

Role-Play Project

Katie first discovered the power of creative dramatics for teaching English when she attended a National Endowment for the Humanities Institute for Teaching Shakespeare over ten years ago. There she learned how to unleash the humanity of written text through instructional drama-based activities. Her juniors always read “The Pardoner’s Tale” from Chaucer’s masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*. “The Pardoner’s Tale” focuses on the story of three rioters who are prompted to “find death.” As the rioters search for death, they find riches near a tree and soon plot against each other as a means to claim the riches for themselves. Eventually, they do “find death” by killing each other over the treasure from the tree. As a pre-reading activity, Katie used her training to invite the students to create a role-play or skit in which they and their fellow performers look for death. During the role-play, each group of students needed to indicate to the audience what “death” might be. Over the years of using this pre-reading strategy, Katie has seen at least fifty versions of this skit in her classroom. The most common form the students role-played was death due to some illegal drug—an interesting statement on contemporary society. Through the use of role-playing a dramatic activity, her students, like Chaucer, became social commentators and were able to connect with the text by relating the theme to present-day situations. Another example of a theme Katie used was the scenario “Is it ever OK to steal?”—one of the primary themes in *Les Misérables*.

Before the students read a text, take a basic theme from the canonical work or from a few of the chapters and instruct students to create a situation in which they reenact that same theme. Then have the students reenact the scenes for their classmates. When the students have completed their role-plays or skits, have a large-group discussion about the themes and ideas that were presented by the different groups. As the students share their thoughts and feelings, bridge their presentations to the text that the class is about to read. Through this activity, the students develop a sense of what the text is about and are predisposed to discover how the text will unfold the text.

As a pre-reading strategy, role-playing does the following:

- Addresses the needs of students with Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence, Visual/Spatial Intelligence, and Interpersonal Intelligence
- Allows the teacher to develop connections to canonical works through auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles
- Empowers students to develop a personal connection with the text
- Exposes students to the major plot points of the related text
- Bridges a connection between drama role-playing and the canonical text

Exhibit 2.12 shows a pre-reading lesson plan for using dramatic performance.

Exhibit 2.13 contains the rubric for the lesson plan. Role playing and other classroom drama activities are useful tools for all types of readers but particularly for the struggling reader. These readers have the most difficulty comprehending a text, and drama activities like role playing provide the opportunity for these readers to directly enter the text world. In contrast to the From Katherine S. McKnight and Bradley Berlage, *Teaching the Literature Classics in the Inclusive Classroom: Reader Response Activities to Engage All Learners*. Copyright © 2007 by Jossey-Bass. Reprinted by permission of Jossey-Bass.

text world that can create confusion and stress for some readers, the role play is a more inviting entrance. Students are given the opportunity to experience and react to the text from within.

Self-Reflection

*What is the primary theme of the canonical book that your students are currently reading?
Does your class contain students who are more kinesthetic learners, who may become engaged in a role-playing activity?*

Exhibit 2.12 Role Playing Pre-Reading Lesson Plan

Pre-Reading Lesson	Role-Play
Objective	To use role playing and dramatic performance as a tool to develop a personal connection with canonical text as well as an understanding of the themes and major plots of canonical text.
Materials	None necessary
Time	One to two class periods
Procedure	
Step 1	Before the students read a text, take a basic theme from the canonical work or from a few of the chapters and instruct students to create a situation in which they reenact that same theme.
Step 2	Have the students enact the scenes for their classmates.
Step 3	Conduct a large-group discussion about the themes and ideas that were presented by the different student groups. Connect the information that the students presented in their presentations to the text that they're about to read.
IRA/NCTE Standards	<p>3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, and graphics).</p> <p>12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).</p>

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Exhibit 2.13 Rubric for Role-Playing Pre-Reading Lesson Plan

✓+	Exceeds standards	Student has demonstrated a strong understanding of the theme through the creative output of the role-play. The role-play is creative and demonstrates originality.
✓	Meets Standards	The role-play demonstrates the student's understanding and interpretation of the theme/topic.
✓-	Does not meet standards	The role-play does not demonstrate the student's understanding or interpretation of the topic.
