

## MAKING HISTORY COME ALIVE: DRAMATIZATION IN THE CLASSROOM

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### Rationale for Dramatization

People of all ages love a story that involves heroes and villains. They particularly like to observe characters confronted with difficult choices and personal decisions over issues with relevance to their lives. That is why biography is popular with students of all ages. It provides a personalized account of the past through the humanized perspective of a single historical figure. Even more engaging is a live dramatization, especially for students. It enlivens history by making the dead past come alive.<sup>1</sup>

In presenting the life and times of people and events through dramatization, a teacher can bridge the gap in the battle between the "old" and "new" history.<sup>2</sup> We believe a teacher should emphasize both political *and* social history, allowing students to pose questions to historical figures addressing the full realm of historical conditions.

Under the format of dramatization that emphasizes a dialogue between historical figures and the audience, students have an opportunity to interact with past figures. It is important for students to develop history's "habits of the mind" such as "historical empathy" and an understanding that "time and place vary."<sup>3</sup> There is a multitude of men and women, both famous and obscure, who are stimulating figures to portray. Their simulation provides an opportunity for students to have an experience that makes historical figures seem real and come alive.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Randolph B. Campbell, "History Through Biography; A Review Essay," *Teaching History*, 4 (Spring, 1979), 31-34; Robert S. Feldman, "Historical Role Playing: An Alternative Teaching Strategy," *TH*, 5 (Spring, 1980), 66-74; and Pauline Ucci Dyson, "Dramatizing History With a Victorian Tea," *TH*, 11 (Fall, 1986), 71-76.

<sup>2</sup> In a 1989 American Historical Association publication, proponents of social history and the traditional political, diplomatic, and intellectual history articulated their positions. For example, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Some Reflections on the New History," *AHR*, 94 (June 1989), 661-670, and Joan Wallach Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story" *AHR*, 94 (June 1989), 680-692.

<sup>3</sup> From The Bradley Commission on History in the Schools, *Building A History Curriculum: Guidelines For Teaching History In Schools* (Westlake, OH: National Council for History Education, 1988), 9.

Dramatization is a valuable teaching strategy. It elicits emotions and causes students to take sides, invest their feelings, and become more involved with the past. The teacher in costume sets the stage for historical investigation. By using drama, teachers are allowed to step outside themselves and into an historical figure's situation in a way that may be more acceptable and understandable to students. The teacher who uses drama in the classroom can model actions and behaviors of particular people who adapted to social and political conditions and caused change in their own lives and in society. Through drama the teacher is able to present a societal issue from a variety of perspectives. The inclusion of emotions and other details allows students to practice conflict resolution, problem-solving, and gives them the opportunity to apply their knowledge. Drama helps students consider values and practice decision-making.

Teachers of elementary, secondary, and college levels might raise questions about dramatization as a method of instruction. Is dramatization a dignified method of instruction that should be seriously considered? How will students react to their teacher who is in costume or armed with props? Will students become involved or is dramatization just another form of lecture? Will students merely be a passive audience, wanting only to be entertained—as if watching television? What will be the result for students once the dramatization has occurred?

A study by Goodlad and others found that eighth-grade students believe history and social studies are boring and constitute the least relevant subject area in the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Sadly, some college students tend to agree. What is missing for the student? Description? Dialogue? Emotion? Realism? A human quality? All of these things are often missing in written or lecture-type presentations about people and events distant in time and place.

We believe a first-hand experience will enhance student attitudes as well as encourage the learning and retention of history. This means someone from a distant time or place can describe, create emotion, and explain a point of view. This increases the likelihood of bringing a distant time and place into the realm of the students' world. Using drama can create the opportunity for varied learning experiences. Students begin to see that history is about people no matter what the time, place, or cultural setting. They begin to see themselves as part of the ongoing process of history.

You as a character of the historical past might be asked questions never asked of you before as a teacher. For example, a figure of the early national period could have experienced malaria. Given the contemporary concern about HIV, students might ask, "Were you as afraid of malaria as we are of AIDS?" Such a question is evidence of the drawing of historical parallels.

