

**Scripting the Curriculum:
A History of Students Dramatizing Content Information**

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Abstract

Prior to the 1990s, the term “arts integration” rarely—if ever—appeared in educational literature. The term may be new, but educators have been involving students in arts learning processes for centuries. In particular, teachers have long harnessed the power of drama to engage students in arts-integrated learning activities. Articles and books published between 1903 and 2018 reveal that student-written scripts comprised classroom learning activities in social studies, literature, and even science courses. Briefly contextualized in prevailing American educational ideologies, this research examines the history of the use of scriptwriting as an educational tool, sharing what teachers and students did, how they did it, how they described it, and why they endorse scriptwriting as a learning activity. The generations of teachers who authored the articles about their practices report academic and social benefits for their students as well as professional satisfaction for themselves. Their ideas, methods, topics, and insights may serve as validation and motivation for current educators. The goal of this research is to encourage today’s educators by familiarizing them with the significant history of this work and challenging them to continue to promote and implement artistic ways of learning.

Keywords: arts integration, scriptwriting, historical research in arts education, history of script writing in schools, arts in education, educational drama, drama in education

Scripting the Curriculum: A History of Students Dramatizing Content Information

Arts integration is a relatively new educational term, rarely—if ever—appearing in the literature before the 1990s. It refers to classroom learning activities that incorporate aspects of the work of visual or performing artists to explore non-arts curriculum areas. Based on intensive work done in classrooms locally and nationally, the Education Department of The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts developed this description: “Arts integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in the creative process to explore mutually-reinforcing connections between an art form and another curriculum area to meet evolving objectives in both” (Duma & Silverstein, 2014).

Contemporary proponents of arts integration, as referenced in the article by Duma and Silverstein (2014), affirm that its methods reach students of all aptitudes and backgrounds, increasing their confidence, knowledge, and abilities. Student engagement springs from the enthusiasm of being involved in a creative process and getting to think and work as artists do. Arts integrated learning activities promote collaboration, imagination, incentive for investigation of a topic, and safe opportunities to be creative.

The term “arts integration” may be new, but educators interested in motivating students and providing them with purposeful classroom activities have been involving students in arts learning processes for centuries. Teachers have long harnessed the power of drama, in particular, to engage students and involve them in higher order thinking skills to create, transform, and synthesize content information. There are many educational uses of drama—strategies that involve role-playing, re-enactments, and improvisation, for example.

Because my own work in arts integration beginning in 1995 evolved into a focus on writing and performing scripts about curriculum content with students in grades 3 - 12, I wanted to examine the history of the use of script writing as an educational tool. My research question was “How have educators (primarily in the United States) documented their use of student-written scripts as learning tools in K-12 classrooms?” I searched for articles and books written by educators who described the script writing that they implemented in classrooms. The earliest article I located was published in 1903, so the time frame of this research extends from the start of the 20th century to the present. My goal for this article is to share the great variety of classroom activities I collected by including specific examples and the language, as much as possible, of each writer. I wanted to avoid lengthy parenthetical references to authors and dates that substantiate findings but offer the reader little more than a name and title to look up if they want to learn *what* was done. I sought to go beyond just an overview of names, dates, and synopses of arts integration (even if the term was not used) activities and tell the story of what these educators and their students did, how they did it, how they described it, and share whether they encountered any complications and why they endorsed script writing as a classroom learning activity.

1900 – 1920: Encouraging Active Learning, Stimulating the Slothful, Portraying the Pilgrims

Back in 1903, American educator Anna Buckbee wrote an article in which she argued that school needed to be “a place of activity instead of a place where the children sit still and

receive passively what is given to them” (p. 110). Her solution for encouraging active learning in history class: “having the students write the play and act it is undoubtedly the best” (p. 109). She found that playwriting motivated her students to “make the most careful research in order to get the right atmosphere and sufficient details” (p. 109) because even the attitudes of students who are reluctant to do research change when they need the additional knowledge and facts for their play.

Buckbee also addressed an ongoing concern of teachers regarding writing scripts as a classroom activity: “The objection is sometimes made to dramatic work in school that it takes too much time. It does take time, but it is time well spent, which cannot be said of all the time used for history as it is commonly taught” (p. 111). Her belief was that the real way to save time in school “is to teach a few vital things each year so well that they need never to be taught again. This can be accomplished in history by a skillful use of drama, which in the long run saves time rather than waste it” (p. 111).

