
STORY, SETTING AND DRAMA - A NEW LOOK AT ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to present the Pullenvale Process as an on-going curriculum approach that has been extensively studied and shown to be effective. It offers tangible evidence of success in organising visits to a Field Study Centre.

The Field Study Centre

A Field Study Centre is any natural or urban setting where environmental education programs are offered to visiting groups. Queensland has sixteen such Centres within the Education Department in addition to independent venues. Similar Centres exist in other States and overseas.

The Curriculum Problem Identified

How can an environmental education curriculum be designed for Field Study Centres to achieve maximum learner impact and involvement?

This question has challenged a host of educators. "The Pullenvale Process" offers a novel solution which selects themes from within a social-ecological framework and interprets them through story, setting and drama.

Themes for the Curriculum

Pullenvale has chosen Social Ecology as the framework within which environmental education content themes are selected in the belief that the social and the ecological cannot be separated.

Australia's environmental history, from settlement to now, is dominated by two broad themes - the utilitarian the aesthetic. Clearing of scrub, pastoral interests and the introduction of exotic plants and animals resulted in landscape imprints which affected the quality of life and raised today's issues. They provide a wealth of themes for environmental education.

Story, Setting and Drama

Individuals are receptive to stories because information is communicated easily in a relaxed and entertaining way. Children come to know the world through abstract concepts like security and fear, love and hate, expectation and satisfaction, hope and disappointment. If information is presented in these terms, content achieves immediate appeal.

At Pullenvale, ideas are enhanced by authentic settings which provide a means of verification. Abstract ideas are

experienced in physical form. This interaction encourages the attainment of personal knowledge. Real settings satisfy a desire for authenticity.

Drama allows content and setting to be drawn into the learner's inner world. It encourages individuals to change and rearrange content into forms that are personal and meaningful by question, experiment and a search for understanding. Drama inspires individuals to play and to have fun.

While drama offers unique opportunities for growth and new understandings, learning is, however, entirely individual and in many ways unpredictable. The educator who uses this process must be prepared for change and adaptation of the content as the story evolves.

Design Method: An Example

"The Settlers" Drama

At Pullenvale a design model is applied to an historical land-use theme in "The Settlers" drama. It has been developed as a one-day, single-visit program in three parts. It ties into Year 5 Social Studies with pre-visit and post-visit resource materials.

The aims of the drama are to assist children to understand why many early settlers' visions were environmentally destructive. It asks how the quality of life was affected. It attempts to verify understandings within real settings. Content is personalised through imaginative play and drama. Children are engaged in experiences which attempt to solve particular environmental problems.

From February to November, 1986 "The Settlers" drama was researched and trialled as a curriculum hypothesis.

Theme Story

In creating a believable story, the following questions were asked:

- * What specific aspect of the theme should be chosen?
- * How would a personal dimension be created?
- * What historical sequence of events would best illustrate the theme?

A poem published in 1867 described the movement of English families from their farms to the squalid industrial towns. An Emigration Agent gives them new hope. They immigrate to Moreton Bay.

Agricultural damage caused by the 1893 floods was supported by photographs, newspaper articles, diaries, letters and official reports. From an abundance of archival material flowed a rich stream of ideas. A local resident with vivid recollections of her grandparents' struggle to survive those floods at their homestead provided a personal story in warm colloquial language.

It was possible to build a fictional story with strong links in reality. The settlers make plans to fulfill their visions of farm life. To finance their dream, they borrow from a "loan shark" who presses his land upon them. Rumours of a terrible tragedy in the same district make them wary. A letter arrives unexpectedly, warning them. A secret meeting is arranged. They learn of disastrous floods which previously devastated the farms they hope to purchase. A deception is exposed. The settlers see how plans to bankrupt them can be thwarted. They discover that unity with the land can bring them a secure life.

Authentic Settings

The story calls for a number of simple settings. The Field Study Centre provides the major location but also allows access to a variety of other settings not otherwise available to schools. For example, in an old-world garden, villagers meet a widow who has been evicted. The Squire's bailiff sits before the rent collection table under a large, spreading fig-tree. A factory scene is recreated within the dimly-lit drama room hung with dark curtains and furnished with oddments of antique machinery. The room is converted to the "loan-shark's" offices by maps, notices and office paraphernalia. The students explore an historic barn filled with evidence of many generations of successful farmers.

Drama Sequence

Before visiting the Centre, schools receive a Program Booklet which describes a range of activities to prepare them for the drama. Children research and develop individual characters. Costumes are improvised to reinforce drama, setting and story.