Dramatization provides a unique opportunity for the student, at any grade level, to witness first-hand the struggle and contradictions of a specific historical

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<sup>4</sup> John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 210-213.

figure, distant in time and space. Above all, it helps the student understand why beliefs (such as owning slaves, deciding about secession from the Union, and leading armies in the Crusades) were held and decisions made within an historical context. The teacher, however, must deal with a believability gap. Otherwise, students may feel uncomfortable about their teacher acting like another person. Thus, the teacher must prepare the students for the experience of dramatization.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. We will make general suggestions as to how teachers can prepare and present a historical figure to their class and how students can be guided through the same process and then we will offer some specific suggestions for one of our most successful dramatizations.

### **Procedures**

The first thing a teacher must do is identify instructional objectives. The teacher should choose a figure, actual (such as James Madison) or a composite (such as an Irish immigrant), who will address these issues in a dramatic fashion. Because dramatization can promote a myriad of questions and encourage interaction between students and the historical figure, the teacher must have a firm grasp of the era and the perspective of the personality presented. This of course requires research and preparation.

We suggest the following procedures for teacher preparation. Scholarly biographies provide themes about the figure's life. They provide insight into academic discourse relative to conflicts and decisions an historical figure has made. Once a teacher has become familiar with the perspectives of the figure, the teacher may consult other sources. These might even include children's biographies as they often include facets of the figure's childhood otherwise overlooked. Moreover, children's biographies address issues with which younger students can identify. Similarly, biographical sketches from popular magazines such as *American Heritage* often provide interesting vignettes as a resource for teachers. Primary sources such as letters, diaries, financial ledgers, and family documents offer an opportunity to personalize the historic figure.

Instead of creating a script to be memorized, record and categorize information into themes, periods of the person's life, and turning points that affected the individual. Becoming familiar with the recorded information (which reflects your original instructional objectives) helps you to portray a more natural and believable person. Rather than presenting a lecture, tell the figure's life story.

### **Student Involvement**

For this to be a valuable learning experience, it is necessary for students to interact with the figure throughout the presentation. Therefore, remaining in character is essential for successful dramatization. A simple prop or costume

(which does not need to be expensive or elaborate) will help focus the students' attention onto a particular time and place of the portrayal. This will also help you remain in character.

Success is limited without the participation of students. Students should be familiar with a descriptive history of the time period so they can relate how the historic figure reacted to the events. Preparing students to listen and watch for specific ideas and feelings in the presentation can enable students to identify the perspectives, biases, and personal conflicts.

A teacher may make this a one-way presentation. We believe it is better for a discourse to take place between students and the historic figure. To encourage such discourse, we have found success in the following activities: (1) conduct the presentation in a press conference format with students as members of the press; (2) "seed" the class, if necessary, with prepared questions to encourage spontaneous inquiry; (3) have students write a response to the character from the perspective of a friend, opponent, or news reporter; (4) have students research and role-play a character who would have known the historic figure and present their portrayal to the class; (5) have students research the same event and role-play individuals who disagreed with the original figure; (6) have students study prepared materials about the figure and critique the teacher's presentation regarding content accuracy that might include anachronisms and historical context; and (7) use student portrayal as authentic assessment.

Students who will role-play must go through the same process as the teacher. For students to portray an historical figure, they too must "do history." Students must find out about the individual they will portray through primary and secondary sources in order to create the whole person. They must assume the perspective of the person they are role-playing so they can respond to the people and events of the time. Students must put themselves in "someone else's shoes" as they role-play. It should be clear to students that emphasis is on the historical context rather than acting talents.

### **Dramatizing the Lives of James and Dolley Madison**

During the late 1980s, with the United States celebrating the bicentennial of the writing of the Constitution, the *Federalist* essays, and the Bill of Rights, we found it an opportune time to dramatize James and Dolley Madison for students as well as civic groups. The Madisons provided ideal characters to use dramatization as a means of exploring both the political and social history of the Early National era.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In 1986 the authors received James Madison Fellowships from Project '87. Besides using dramatization in their own classes at the elementary, middle, secondary, and university levels, they have presented approximately 200 dramatizations of James and Dolley Madison to students and civic groups in the Great Lakes region, Texas, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania.

As a Virginia leader, James Madison articulated the advantages of an "extended republic" in speeches at the Constitutional Convention and in the *Federalist* essays.<sup>6</sup> Madison was a political philosopher and practical politician whose ideas are meaningful for students today. His role at the Grand Convention in Philadelphia went beyond the desire to create a stronger central government. Madison was a proponent and defender of human civil liberties. Above all, he wanted to protect the rights and liberties of individuals within a civil society.<sup>7</sup> Most students are unaware of this great contribution.

