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Once Upon an Arabian Night
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Abstract

The writing process is not often a task that the average high-school student relishes. Yet, there are ways to interweave creativity into certain projects so that high-school students become immersed in an activity and lose themselves in the ensuing excitement. The following paper will show how a variety of writing activities, incorporating concepts of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and Service-Based Learning (SBL), resulted in a puppet show that was written and produced by students, then taken on the road to two very different venues, where the performances were met with great success.

Once upon a time...

Schoolwork for the average high-school student has often been perceived as lacking in relevance for real life (Diaz-Rico, 2004; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). According to Diaz-Rico, “In school, problems are simplified, and there are usually right and wrong answers. Activities are neatly structured to fit within class periods. Teachers evaluate students’ products and effort” (p. 378); yet, other than grades, there are no real long-term consequences. “In contrast to the delimited world of the classroom, the real world is relatively complex and unstructured, and the stakes are enormous” (Diaz-Rico, p. 378). Because of this, there is often a distinct disconnect between what is learned in school and what is needed in real life.

Project-based learning (PBL) seeks to address this problem by encouraging students “to take initiative, seek learning on their own, and take responsibility for the results of their inquiry” (Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 379). As such, in the words of Moss (1998), PBL is “an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop” (p. 1). This, then, results in work that is motivating (Roth-Vinson, 2001), culminating in work that goes beyond the minimum needed for a course grade (Katz & Chard, 1989) and increases students’ feelings of connectedness to the community (Diaz-Rico).

Not only does PBL provide the needed relevancy for today’s youth, it also supports interconnections between various content areas. For example, Giromini (2001) has discussed a program at an urban high school that incorporated history, science, technology, visual arts, communication skills, and English language standards into a major history project presented to faculty, parents, and guests. Diaz-Rico (2004) writes about a similar project in another high school that was carried one step further when it was recorded and transferred to video for all to keep. Another history project, described by Balderas (2001), incorporated aspects of art, writing, history, and technology to create albums which were shared not only with other classes, but also with community groups.
Service-based learning (SBL) is somewhat related to PBL, though the foci are different. In PBL, the students/participants are the primary beneficiaries in that their knowledge and skills have increased, whereas in SBL, the primary beneficiaries are perceived to be those who were served. Furco (1996) defines SBL as “a form of experiential education in which learning flows from service activities” (as cited in Diaz-Rico, 2004, p. 402). As such, learning would be seen as secondary to the service provided. Components of SBL include preparation, followed by performance of the service, and concluding with reflection. These three areas and what they involve will become more evident with the service project described later in this paper.

One type of project that can support students in meaningful, long-term learning is dramatizing literature. Drama has often been used in language teaching as a way of lowering the “affective filter” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and teaching culturally-appropriate interaction (Stern, 1980). It can be even more beneficial when students themselves write their scripts with help from a teacher (see, for example, Burke & O’Sullivan, 2002), or when students completely by themselves, in the words of Carke et al. (in press), “work together to create meaning as they interpret and react to literature.” Beniston (1996) details how to use written text, video, and role-playing to teach West Side Story. Other exemplars of incorporating literature and drama can be found in New Ways of Using Drama and Literature in Language Teaching (Whiteson, 1996) and The Magic of Drama (Finger, 2000). In all of these sources, a common thread runs through: that of encouraging students to use language in a practical manner by negotiating meaning through various speech acts (e.g., suggestions, refusals, hypothesis-making).

A specific type of dramatization, informed by the theoretical framework of Vygotsky (1934/1986), is that of Reader’s Theater. Carke et al. (in press) summarize different techniques for developing this form of drama using literature, textbooks, and existing plays. In Reader’s Theater, actors typically read from scripts, minimizing preparation time and focusing attention on the delivery rather than the memorization of the dialogue. Carke et al. conclude that even the simplest theatrical performance “introduces a sense of authenticity in the classroom because it communicates true emotion, meaning, and realistic language use to a larger audience, [...] allowing language learners to build and then test their communicative ability in front of a real audience. Drama can make language learning relevant and engaging at any age.”