Other educators echoed Buckbee’s conviction about involving children in writing plays about history. In 1907, Helen Purcell of the Illinois State Normal University, a teacher’s college, wrote, “The curriculum of every school, dry and bare as it sometimes appears to be, presents living material for dramatization” (p. 513). When she suggested that fifth graders write a play about the Pilgrims to Massachusetts in the 1600s, and then present it for their parents and friends, “[t]here was a quick awakening. We could not decide then what part of the history of the pilgrims we would take as the subject of our play, as we had studied but a small portion of it. You can see that there was an immediate incentive for further investigation, especially as the subject was to be decided by the children. I have never seen more interest displayed by a class than that which those children possessed. They ransacked the library for books and even dry autobiographies were eagerly read and passed around” (p. 513).

Other educators also advocated for student-written plays based on class readings. In their 1908 article “The Making of a Play,” authors Mabel Dryer and Margaret Brown described how seventh graders created a play based on *The Talisman* by Sir Walter Scott. “The text was carefully read and the sequence of events outlined. Then followed the writing of the play as a class exercise. In order to have the children feel the life of the time as much as possible, it seemed desirable to use the language of Scott as far as this was consistent with our plan” (p. 423). This article concludes with the students’ 10-page script that contains lines like “Who goes there?” and “Who art thou that would approach my post?”

“Much of the composition work in school is done with no apparent end in view,” Sarah Woodbury complained in her 1909 book *Dramatization in the Grammar Grades*. Her antidote: “To write a play of their very own, to be given by themselves, satisfies the sense of ownership so strong in children, and at the same time offers to the teacher a large opportunity for the cultivation of correct form and expression” (p. 9). Woodbury found the writing and performing of original plays to be “...a motive adequate for the most ambitious and stimulating to the most slothful” (p. 9). She did, however, state her own standards when it came to dramatizing literature: “it is unwise to dramatize even good pieces of literature if they contain incorrect English. A dialect story may be a bit of real literature, and charming in its way, but it is entirely unsuited for dramatization in the [grammar] grades” (p. 9). Her recommendation was to stick with myths, legends, and classics. Regarding the written script, Woodbury included practical warnings: “A teacher should neither expect nor require highly finished work. If it bears the mark of childish effort it will necessarily contain many errors— Errors of proportion, of structure, and

of expression— just as do all other forms of children’s compositions. The teacher should be a guide, leading pupils from ‘better up to best,’ rather than a gardener, pruning until little of the original stalk remains” (p. 11).

Like others before and after her, Woodbury involved students in writing a play about the pilgrims. Her sixth graders researched books on the topic, and she provides an explanation of the playwriting process: “Much of the dialogue was written by children and teacher together, one child giving a part, the others offering criticisms and suggestions. It was afterwards placed upon the blackboard and its merits still further discussed by the class. Some portions were acted first and then written, as the words came warm and glowing from the speaker’s lips; other portions, written by the children at home, were read and criticized by the pupils and approved or rejected. The best parts of several pupils’ work were often combined. Before a scene was finally accepted, it was acted, the parts being assigned to different groups of children. . . . This trial of the scene tested its value, and many of their mistakes were here corrected, the children being very quick to see what should be substituted or omitted” (pp. 13-14).

In 1912, British educator Harriet Finlay-Johnson wrote an influential and frequently referenced book (especially among American educators) called *The Dramatic Method of Teaching*. Her dramatic method endorsed having upper elementary school students (ages 9 -14 years old) research, write, rehearse, and perform plays to learn about various topics, a method that was clearly student-centered and driven. She was adamant that “the play must be the child’s own. . . . However crude the action or dialogue from the adult’s point of view, it would fitly express the stage of development arrived at by the child’s mind, and would therefore be valuable to him . . . rather than a finished product. . . .” (p. 7). Published over a century ago, her words resonate with contemporary teachers who rebel against rote learning: “Surely [there are such habits] more valuable foundation for a life’s career than the mere ability to . . . spell a large number of extraordinary words, . . . work a certain number of sums on set rules . . . or to be able to read whole pages of printed matter without being able to comprehend a single idea or to originate any new train of thought” (p. 9).

