

A Living History Classroom Using Re-Enactment to Enhance Learning

Mark L. Daniels

The otherwise rowdy class quiets as a man in colonial period clothing, carrying a muzzle-loading rifle, with a tomahawk through his belt, enters the classroom. After tipping his tri-corner hat to the teacher and wishing her “Good Morrow,” he turns to the class and says, “Before I introduce myself, I request permission to make an inquiry of you. As I passed through your outer courtyard this day, I noticed a large number of what appeared to be closed carriages or wagons, but they had no tongue and there were no horses, mules, or oxen present. Could someone quench my curiosity and explain how these means of conveyance function?”

With these few sentences, students are engaged in higher-level thinking; they are cooperating with one another and trying to explain to an apparently 300-year-old man how a motor vehicle operates. They are explaining fuel (“Gas, I do not understand!”) and comparing/contrasting with lamp oil, explaining horsepower verses actual horses and how the cars are driven. The students are using their thinking and explanation skills in a rigorous manner.

Now, one might think this was an advanced class, an AP class, or some other class in which the students normally excelled. In fact, the class was a “special education” class at an alternative school, one where the students attending had been relocated from their regular school for a variety of reasons including discipline problems. Bringing a “character” into the classroom brought history to life. The students were learning without knowing they were learning.

Does this mean that we need to bring re-enactors into our classrooms

to engage students? Not at all. However, we as teachers can bring the excitement of the re-enactment experience into our classrooms on a regular basis. Become, as much as possible, a 14-year-old again. If you can place yourself in that position, you can make the class valuable for your students. A student holding a musket ball is more likely to understand the impact of this item on the human body. Wearing a cowboy hat when lecturing about cattle trails puts the students in the spirit of the period. Having the students enhance presentations by donning costume parts or carrying objects related to their talk grabs the attention of their audience even more than using technology.

A good example of this came in an 8th grade U.S. history class a few years ago. The students were making presentations of their end-of-semester projects in which they were to research particular Native American tribes or nations and explain facts about the group they had studied, including housing, religion, food, clothing, and culture. Several students

had developed Power Point or Photo Story/Moviemaker presentations, which were well done and well received. Then one young lady stole the show with no advanced technology.

Using the resources she had at home, she built a fake campfire on an earth-colored (painted) board, with dead tree branches over Christmas lights, which she plugged in to simulate the fire burning. Then, after asking her classmates to clear the desks from the center of the room, she sat the class around the fire, put on a replica (home made) native shirt and headgear, and told stories from the culture of the tribe she had studied. After getting the classes attention with the stories, they listened intently to her explanation of all the other aspects of life in the tribal culture. She even passed a “Peace Pipe” around the circle for question time. The other students could only ask a question or make a comment when the pipe reached them, much as her research had shown happened at the tribe’s council fires.

Why did this work? The student and her classmates were having fun. Low tech, not high tech, won the day. Not because we should not be using high tech, but because “real life” articles and actions get the students involved in a subject. The student used minimal re-enactment and was able to teach in a very effective manner.

Mark Daniels portrays "Benjamin Hewes" (based on one of his ancestors), a colonial militiaman from 1759, during a lesson on the French and Indian War, at Vista Lakes Elementary.



Does this only apply in a history class? No, it can apply across the curriculum as well. Will students listen to the theory of relativity more intently if is presented by "Professor Einstein"? (The teacher wearing a crumpled sports coat and messing up their hair or wearing a messy wig can give this effect, especially if he or she talks in a professorial tone.) They might and if they do, you have just enhanced learning in your science class! When reading a Greek tragedy in a literature class, students could take turns reading from a podium and wearing a toga (a white bed sheet draped over their shoulders); this may help set the tone and better convey the message.

A teacher explaining quadratic equations could don a hard hat and explain how the equation can be used in developing building plans. This helps connect the real world with what they are learning. How about teaching angles and trajectory? Putting on a football or soccer jersey might drive home the point. Of course, these re-enactment methods cannot, and should not, be used all the time, or they lose impact. But if used sparingly, the methods can bring learning to life for the students in your classroom.

So how does the average teacher develop characters to use in their classroom? Study character. Use your imagination and put in place a character that will relate to the topic that is being learned in your classroom on a particular day.

One valuable resource is a recent book by Dr. Joyce Thierer, *Telling History: A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives*.¹ In her book, Thierer details how to develop first-person characters and use them in classroom settings. While I only obtained it recently, I have greatly benefitted from the insights and instruction given in this book and would recommend it for any teacher as a place to get started.

I would say, start simply and small. The first time you "become" a character, you might consider just being a greeter at your room door. If you will be discussing the Civil War, wear a Union or Confederate soldier's Kepi (cap). These are very inexpensive at toy stores or online. If you plan a little ahead, the day after Halloween is a great time to buy costumes at a reduced rate; you can build a whole supply of enhancements to be used by you or by students.

There are many companies that sell period clothing and equipment. It is as simple as using a search engine and looking for "Civil War clothing" or "18th Century clothing." You will be amazed how many people are making what you need. But before spending money for accurate items, be sure they are indeed accurate, such as patterns on specific uniforms. Just as we would scrutinize a primary source, study the costume to determine its validity.

Once you get started, if you get hooked, then you can develop specific characters for specific time periods. This takes research, because it is about a particular individual. Choosing a non-famous person gives you a little more latitude, as people generally know little or nothing about them. With a character of this nature, you can teach about the general period rather than about the individual. If you "become" George Washington, you will teach about Mr. Washington, but if you "become" an officer in the Continental Army serving with Washington, you can teach about life as a soldier, life in the colonies, etc., giving yourself more flexibility. The most important thing is to have fun with the process. If it becomes a chore, you will most likely not make the best use of this teaching tool.

So put on a strange hat, bring an object into your class, or have your students dress up. You are only limited by your own imagination and resources. 🎭

Note

1. Joyce M. Thierer, *Telling History: A Manual for Performers and Presenters of First-Person Narratives* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2009).

MARK DANIELS is a social studies specialist with Orange County Public Schools in Orlando, Florida. In addition to Benjamin Hewes, he portrays Brother Patrick (a crusader/monk from the first crusades), Roger Crarey (a wagon master in the trans-Mississippi westward expansion of the 1840s), and Samuel A. Daniels, a soldier with the 3rd Iowa Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War. Daniels can be reached at mark.daniels@ocps.net.