Using the concepts of PBL and SBL, along with ideas from the increasing literature available on the use of drama to teach English language learners (ELLs) (see Carke et al., in press, for an extensive bibliography), the following project evolved. The goals of the project included contextualizing language and literature into real-world use and then extending the resulting dramatization out into the community to serve those in need. This added another layer of learning for the students who found themselves completely immersed in an activity that had positive repercussions for both the performers and their audiences. In the following pages, the first author recounts her experience as teacher, creator, inspirer, project manager, set designer, and director, illustrating an example of PBL and SBL in action.
The Project

Conceiving the Idea

I (Gordon) teach English Language Learners (ELLs) between the ages of 15 and 17 at the high-school level. The participants in this project were all members of my Advanced ESL class, representing eight countries: Afghanistan, Albania, China, El Salvador, Iraq, Mexico, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The project itself was the result of a simple request from one of my Level 4 high-school students during the Fall of 2006. She was a young girl from Afghanistan who had read the story One Thousand and One Arabian Nights in the original Persian, and had then proceeded to watch the Hallmark edition of Arabian Nights (Barron, 1999) starring Mili Avital as Scheherazade and Dougray Scott as her husband Schahriar.

My student said the movie was wonderful and wanted to know if our Advanced ESL English 11 class could watch it together as a class activity. I told her that I would need to preview the film in order to see if it was appropriate for our curriculum. To myself, I thought, “I don’t have time to show lightweight movies that students could easily view at home for their own pleasure.” But I took the film home and decided to see what it was all about. To my delight, a number of clever classroom activities started racing through my head within the first half hour of the film. I was amazed to discover a storyline begging to be turned into a whole unit of study that would revolve around viewing, listening, speaking, writing, and reading.

Before showing the movie to the class, I told them that I had decided to take them on a field trip in the near future. Everyone became excited and called out possible destinations like the zoo, Cedar Point, or Chicago. I told them I was thinking more along the lines of a theater. They started suggesting movies, but I reined them in and said I was thinking more specifically about live theater. The students were intrigued by the idea and agreed. At this, I replied “Great, we’ll be watching the movie Arabian Nights. Afterwards, we will write a script for a puppet show. You’ll create the puppets, and we’ll build a puppet theater. Then, we’ll take

1 Although I had a small class, this activity could obviously be done with a larger group of students, as well. We had to double up on parts; a larger class would not need to. The time frame ended up being five weeks in total. The first week was spent watching the movie and figuring out how to sketch out a summary of the stories within the larger tale. The second week was spent working on dialogue and reported speech. Lessons were taught and students applied the information to their summaries. The third week saw the change in writing style to the script format. Also, a few days were spent in the art room making puppets and designing backdrops. Concurrently, the puppet theater was being built outside of school time at a student’s home. Rehearsals took up the fourth week and a half of the fifth week, with the final few days of the 5th week spent in dress rehearsals. After that, we waited to go on our “field trips” to Hiller Elementary School and Children’s Hospital of Michigan. Since there were several
weeks in between these two performances, we were able to continue with other lessons. However, we built in some occasional dress rehearsals so that we would not forget how to keep our performances running smoothly. Our show on the road.” I have to admit, they were stunned. They wanted the field trip, but they were not clear about the part they had just agreed to do. That was OK. I started up the movie, and they quickly became engaged. I was thrilled; I had them hooked. The film took three days to watch (175 minutes total running time), and then the work began. (For those interested in a detailed plan for carrying out such a project beyond what is offered here, see Edwards, 2000.)

**Story Summary**

For anyone unfamiliar with the basic storyline of this movie, it is based on the classic story of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The story is about a king, Schahriar, whose wife has betrayed him. The king discovers that his wife is having a clandestine affair with his brother. In a fit of rage, the king aims a dagger at his brother’s heart, but the queen throws herself in front of her lover and is killed on the spot. Schahriar is devastated. Sadly, he has little time to grieve. According to the laws of his land, he must find a new queen or risk losing his kingdom to his brother. Of course, he no longer trusts women. He plans a ruse: he will marry but kill the bride the morning after the ceremony. Then he will marry again, and repeat his plan. The girls in the harem hear about this and fear for their lives. Scheherazade – daughter of the king’s adviser – learns what is going on and tells her father that she will marry the king. After all, they were childhood friends, and she knows in her heart that Schahriar is a good man and a good king. She believes she can turn him around and bring him back from the edge of despair and grief. Her father is worried sick but finds he can not change her mind. Scheherazade assures him that she will use wonderful stories to help Schahriar find the good in others. And so the wedding takes place, and the tales begin.

The four stories that Scheherazade tells in the movie are “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,” “Bak Bak the Hunchback,” “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” and “The Three Brothers” (which includes tales about a magic carpet, the apple of life, and a magic telescope). In our puppet theater version of the movie, students acted out the outer story line between Scheherazade and Schahriar, while puppets were used to tell the four inner tales. Four students were chosen to take on the roles of Scheherazade, Schahriar, the king’s adviser, and the king’s doctor. These four students were given the task of writing the script for the outer story. The entire class, along with these four students, was then divided into four groups. Each group was assigned one of Scheherazade’s four tales and required to summarize their story. The scripts came later after lessons were given on dialogue, reported speech, and specific punctuation (names, quotation marks, and end punctuation).

