Simulation and Character Ownership in Secondary-Dramatic Literature Education

Popular abstract: This case study examines the effectiveness of incorporating role-playing and simulation techniques into a high school classroom in order to improve student's mastery of the themes and structure of an American play. After incorporating three techniques to encourage student empathy toward the characters in Arthur Miller's The Crucible, the teacher compared students' grades during this unit to their grades earlier that year and to the grades of the previous year's students during the drama unit. Grades were measurably higher when the teacher applied these role-playing techniques. Both general education and special education students improved their analysis of the play's themes and structural elements, as measured in daily assignments, quizzes, and exams. Despite limitations in the data, such as limited access to the grades of the previous years' students and a relatively small sample of special education students, role-playing techniques are a promising tool for secondary educators in the dramatic literature classroom.

Josh T. Jordan
joshtjordan@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Live-action role-play (larp) and simulation have growing support in secondary and post-secondary education as tools to increase student engagement and to raise subject comprehension and retention. This paper seeks to explore how certain role-play techniques, specifically three techniques related to character ownership, affect student comprehension in a high school literature class. Do role-play techniques measurably improve student mastery of state-mandated knowledge and skills over the course of the unit? Previous research suggests that simulation can be used as an educational tool. "Certainly, the idea of using simulation and videogames for educational purposes is far from new…" (Frasca 2004, 89.) There is even evidence that simulations involving role-play specifically aid Language Arts education. "Edu-larp is also exceptionally useful in the study of Language Arts, including public speaking, secondary language acquisition, and exploration of literature" (Bowman 2014, 117).

I teach high school American Literature, which includes drama, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction reading, and a variety of writing and speaking skills. American Literature is a required class for juniors, seniors who did not pass it as juniors, and sophomores who plan to graduate early. Included in my class are ESL students, who are learning English as a second language, and Special Education students, who have some diagnosed learning disability or medical condition that interferes with their learning. In other words, I teach all kinds of students at the school except the subset of Special Education students who have severe enough disabilities that they cannot function in a classroom with general education students.

Since the drama unit in a high school English class, in which students read aloud from a famous play, already resembles a simulation, I decided to integrate role-playing techniques into that unit and measure how those techniques affected my students' daily grades and exam grades. During the drama unit, students imagine a fictional scene, speak as characters in that scene, and react as both audience and co-participants with their classmates. To these simulation elements, I added three role-playing techniques and then measured their grades to see if those techniques helped the students.

2. INSTRUCTIONAL CONDITIONS

In the United States, in order to evaluate whether a teacher has succeeded in teaching a class, state education agencies assign lists of specific skills and content for each class. For American Literature in Texas (according to the Texas Education Code, Chapter 110. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading,) there are two skills that directly pertain to the drama unit, TEKS 2, A through C, and TEKS 4. These skills are listed in subchapter §110.33. English Language Arts and Reading, English III (One Credit), Beginning with School Year 2009-2010. They are as follows:

> "(2) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Theme and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about theme and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to: (A) analyze the way in which the theme or meaning of a selection represents a view or comment on the human condition;

> (B) relate the characters and text structures of mythic, traditional, and classical literature to 20th and 21st century American novels, plays, or films; and (C) relate the main ideas found in a literary work to primary source documents from its historical and cultural setting."
>
> "(4) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Drama. Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of drama and provide evidence from text to support their understanding. Students are expected to analyze the themes and characteristics in different periods of modern American drama."

I measured my students using exam grades, including written tests and quizzes, and daily grades, including worksheets, group discussions, and answers to teacher's questions aloud. Success would mean improvement in scores for TEKS 2 and 4 for all the demographic groups in class.

Texas Education Agency reports that during the 2014-2015 school year, Terrell High School had 1,082 students enrolled. Of these, 54.5% were male, 45.5% were female. The ethnic breakdown as reported by the students' parents was 42.1% Hispanic, 29.5% White, 25.0% Black or African American, 2.5% Two or More Races, 0.5% Asian, and less than 0.5% American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian. In other words, the students are mainly from three ethnic groups, Hispanic, White, and African American. These students attend Terrell High School in Terrell ISD, an independent school district in Texas. According to Texas Education Agency, during the 2014-2015 school year, 74.1% of students in the Terrell ISD school district qualified as economically disadvantaged. Over two-thirds of the students in this district (67.5%) qualify for free lunch based on their low family income. In other words, the students at this school mostly come from low-income families.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

As Bowman and Standiford (2015) have shown, edu-larp can increase motivation and interest and perceived competence in the subject. The three role-play techniques I incorporated this year are a successful use of edu-larp-like elements if they quantifiably help me to teach TEKS 2 or 4 (or both) to more of my students. To be considered a success, there must be data that shows an increase in student daily grades and unit exams after I used these techniques.

