a good rotation at each section depending on the difficulty of the activities. Give the volunteers a two-minute warning to finish up the last few details.

Experienced and responsible upper elementary students can assist small groups of younger children with activities. These students can be particularly helpful in monitoring the time schedule, leading younger students from place to place, and helping with crafts. Younger students should focus on answering the question, “How have things change over

time?” Many different activities can help students illustrate and explain their conclusions. The reenactment may also prompt further questions.

Evaluations

The teacher needs to observe the event as it progresses; every portion of the experience requires evaluation throughout the day. Being ready to build on those interactions that occur naturally during the day is also important. A teacher should circulate during the reenactment, asking the students and volunteers for their opinions on how the day is going and reviewing what they learned. The more notes that are taken and the more evaluations done, the easier next year’s planning will be.

Because each student will experience the varied and complicated culture of the reenacted historic period differently, it becomes difficult to rely on traditional objectives and assessments. One possible assessment method is to offer guiding questions before the reenactment, to help students focus their learning. Ask the students, first thing in the morning, to predict the answer and then talk with a friend about it; at the end of the day review the questions with the students. Have the students talk in groups of four and then discuss the answers with the whole group; the day following the reenactment, fill out a data-retrieval chart in class. Use a common set of questions to compare historical figures.

In a second assessment strategy, ask the students to write the story of their experiences during the reenactment. They should record their most salient observations in detail, and compare that way of life to their present lives. Students should interpret the events and discuss why they were important. Through this process students may understand that some of their current concerns are not so different from those of the past.

Other closing activities will help in evaluating the experience. Students may write a newspaper account for the local paper describing their adventures, or they could write a diary entry in the voice of a person from that time period. Still another possibility is for students to assume the role of a common person from that era and write a letter to a famous person of the time asking questions about issues of the day. Students can make connections and comparisons from the past to the present on a wall chart, comparing issues such as health, pollution, civil rights, and civic participation.

Conclusions and Student Reactions

Student reactions to reenactments are very favorable. As Aubrey, a student, participating in the French Colonial reenactment stated, “We had a taste of what it was like for them.” The environment they helped create surrounded them with experiences that stimulated their senses. The students got a better understanding of daily life through their experiences with the past. “We saw what it was like back then, saw what they went through, and [saw] what their daily hardships were like,” said Jake. By challenging students to immerse themselves in a different culture and time, striving to survive there, they learned to solve problems. Brent said, “You see things and then you end up doing stuff, like the people used to do like building fires and cooking.” Students integrated multiple skills and experiences into the event. “I remember chopping and splitting wood for the fire,” confirmed Jordan. Reenactment, through hands-on experiences, can help students become more responsible for their own learning.

When teachers take the time to plan and conduct a reenactment, they bring students off the “sidelines”, and into the heart of discussions and conversations. As Orion said, “You weren’t viewing things; you were part of them.” Students learned how

people lived and related to one another. They also talked to one another about the events of the time, and they enacted these experiences. “The French Colonial reenactment was important because it helped us better understand how they lived. It made me understand that they had really hard lives, and it made us appreciate it [Colonial living] more,” Laura explained. Reenactments offer time to explore depth of content, giving deeper meaning to issues and events.

NOTES

1. J. Fines and R. Verrier, *The Drama of History: An Experiment in Co-operative Teaching*. (London: New University Education, 1974); P. Goalen and L. Hendy, “‘It’s not just fun, it works!’ Developing Children’s Historical Thinking Through Drama.” *The Curriculum Journal* 4(3) (1993): 363-84; E. B. Kanas, *Echoes from the classroom: Teacher influence on student autonomy, social interaction and creativity*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: Columbia University Teachers College, 1994); R. V. Morris, “Common Threads: How to Translate Best Practices into Teaching,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 22(2) (1998): 11-8; P. M. Taylor, *Our Adventure of Experiencing: Drama Structure and Action Research in a Grade Seven Social Studies Classroom*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation: New York University, 1992).

2. National Council for the Social Studies, “A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy,” *Social Education* 57 (1993): 213-23.

3. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Author, 1994).

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Resources

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Nute, G. (1969). The voyager's highway. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society.

Figure 1

Companies That Produce Artifacts For Historical Reenactments

Design Horizons

8175 SW Maple Drive

Portland, Oregon 97225

503-297-5305

Ethnic Arts and Facts

Susan Drexler

P.O. Box 20550

Oakland, CA 94620

510-465-0451

Fax 510-465-7488

Personalizing the Past

Barbara Loftin

52 Molino Avenue

Mill Valley, CA 94941

415-388-9351

James Townsend and Son

PO Box 415

Perceton, Indiana 46562

1-800-338-1665

Jackdaw Publications

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Cuyahoga Valley Trading Company

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Buffalo Enterprises

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East Berlin, PA 17316

717-259-0991

Lithic Casting Lab

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Troy, IL 62294

Old Suttler John

PO Box 174

West View Station

Binghamton, NY 13905

Yester Years Trading Post

118 South Canal Street

Natchez, Mississippi 39120

601-446-8393

Treasures From Your National Parks

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Conshohocken, PA 19428

Laidaker Historical Garments

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Watson, PA 17777

717-538-9490

C D Jarnagin and Company

Route #3, Box 217

Corinth, Mississippi 38834

601-287-4977

LaPelleterie

Highway 41 North

PO Box 127

Arrowrock, Missouri 65320

Pages and Petticoats

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Livermore, CA 94640

Early Times Trading Company

1508 45th Street

Moline, IL 61265

309-764-7130

Log Cabin Shop

8010 Lafayette Road

Lodi, OH 44254

Panther Primitives

P.O. Box 32

Normantown, WV 25267

Juniper Learning, Inc.

Post Office Drawer O

Espanola, New Mexico 87532

1-800-456-1776

Figure 2

Student Research Questions Related to Social Studies Standards

Standard	Question
Culture	<p>What identifies the people as French rather than English, Spanish or Dutch? Specifically examine the language, folk song, customs, folk tales, foods, fashion, and construction.</p>
Time, Continuity, and Change	<p>How has France influenced people? All the first-person historical presentations examine this question.</p>
Individuals, Groups, and Institutions	<p>How do French colonists relate with the Native Americans? Native American, Farmer, and Jesuit Priest first-person presentations examine this question.</p>
People, Places, and Environments	<p>How will French colonists survive? Trading and Voyageur first-person presentations examine this standard.</p>
Individual Development and Identity	<p>What are the personal characteristics that describe the French traders and colonists? The first-person historical presentations examine this standard.</p>

Production, Distribution, and Consumption	<p>How is trading done?</p> <p>The first-person historical presentations presented by the Trader, French Lady, Native American, and Voyageur examine this standard.</p>
Science, Technology, and Society	<p>How do French Colonists and Traders use science and technology?</p> <p>The Marine's gun and his flint and steel address this standard in a first-person historical presentation.</p>
Global Connection	<p>What connections remain with Europe?</p> <p>The first-person historical presentations of the French Lady, Trader, and Marine discuss this standard.</p>
Power, Authority, and Governance	<p>What civil and military laws existed in New France?</p> <p>The first-person historical presentations of the Marine, Priest, and Native American address this standard.</p>
Civic Ideals and Practices	<p>Who was considered a citizen of New France?</p> <p>The first-person historical presentations of the Farmer, Voyageur, and French Lady</p>

examine this question.