**How to Write a Puppet Show**

The grammar and writing activities built into this puppet project included teaching dialogue, reported speech, and parenthetical notations; reviewing verb tenses as they fit into the above three writing activities; and demonstrating how to use various
types of punctuation, especially quotation marks, commas, colons, semi-colons, and end punctuation (the period, exclamation point, and question mark). There were many re-writes and opportunities for peer editing. Initially, the students were asked to write a summary of their designated storyline. Next, they were taught how to write dialogue. The students were then challenged with their first rewrite assignment: turning a summary into a conversation. After that, they were shown how to write reported speech, which resulted in a second adaptation. Finally, the students learned about the format needed to write a script for the ensuing play. This became the third and final adaptation of each student’s written work. The format now resembled a script with all character names typed along the left-hand margin followed by a colon. Dialogue replaced summaries, and quotation marks were removed. Parenthetical notes were written in to indicate what the puppets would be doing. The characters began to interact, and the stories came alive.

Students were graded individually on worksheets as they initially learned each step of the writing process for dialogue, reported speech, and script writing. They also practiced verb tense, sentence structure, and punctuation. They were graded as a group whenever they handed in a draft of their story (summaries, storyline with dialogue, storyline with reported speech, and storyline written in play format). At one point, each group sat across the hall in the English office for one class hour to watch their particular Arabian Tale one more time. This gave them an opportunity to correct errors in their storyline due to misconceptions or inaccurate memories. The other groups continued to work in the classroom on their storylines.

Changing Between Media

One of the interesting experiences that the students had was learning to change from one medium to another. What they saw on the “silver” screen was not necessarily easy to portray on a small puppet theater stage. There was quite a bit of negotiating involved as students learned to adapt a story to fit the given parameters. After all, there was no way we were going to be able to portray forty thieves riding across the puppet theater stage. However, it was reasonable to use a smaller number of thieves to represent all forty. So, one student found a picture of a thief on a horse and duplicated it multiple times. He then printed out his collage and attached it to a piece of cardboard for stability. In order to make it easier to manipulate the prop, a large Popsicle stick was attached to the base of the cardboard. This was one of several adaptations needed to portray the stories in puppet theater format.

An Old-Fashioned Sewing Bee

While we were all busy working on the outer storyline and the four inside tales, we also discussed the performances. Of great concern was making the puppet shows entertaining. That brought us to a discussion of how to make puppets that would be believable. I arranged for my class to spend a few days in the art room. To our great delight, not only was the art teacher agreeable, she even set aside a work area for us and handed over two large boxes of material that someone had donated. There were yards and yards of fabric and more than a dozen different colors. We had our choice of the
entire bundle: linens, stretch fabrics, crepes, gabardines, corduroys, and velours. My paraprofessional and I stitched a basic puppet that looked like a mitten with two thumbs. Using that as our template, we made several dozen puppets out of five of the fabrics so that there would be a variety from which the students could select. The students used these for the puppets’ basic bodies. I supplied several dozen spools of thread in a rainbow of colors. I also brought in needles, pins, buttons, colorful rickrack, lace, cording, etc. The students were encouraged to use all of these supplies and let their imaginations run free. Some students made the puppet heads out of papier-mâché. Others used tennis balls for heads or white socks for the entire puppet. Trims, miniature ties, and aprons were stitched on. I brought in more than 20 skeins of yarn in a variety of colors so that the puppets would have hair and mustaches where needed. The students had fun.

My paraprofessional had each group tell her what type of backdrop they wanted for their 15-minute puppet sketch. With a lot of input from the students, four different backdrops were designed from our cache of fabrics. My parapro pinned the designs in place (a full moon, a mountain, a tree, a sun, a palace, etc.), took the material home, and using her talents on the sewing machine, stitched up four wonderful backdrops on four different pieces of material (36” x 48” size). She also made a solid black backdrop that was hung six inches from the opening of the puppet theater window stage. We used this black backdrop to hide the students and their puppets while one person reached in and changed the colorful backdrops from one storyline to the next. These colorful backdrops were hung four inches from the window/stage.