During this unit, my students, who are high school juniors, and I read aloud an entire play, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. As we read the play this year, I did the following: First, I **assigned the same students to read the main three parts** for the whole play. In each period, the same person read John Proctor every day. Likewise, with Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor. My intent was to encourage the students to feel a sense of ownership for their character. It also helps the rest of the students remember a character when the same student reads him every day. If Curtis always read Abigail, students should remember what Abigail did yesterday.

Second, at least every other day, I interrupted the reading to **ask students what one of the characters should choose to do next**. In other words, I asked them to empathize with a specific character and hypothesize what they would do next in that character's situation. My intent was to encourage students to analyze the events of the scene and the motivations of the characters. This game element relies on the importance of choice to character development and to game play. As game theorists Hindmarch and Tidball (2008) explain, "All variations on gameplay stem from two core types of alterations: expanding choices and restricting choices." If I ask students whether John Proctor should admit to adultery in order to stop Abigail's witch hunt, I am challenging them to empathize with John.

Third, when reviewing or explaining events in the plot of the play, I frequently **switched the name of the character with the name of the student** reading that character. For example, instead of saying, "When Abigail Williams accused Elizabeth Proctor of being a witch, what did John Proctor do next?" I would say, "When Miguel accused Carla of being a witch, what did Tyson do next?" My intent was to encourage students to increase comprehension and retention by associating the fictional characters with real, visible people. In role-playing circles, at least in my experience, it is common to refer to someone both by their real name and their character name. This casually reinforces the player group's emotional connection to the fictional world.

I chose these particular role-play techniques because I wanted to treat the dramatic readings more like playful simulations, and less like assigned in-class readings. This was not a gamification of drama in the sense of an achievement system. It was instead a gamification in the sense that it encouraged the

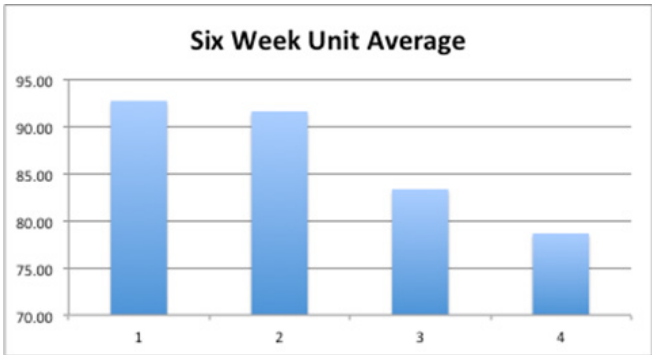
students to be playful and engaged. (For games as play, not points, see Reimer 2011.) We treated the play less like a quiz and more like a collaborative story. (Compare to how Hergenrader (2011) used role-playing to teach collaborative fiction writing.) In other words, I theorized that the students would learn the stage play better if they were allowed to "play" with it, according to Zimmerman's (2014, 159) definition of play, "Play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system."

In order to evaluate the students' grades most effectively, I would compare their assignments to the previous year's. However, there is a limitation in the specificity of my data. Our school changed grading systems this year, so I am unable to access specific grades from last year at a student-by-student level. I have instead a quantitative comparison of how the students did overall in each unit, e.g. whether they scored higher in the Drama Unit than in Research or Poetry. I also have a qualitative sense as their teacher to how well they understood the material.

According to this qualitative and limited quantitative measure, the grades for the Drama Unit this year were noticeably higher than other units. This is usually one of the six week units when students have the lowest average grade. This year Unit 2 had the second highest average grade (See Figure 1. Each blue bar represents a six week unit on a different English subject. The Drama Unit had the second highest grades.) The only unit in which students scored higher was Unit 1, short stories and historic nonfiction, which students spend most of sophomore year practicing. Given that students had not studied drama during the previous year, they did remarkably well on tests of TEKS 2 and 4. The data shows that when students can understand why characters are acting a certain way, when students feel invested in the story, then reading the play is more fun and therefore, more relevant. "But regardless of what method, motivation, or type of interaction the author chooses, the real heart of the interactive narrative is the relevance of the story to the people who are doing the reading." (Meadows 2003, 231).