Later, during the First Congress, Madison fought to protect rights and liberties and maintain the structure of the Constitution. In the summer of 1789, Antifederalists were determined to alter the "great work" of the Constitution. Madison, however, withstood Antifederalist plans. The Virginia representative proposed the Bill of Rights, which he had been against at the Constitutional Convention. It was Madison's Bill of Rights that emerged from Congress in 1789. What students do not know is that Madison was verbally assaulted during the First Congress by the same people who had called for a Bill of Rights during the ratification of the Constitution.<sup>8</sup>

Whether working at the Constitutional Convention, securing a Bill of Rights, challenging Alexander Hamilton's model of the federal government in the 1790s, or serving as chief executive in the War of 1812, the fixed star in Madison's vision of the United States was ordered liberty—the securing of rights and liberties of the individual. At times in his political career, Madison would turn to the national government to protect rights and liberties. At other times, he would turn to state governments for the protection of peoples' rights.

To explore only the political life of Mr. Madison, however, would result in a limited image of the fourth president. His personal story—especially his relationship with his wife Dolley—also reflects the social setting of the time and provides opportunities for viewing the various facets of President and Mrs. Madison's characters.

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<sup>6</sup> Madison spoke of an extended republic in letters and papers. For a specific reference, see James Madison, *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), 75-77 and James Madison, "Federalist No. 10" (New York: The Modern Library, 1937), 53-62.

<sup>7</sup> In presidential addresses to the Organization of American Historians and the American Historical Association, Carl N. Degler has suggested that a central idea of history and history instruction be "national identity." Degler encouraged historians and teachers to focus on the question: "What does it mean to be an American, that is, a citizen of the United States?" For Degler's addresses see Carl N. Degler, "Remaking American History," *The Journal of American History*, 67 (June 1980), 7-25, and Carl N. Degler, "In Pursuit of an American History" *AHR*, 92 (February 1987), 1-12. We believe that portrayal of James and Dolley Madison helps address this issue of a national identity, particularly as an issue of majority rule-minority rights.

<sup>8</sup> *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, Vol. I (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 424-449; 659-659; 703-761.

Dolley Madison took no active part in political matters, but James kept her informed of developments. She admired him so much that her attitude was simple: Whatever he believed was right. Whatever his endeavors she would support his efforts. Dolley established new trends as the wife of a public official. She attended functions to hear her husband's speeches. She accompanied James to Washington, D.C. though most political wives did not live there regularly because of the primitive conditions in the new capital. During the War of 1812, Dolley, as First Lady, thought it unseemly to continue with the regular social calendar. She made it fashionable for ladies to sit in the gallery of the House of Representatives when Henry Clay spoke or to hear Attorney General William Pinkney argue a case before the Supreme Court.

Dolley, however, did not think of herself as being involved in politics. She wrote her sister, "Politics is the business of men. I don't care what offices they hold or who supports them. I care only about people."<sup>9</sup> Although she felt politics was "the business of men," Dolley's support of her husband contributed to his political career. Her Wednesday afternoon drawing room receptions, to which she invited both dignitaries and ordinary folk, made her husband's administration more accessible. When Madison's arthritis prevented him from writing in the 1830s, he dictated and Dolley copied "Advice to My Country."

Dramatizing James and Dolley Madison has given us the opportunity to pursue several teaching goals whether in the setting of a third grade through twelfth grade class, a college survey course, or an auditorium with 400 to 500 people who seek to learn more about the Constitution, *Federalist* essays, the Bill of Rights, and other basic writings or events in the early national period.

There are as many as seven goals we have attempted to achieve during a dramatization which have application beyond dramatizing the Madisons specifically. We dramatize the Madisons to 1) introduce an audience to the ideas of government James Madison developed and expressed; 2) introduce an audience to the social and economic setting during the life of the Madisons; 3) acquaint the audience with other delegates who participated at the Constitutional Convention and provide a summary of their respective ideas and contributions; 4) describe for the audience the interpersonal relationships of James and Dolley Madison; 5) help an audience comprehend the role of James Madison at the Constitutional Convention and the First Congress to secure a Bill of Rights; 6) help an audience understand the positions of the Federalists and Antifederalists regarding the ratification of the Constitution and their philosophy of government; and 7) help an audience comprehend Madison's idea on majority rule and minority rights, the rule of law, and a republican government.