**Building a Puppet Theater**

The puppet theater was built by my parapro’s son, who is handy with wood. Using the following dimensions, he built a three-sided puppet theater: 4’x10’ for the front of the theater and two side walls (2’x10’), fastened with long hinges so that the theater could fold down flat or stand up on its own. The window of the theater was cut out in the upper third of the large board. We needed a ledge across the bottom of the window where we could place props or rest puppets. A beautiful deep red velvet curtain, complete with gold fringe and gold braid tie backs, was the perfect finishing touch after painting the puppet theater black and attaching the curtain with a staple gun.

**Rehearsals**

The students decided it would be better to audiotape their storylines because it would be too hard to read a script, turn the pages, and manage all the puppets and props. This is similar to the method of producing Reader’s Theater (Carkin et al., in press). We practiced the scripts again and again until they sounded good. Then we taped, and re-taped, and taped again. What an experience! The classroom phone rang. Someone sneezed. A chair scraped. We finally found a quiet room in the building, and held our breath while each person read his/her part. The scripts sounded good. Phew! After that, it was a matter of listening to the scripts and practicing the motion of the puppets. Meanwhile, the four students who were working on the outside script continued to practice their lines. We had to
coordinate their performance with the start-up of each puppet show, since these four students were also puppeteers. My parapro was in charge of the tape recorder, and pushed the button that would begin each tale just as the students scrambled into place behind the puppet theater. As each puppet show ended, the tape recorder was stopped, the four actors would assemble to the right of the puppet theater, and their tale would continue. One student was responsible for changing the backdrop in preparation for the next storyline, and the next group of puppeteers would gather quietly behind the puppet theater with their array of puppets and props. Within a week, we were ready for show time.

**Taking the Show on the Road: Part One**

I arranged for my students to perform at a nearby elementary school in our district that has 55% ELLs. My principal was so thrilled with our production that he paid for the school bus that took us to and from the elementary school. Three of our boys were responsible for hauling the puppet theater up onto the bus through the back door. The other students were responsible for bringing their individual backdrops, puppets, props, and the tape recorder.

Two hundred elementary students filed into the multi-purpose room to watch our performance. It was a very exciting day. For the first half hour before our audience arrived, my students organized all their puppets and props and positioned and repositioned the puppet theater three times. By the time the children walked in, we were really ready to perform. I gave a brief introduction, explaining what we had done to prepare for the day, then the storyline began, and the performance was underway.

The children loved it. And my students were high as a kite. What a success!!

**Taking the Show on the Road: Part Two**

My students were so thrilled with this experience that they began to beg to go to another elementary school to perform again. I told them I had a different idea in mind. I said I wanted to write to Children’s Hospital of Michigan to see if we might be able to perform there for some sick children who did not get much outside entertainment. My students liked the idea, so I made the phone call.

I learned that there were specific restrictions in place: no stories about death and dying, no mutilations, no performers who might be coming down with a head cold, no loud noises, nothing scary in the storyline, nothing that would upset the children. And...we had to be approved by the hospital committee. I sent in a summary of the project and the stories we would perform. Meanwhile, I told my students we would have to write a “gentle” version of the entire performance. This turned out to be a lot of work. Again, we began to negotiate how to portray different parts of the stories since characters had been strung up (“Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”), killed (“Bak Bak the Hunchback”), or found to be in very poor health and on the edge of death (“The Three Brothers”). But the effort was worth it. We changed the storylines enough to fall within.
the guidelines and still not lose the essence of the tales. Our performance was approved and we prepared to take our show on the road again.

This time our superintendent paid for the bus. She and our Board of Education had been treated to a shortened performance during one of the spring Board meetings. I told them we were hoping to take our production down to Children’s Hospital near Wayne State University’s medical center. Our plan was to give something back to the community since all of my students had come to this country with very little in the way of personal possessions. The community had stepped in to help each of their families get on their feet. This would be our opportunity to give back. Right on the spot, our superintendent said she would cover the cost of the bus. We were on our way.

**Children’s Hospital of Michigan**

Our experience at the hospital was very different than the one at the elementary school. We only had 12 little guests. They were all in hospital gowns or pajamas. Three of them were on IVs. Two of them wore masks over their mouth and nose to protect them from outside germs. One little boy was laying in a red wagon because he was too sick to sit up. My students were stunned but composed.

I had tried to prepare them in advance. To my great joy, my students showed compassion and love beyond what I could have imagined. They made 12-page coloring books to take to these patients with pictures from the four Arabian Tales. They also bought new boxes of crayons to give to each of the children. At the end of their performance, each of my students took a box of crayons and a coloring book and handed it to a child. It was all I could do to keep from crying. I was so proud of them.