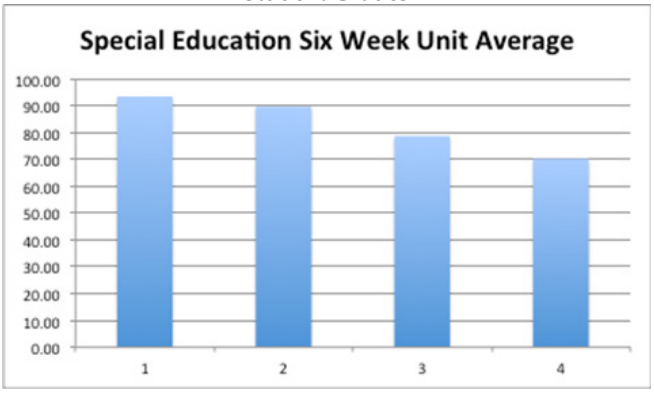
One immediate check on that success would be if the special education (SPED) students' grades lagged drastically behind the general education students. Role-play techniques that do not work for SPED students would be of limited value, since these are among our most at-risk students.

Figure 1: Six Week Unit Average of Student Grades



However, this was not the case. SPED students did almost as well as general education students during the drama unit. On a scale of 0 to 100, where 70 and above is passing, there was less than a 5% overall difference in grades between SPED and general education (gen ed) students. That is remarkable. (See Figure 2. Again, each blue bar represents a six-week unit of study).

Figure 2: Six Week Unit Average of Special Education Student Grades



The most surprising result is how well the students did on their quizzes and exams during the drama unit. I expected the role-play techniques to help students' daily grades, since role-play is fun, and students who are having fun tend to do better on their daily work, e.g. worksheets, reading aloud, group discussion, etc.. However, students also did well on their exams. They did almost as well on the toughest drama assignment, a unit final exam, as they did on an average assignment in any other unit. Students' average Drama Unit test grade was only 2% lower than their average grade for the whole year. (Students are graded on a scale from 0 to 100. 70 and above is passing.) Once again, the SPED students' grades echo the general education students' results. Both groups scored only 2% lower on their drama *exams* as they did on regular *assignments* the rest of the year. That is very unusual.

In conclusion, based upon the measurement of average daily and test grades, which are based on student mastery of TEKS 2 and 4, both general education and SPED students did better than expected during the drama unit when I added three role-play techniques to the classroom.

4. LIMITATIONS OF ANALYSIS

There are at least three limitations to the strength of the data and to the firmness of our conclusions. First, there is no specific data from last year's students with which to do a point by point comparison. Because the school district switched grading software this fall, I no longer have access to the grades of last year's students. That essentially means that I don't have a good control group to quantify how helpful the role-playing techniques are. What I do have is the relative ranking of each six-week unit. Last year's students' scores for drama were the second lowest of six units. This year, their scores are the second highest of the six units.

The second limitation to the strength of the data is sample size. I have data for 150 high school juniors. This is a non-trivial number, but it would be even better if the results included students from other schools using the same three techniques.

The third limitation to the strength of the data is the sample size of the special education (SPED) students. Although their data is a good check to make sure that the role-playing techniques are helping all students, even our most at-risk, it is hard to make strong conclusions about how these techniques affect SPED students, since I have less than 20 in my classes.

CONCLUSION

The data is encouraging. Students demonstrated a quantifiably better mastery of the required TEKS when learning was treated more like a game. Learning games are fun, and they encourage a "special reality" (Balzer 2015). When students inhabit that special reality, when they imagine themselves as the characters in the play, they gain an intrinsic motivation (as described by Bowman and Standiford 2014) that translates into better test scores for both general education and special education students. I recommend encouraging students to identify with characters in the story, asking them what characters should do next, and interchanging names for a student and her character. These techniques improved student learning.

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BIO

Josh T. Jordan is a high school English and ESL teacher in Texas. He is the designer of analog role-playing games such as *Heroine*, *Doll*, and *Singularity*. He earned Bachelor's degrees in English Literature, Classics, and Linguistics from the University of Iowa and a Master's Degree in Theology from Dallas Theological Seminary.