Finlay-Johnson prescribed a specific order for the kinds of plays that students should write, beginning with those based on history. “The point I should particularly like to emphasize is that the earliest plays should deal with *real* persons. Children are generally sincere and most interested in a story that is true” (p. 13). Next, her students dramatized the stories that they read, “supplying deficiencies in dialogue” as well as including dialogue from the book. In adapting these plays from literature, Finlay-Johnson noted that her students read for a purpose—“for information and immediate profit”—and wrote for a purpose—“for preservation and future use (p. 28).” They also wrote creatively, inventing probable conversations, and kept up the style and “period” in their diction.

Finally, her students worked on an original play. They collected historical information from a variety of sources—not from novels or storybooks—and created plays titled “Charles I” or “The Coronation of William and Mary.” Their scripts involved all the pupils in the classroom. If there were not enough principal roles, students played a crowd of citizens, an army, a ship’s crew, or a chorus who announced players, and provided explanatory narration (p. 34). In addition to witnessing her pupils acquire knowledge, Finlay-Johnson noted a great improvement in their speech and diction. They learned to speak freely and enunciate clearly, to avoid mumbling or chattering, and to “choose their phrases carefully and clothe their thoughts in appropriate words” (p. 74).

Mrs. Iola Storm was able to take the time in 1918 to have her eighth graders write and dramatize a play to present at their graduation exercises. This activity involved “every pupil from the brightest in the class to the one most lacking in imagination” (p. 251). The students chose their play’s topic: “The suggestion concerning a struggle for success found favor in the minds of the majority, and it was unanimously decided that the play describe a boy’s struggle and victory in the achievement of success” (p. 251). Storm expressed pride that her students wanted the hero of their play to strive for “the attainment of an education and the living of an unselfish life” (p. 251). The pupils gave their suggestions for each act, which were carefully considered by the teacher and other pupils who criticized them freely and rejected those that were inconsistent and least valuable. Each pupil then wrote a version of the act, using the suggestions and adding more of his own. The teacher collected the writings, corrected them, marked the best suggestions, and read them aloud. After a class discussion, the best elements from each paper made it into the final draft (p. 252).

According to the teacher/writer of the article, all aspects of this process—the writing and dramatizing of an original play—achieved impressive academic results. “The weighing of the many suggestions in order to select the most worthy ones called for judgment of values, the gathering up of the various points and giving each its proper setting called for organization, in striving to write the acts of the play in the most effective manner, the pupils felt the need of a good working knowledge of the principles of grammar” (p. 255). Pupils used their imaginations freely, practiced consistency in characterization, and learned that collaboration led to success. “Perhaps the greatest benefit derived from the play was the value it placed on class spirit and community effort,” wrote Storm. “When graduation day was over, both teachers and pupils felt that time and effort had been spent in a worthy cause, that the writing and dramatization of the eighth-grade play had been worthwhile” (p. 255).

Perhaps these author-teachers of the first two decades of the twentieth century reflect the beginnings of the Progressive Education movement with their pedagogical innovations and changes in school curriculum and other school practices. “The agenda of pedagogical progressivism involved moving towards more child-centered teaching” (Urban and Wagoner, 2014, pp. 178-179), a trend definitely displayed in the script work described above.

1920 – 1940: Dialogue and Discipline, Generosity and Artistry

My research failed to find any pertinent publications from the 1920s. Winifred Ward, a teacher and scholar remembered primarily for her pioneering work in creative drama in the United States, published her first book, *Creative Dramatics for the Upper Grades and Junior High*, in 1930. Her focus was on the process of improvising dramas with children rather than creating scripts and memorizing lines. In this book, however, she includes one example of a dramatization developed and then scripted by eighth graders. The class was studying Shakespeare, specifically *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They knew the story and their teacher had read several scenes from the play aloud to them. In order to better understand the characters known as The Mechanicals, the students created an imaginary scene featuring Quince, Bottom, Snug, Flute, and Starveling. “The dialogue was originated by the pupils, the scene being played informally many times, and finally written down exactly as they had played it” (p. 54).