On the day-visit, the story falls naturally into three segments. The morning period covers events from the eviction to the decision to emigrate. The middle period focuses on the dealings in the "loan-shark's" office and subsequent settlers' meetings. An afternoon visit to a nearby farm discovers evidence of good farming practices. Brief audio visual presentations, "props" and museum artifacts create atmosphere, mood and understanding.

It is possible to extend the drama beyond Pullenvale by post-visit classroom work which further develops an appreciation of the chosen theme. Possibilities are created for teachers to integrate process writing, art, language, literature and social studies within an on-going drama.

The Curriculum Journey

"The Settlers" drama has been described in its current form. It would be misleading, however, if the task of developing the program was ignored.

The path was often unclear and the journey extremely frustrating. As there were no magic formulae, the staff slowly learned to push through the difficult periods until insights came. This was exciting design, active and alive, with successes and failures. Curriculum was experienced as a cyclic process when theory and practice were continually revitalised. This design style was eventually drawn into a more systematic action research method - plan, act, observe, reflect.

The Morning Segment

The "arrival activity" has always been critical to "The Settlers" drama. When groups first step from their bus, the fate of the drama is decided. Commitment and belief must be achieved quickly.

Initially, staff attempted to create belief through lengthy discussion and 'teacher talk'. This failed. A visiting British drama teacher demonstrated a new use of "teacher-in-role". She immediately introduced herself as the evicted widow. The response was stunning. Without hesitation, the group joined in. Genuine shared emotion was sufficiently powerful to propel a group into dynamic action.

Pullenvale staff learned to explore hope and expectation, despair and

disappointment, and to build the morning segment around an inter-play of friendship, loyalty and betrayal. Content ideas entered the "inner world" of individuals. It gave strength and provided an emotional thread which linked the village, factory and emigration into a free-flowing story-drama.

Middle Segment

Morning tea is a diversion that imposes severe strain on a drama sequence. It is necessary to re-establish excitement about selecting land in a new Colony. Energy must be directed towards the need to nurture the land if the settlers are to survive.

Initially, staff tried to build an understanding of flood devastation by creating an imaginative scene where victims, surrounded by their pitiful belongings, huddled around open fires and shared stories of their ordeal. The sequence failed to capture the students' imagination. A geographer was invited as a "critical friend" and posed the question: "How can students feel loss if no emotional bonds to the land have been established?" The sequence was revitalised with settlers selecting land, planning farms, and then seeing them washed away moments before their visions of prosperity are realised. This improvement offered a glimpse of what might be achieved but still lacked commitment.

Another opinion was sought. A drama lecturer focussed on the need for a strong character to emerge, one who would draw out the settler's hopes and dreams and then dash them on the point of fulfillment. The drama evolved to include a Bank Manager but the sequence was a predictable ritual. It did not excite the imagination.

A break-through was achieved when the "hidden agendas" of life, theatre and drama suggested by a speaker at a National Drama Conference were applied to "The Settlers". Key characters needed to play dual roles - "role-within-role" - so that atmosphere, mystery and expectation could be created. The unknown and the unseen are imagined and provide spark and vitality.

The "hidden story" now revolves around rumours about a group of earlier selectors who, through ignorance, lost all they had

worked towards. "The Settlers" must learn from the mistakes of others or risk the same fate. How can they discover a way to work with the land and not against it?

Afternoon Segment

This segment allows the understandings gained in the drama to be verified within authentic settings. Children visit a nearby historic farmstead where they explore a dilapidated barn. Farm machinery, tools, implements, harness and a variety of small artifacts are roughly scattered on the dirt floor or hung loosely from beams and stalls. Iron trunks contain a velvet gown, cotton blouses and a Victorian dress jacket. Old books, a broken perfume bottle, photos, a purse full of coins and a letter hidden in a secret compartment of a jewelry box await discovery. An air of mystery prevails as light filters through nail holes in the iron roof. Who were these pioneers? Were they successful farmers? How did they relate to the land?

Lifestyles can be imagined from the clues. In a Sharing Circle, children recreate "The Settlers" vision of land use. Teachers collect the children's ideas, language and word pictures for post-visit classroom work which can be integrated into a variety of lessons.

Conclusion

"The Settlers" is now a sophisticated learning experience. Whilst sequence structures remain stable, its characters are dynamic and fluid. As staff continue to grow in confidence and self esteem, they are prepared to take risks with the drama and trust their own intuition. Mastery of drama control techniques is critical to the development of this confidence.

The Field Study Centre now offers eight unique programs. Each has been designed through the Pullenvale Process. The opportunity exists to apply it to a myriad of other settings and contexts - an old railway station, convict goal, pioneer church or almost any historic setting.

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