**Reflections**

When we returned from the experience at the hospital, I asked my students to reflect on the difference between their two performances. The essays I received from them were very touching. One student wrote:

*When the children first entered the gym at Hiller Elementary, they were loud and happy. They laughed during certain parts of our show. But when the children came into the Activity Room at the hospital, they were really quiet. Most of them did not have the energy to talk, laugh, or participate in the show. Even though these kids did not show emotions during the show, I think deep inside they enjoyed it more than the kids at Hiller. I think when a kid is sick and in the hospital, he doesn’t have the energy for anything. I really learned a lot from this experience.*

In their essays, several of my students noted the difference in the physical structure where they performed their shows. Another student wrote:

*At Hiller, we got to use the gym. It was a really big room with a lot of space. We had a lot of room to move around and perform for a big crowd of kids. But at Children’s Hospital, we had to use the kids’ play room which was*
pretty small. Most of the students in my class thought it was too small because some of us had to wait in the hallway for our turn behind the puppet theater. There just wasn’t enough room for all of us to stay in the Activity Room during the performance. So as I stood outside the doorway looking in, I watched these sick kids. I thought about how sad these children were at the hospital and how sick they were. I could smell all the medicines. That’s when I knew you have to learn to be happy with what you have. That’s what I learned while performing at the hospital.

Another student also found the two experiences to be extremely different from each other. She wrote:

The day I went to Hiller Elementary School, I was so nervous I had butterflies in my stomach. But then I saw the kids and they were so happy to come and see our play, and even happier after the play. This made me really glad because I made others smile. But when I went to Children’s Hospital, I saw that the children were wearing hospital gowns and some of them had IV’s and masks. This made me feel so sorry for them. I felt so bad because they saw a lot in their lives and they are so young. At the school, we were in a very big gym, but at the hospital we put our theater in a playroom that was small as a can for bees. When I saw the kids I did not know if I should cry or be happy. But at the end, we gave them our love and some simple gifts. They liked it but they could not smile because of what they were going through. When I left Hiller Elementary School, I felt like I was done with my job. But when I left Children’s Hospital, I felt like I had been in a different world. I was glad that I made someone else enjoy this day. Even if I did something so simple that made the children be thankful for something, I was amazed. I changed a lot from the time I left Children’s Hospital. I stopped thinking of small things. I started thinking of other people more than I think of myself.

Still another student provided some insight as she reflected on her experience with her classmates at Hiller and at Children’s Hospital:

At first when my English class started to watch “Arabian Nights,” I thought it was like any other time that we watched movies. But from the movies and the stories we wrote, I gained a lot of experiences...Although the trip to Hiller was to tell the stories that we had learned, in my opinion, the trip to Children’s Hospital was for a better cause. At Hiller, the children were hyper, loud, excited, and happy. The room where we performed was very big. There was a lot of room for us to move around and do the stories....The experience at Children’s Hospital was very touching. The kids didn’t have as much energy as the kids at Hiller, but we understood why. These kids were tired, quiet, depressed. And the room where we performed was very small, but we had to adjust to our environment as Mrs. Gordon said....I felt really happy to perform for the kids at the hospital, but I also felt really sad for what they were going through. It was an experience that I will always keep in my heart.
It is clear that my students took stock of their emotions. They wrote about the impact of performing for children with terminal illnesses versus entertaining healthy students who could walk into their school gym on their own power. Their essays reflected their initial shock followed by a newfound sense of compassion. They also realized how lucky they were to be healthy.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the above narrative, the combination of PBL and SBL along with concepts from Reader’s Theater, provides an authentic project that enriches learning in many ways. Students practice speaking and listening skills across a range of speech acts as they negotiate meaning not only on a functional language level, but also at an academic level that will stand them in good stead in the real world. Reading and writing skills develop out of the need to produce a real script for actual use, in multiple formats, which again promotes academic language development in a way that transfers to real life use, not only in the short-term, but for long-term value as well. Because of the degree of negotiation required by such a project and the contextualized, authentic nature of the task, students learn at a much higher level than what is usually encountered in the school situation, developing critical thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, synthesis, and application of knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, the students in this project took their knowledge outside of the school walls, to the community of which they are a part, and shared their newfound knowledge and excitement with others. Not only did they expand their own knowledge of language and literature, they also shared a piece of themselves with a vulnerable population, giving of themselves and becoming emotionally invested in others—hallmarks of true education.

Author Note

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