Audience participation in a dialogue with James and Dolley is one way to achieve our several instructional goals. An audience that asks questions of the

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<sup>9</sup> Letter of February 26, 1808. Reproduced from the Collections of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Madisons tends to enjoy the presentation more and gains more insight about the writing of the Constitution, *Federalist* essays, and the Bill of Rights, and about political maneuverings in the Early National period. Because each audience, whether students or members of civic groups, differs in knowledge and personality, audience involvement also varies.

To capitalize on audience involvement we generally utilize a press conference format. This technique helps us dramatize and present the life, times, and ideas of the Madisons and the triumphs and tragedies they faced. Dolley "sets the scene" by informally chatting with the audience; her informality is followed by a formal statement by James. Upon completion of President Madison's formal presentation, approximately ten minutes in length, the audience and the Madisons engage in a press conference. Many questions are "planted" in advance to random members of the audience. The following are sample "planted" questions:

You have been called the "Father of the Constitution." When did you first receive this distinction and do you think it is deserved?

You are known for taking notes at the Constitutional Convention. Did other delegates take notes and were they as precise in their notetaking?

Thomas Jefferson is considered one of the great Founding Fathers of our nation. Is it not true that Mr. Jefferson was your "mentor" and that you were merely mimicking this great man?

Mr. Madison, other than Dolley, were there any other women in your life?

Mrs. Madison, how did you react to political events of the day such as the Bill of Rights, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the War of 1812?

Mrs. Madison, how did you try to help your husband's political career? Is it true you protected him at social occasions?

Mrs. Madison, would Mr. Madison have been as successful without you?

What were your greatest successes at the Grand Convention?  
What were your greatest disappointments?

Why was a Bill of Rights not part of the Constitution submitted for ratification?

Do you believe Thomas Jefferson helped or hindered ratification of the Constitution?

What was your position regarding a Bill of Rights? Were you a reluctant architect of the Bill of Rights?

What satisfactions and disappointments did you experience in proposing a Bill of Rights?

Do you think most Americans of the 1790s really cared about their rights?

What do you think of American citizens today? In what ways are you proud of the American character? Are there disturbing characteristics?

Other than the first question, there is no required order or sequence for the audience to ask questions. By "seeding" the audience with prepared questions a dialogue is usually assured and more often than not other questions are asked by members of the audience—some who do not realize that a "seeding" has taken place! In fact, the press conference, which may last as long as one hour (depending on the class), produces spontaneity and an interaction that is difficult to achieve via traditional expository teaching strategies. In most instances, nearly one-half of the press conference questions from the audience are questions we do *not* "plant."

With adult groups and older students we usually provide all of the sample questions and a few additional questions. Adults enjoy the opportunity to engage a figure from the past in conversation relative to the struggles and anxieties of founding a government that has power and yet protects people's liberties. With high school students we focus on the analysis of political ideas. In dramatization with middle school students our intent is to provide a narrative of the Madisons' lives and James Madison's role in writing the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. With elementary students we do not provide any questions. Young students are interested in the lives of James and Dolley Madison, their family members, and their experiences with friends. They, like older audiences, want to know about life at Montpelier, what the Madisons did when growing up, and about their marriage. Young students in particular, are not inhibited to ask questions regarding James and Dolley's early life—and even their death. The dialogue between the Madisons and an audience provides an opportunity for participants, whether young or old, to experience first-hand the historical concept of understanding the decisions and beliefs of individuals in the context of their own time.



### Summary

In her *Teacher's Handbook*, Hilda Taba spoke of the importance of history and social studies education when she said we wish to produce individuals who 1) have a certain kind of knowledge; 2) can process information; 3) have a genuine sense of participation; 4) have a capacity to put themselves in other peoples' or nations' shoes; 5) have a capacity to transcend their own ethnocentric skin; 6) can keep on learning; 7) can face change without trauma; 8) can handle international situations objectively; 9) have loyalties; and 10) have a sense of the complexity of global issues.<sup>10</sup>

The use of drama can certainly contribute to the attainment of each of the above goals and can enhance a student's understanding of historical mindedness.

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<sup>10</sup> Hilda Taba, *A Teacher's Handbook to Elementary Social Studies: An Inductive Approach* (Palo Alto: Addison-Wesley, 1971), 13.