In the May 1938 issue of *The English Journal*, Caroline Power expressed her enthusiasm for classroom playwriting in a detailed account of her work with eleventh graders. “I can say

unhesitatingly that the one-act play is the most logical, most natural, and the easiest art form for high-school students to write. . . . Dialogue to him as natural as living. Planning a set of lines for classmates to read in play setup is a thrilling adventure” (pp. 401-402). Her students spent three weeks reading examples of one act plays aloud, two weeks writing their plays, and two weeks casting and directing them. Power makes interesting remarks about student involvement, mentioning what would now be referred to as “differently abled” students: “One girl, a paralytic, I left out of casting, thinking it a kindness. A boy put her in a part to walk across the stage to buy a paper. She was delighted, and although she held up the action of his play very markedly, everyone in the class was pleased. Generosity once hit a cast to do something especially nice for one of the blind students. They committed to memory all the lines of his play without a thought of the dramatic irony” (p. 405). She also includes a success story with a boy she describes as “a happy-go-lucky irresponsible.” After his classmate scolded him for failing to be ready with his two lines of dialogue, the boy learned his lines and cues. “I never succeeded in so disciplining him,” remarked Power (p. 406).

“Product is less important than the process that goes on inside the writer,” she says, warning against too much adverse criticism of the writing. “Many teachers are too ready with a red pencil” (p. 407). “These students are artists in their way. . . . Almost without exception they do their best” (p. 405). Power admits that play production is time-consuming, but she believed it was the logical way to end the unit. Her students performed for one another, not for visitors, during class time. Still, the excitement of live performance endured, especially for the teacher. “Here come all the agonies and joys of first nights. If I ever get sentimental over this business of teaching, it's when plays go into production. It's then and only then that I'm sure I've at last solved all the educational problems” (p. 405).

“As I look over my program of the many kinds of English teaching I do, I believe that the unit of six weeks' teaching the one-act play gives the students, the student-teachers, and me the most satisfaction and enjoyment in the achievement reached. . . . I can see pupils thrilled as only creative art can thrill them . . . I can see young students become real artists—not that the thing produced is a work of art necessarily, but ‘art feeling’ is experienced, and the way each one refers to ‘my’ play is enough to count seven weeks well and delightfully spent in a genuine creative-writing experience” (pp. 408-409).

It may be that Ward and Power were influenced by both the Progressive Education movement (child-centered) and the social efficiency school of thought that emerged in the early 20th century, which valued, among other things, “cooperation with other students in the pursuit of a common interest” (Urban and Wagoner, 2014, p. 215).

1940 – 1960: Radio and Television Influences

In 1942, Elisabeth Tomlinson—“an English teacher of the not-too-recent vintage”—yielded to the pressures of educational magazines and student opinions: “I must recognize the radio as a teaching device,” she bemoaned. Writing and broadcasting radio scripts were not elements of her highly traditional speech and English training, but she decided that, regarding radio’s value as an educational tool, “There was nothing to do but find out” (p. 64). She described her students as follows: “There are eighty of them in my senior English groups, and they all have a few characteristics in common—they do not like English; they do not like to write; and they have never made good grades in English courses. Furthermore, they do not like to

make speeches. My chief purpose in conducting these classes is to teach correct writing and effective speaking. As luck would have it, the idea of writing script appealed to them, almost unanimously; so much was in my favor” (p. 64).

Tomlinson and her students spent a week reading on the general subject of radio and writing for broadcast, learning the essential differences between writing for the movies or the stage and writing for radio (p. 64). The students’ first script was a three-hundred-word speech on a matter of general interest. They read their scripts aloud and made adjustments to correct faults in diction, voice placement, and pronunciation. Then, in pairs, the students interviewed people in the school and community. “It so happened that at that time, Connie Boswell [well-known singer] and Tommy Dorsey [famous musician and bandleader in the big band era] were in the city, and two enterprising groups had the experience of a lifetime interviewing these celebrities and later impersonating them” (p. 64).

All of the interviews were scripted and then broadcast over the school public address set. In the third week of the script-writing unit, students chose to either dramatize a news event or prepare a biographical drama. At this point, notes Tomlinson, they developed a strong interest in creating and finding sound effects for use in their broadcasts. The final script was a radio drama, “which might be original, or might be adapted from a short story or a stage play” (p. 65). The class was “divided into small groups whose business was to plan their new script, write it, and rehearse it. I was adviser, sergeant-at-arms, and general source of information not otherwise to be obtained” (p. 65). She was pleasantly surprised with the results of the script writing unit. “From the first I found that there was a great deal of interest among all the students in writing their assignment, and from week to week I observed an improvement in the scripts which they submitted to me, as far as mechanical accuracy is concerned” (p. 65).

She found that the scripts provided an effective way to teach types of sentences and punctuation, especially the use of a “comma after the noun of address” (p. 65). The dictionary also became more popular with her young writers, providing a helpful guide to effective pronunciation. “More than at anything else. I was surprised at the quality of writing which they did” (p. 65). “Above all, many students seem to discover for the first time that they had something to say that other people enjoyed” (p. 66). Tomlinson also admits that she encountered problems with some students who willingly let other members of their group do all or most of the work. All in all, however, she felt that “this experiment in writing for the radio was a successful one, and one that almost any English teacher will find worthwhile. Of course, any teacher who likes to see the class hour flow along smoothly and quietly, who likes to feel that at the close of every day something definite has been accomplished, should never undertake such a unit. One’s nerves must be strong and one’s sense of humor adequate. . . . But the teacher who wants to learn while he is teaching, who enjoys seeing students enjoy themselves while they work, even if they are a bit noisy about it all, can find several weeks of pleasure in turning classes over to a radio” (p. 66).

According to a 1957 article entitled “TV, An Ally?” teachers began to suspect that TV could become their ally: “Their slogan is not exactly ‘If you can’t lick it, join it,’ but rather ‘If you can’t lick it, use it’” (Spence, p. 54). This article, however, concerned a plan “to help Johnny detect the phony and admire the good on his home [TV] set” and evaluate TV programs for quality, not to advocate for teaching subject matter by means of TV. In searching for a new approach to book reports for his tenth-grade English classes, however, Donald Noble (the first male teacher/author within this research) in 1960 leveraged the popularity and prevalence of TV.

He found success in having students write a television script based on a single scene from a novel.

Because it would be too large a project to script an entire novel, Noble had his students “sift for themselves the important elements from the book. Which characters are necessary to the action and plot of the story? What scenes carry forward the plot or develop the characters? Where should the play begin and end? Which subplots, if any, should be retained? How can the various scenes be correlated to achieve effective transition and continuity?” (p. 260). Noble taught the students proper playwriting formatting, and they wrote their scenes complete with dialogue and stage directions. He found that the initial analysis of the book’s elements increased his students’ understanding of the intricacies and interrelations of plot, characters, and setting, not only in the novel but in a play as well (p. 260) and “the writing of the actual script makes many students more conscious of dialogue than they have ever been before. Amateurs that they are, they can be pretty quick to spot lines that ‘just don’t sound right’” (p. 261). In working on their own scripts, and in reading those of their classmates, Noble felt that his students got a good idea of the importance of continuity and transitions. “This plus the other experiences they gain in planning, analyzing, and writing makes the project a really creative activity” (p. 261).

1960 – 1980: Deciding like Artists, Demanding Excellence from Each Other

Schools in the 1960s were dealing with issues of civil rights, desegregation, bilingual education, and disparity in the schooling of the suburban affluent and the urban poor, which may explain why no articles from that decade concern script writing as a learning activity. Teachers perhaps had too many other concerns demanding their attention. There were, however, critics of the “stodginess” of the pedagogy of the 1960s and 70s. These writers (Charles Silberman, for example), like the child-centered progressives in the first half of the century, advocated for “informal classrooms, freedom of movement for students and teachers, problem-centered learning, and other inquiry-based strategies” (Urban and Wagoner, 2014, p. 300). The writings of these critics may have influenced the following educators who involved students in creative processes, allowed them to make their own artistic decisions, and gave them freedom of choice when it came to ideas about what to dramatize and how.

Ellen Nold of the English Department of the City College of San Francisco complained about the limited effectiveness of study guide questions for fostering understanding of the short story. In her 1972 article, “Short Scripts and the Short Story,” she presents and explains “one of the most useful and well-received exercises I have developed. It fosters student awareness of choice and technique by placing him for a short time in the role of the artist and allowing him to compare and contrast his product with the original story” (p. 377). Her exercise requires short stories told from a variety of perspectives and a flexible teacher. “At the heart of the exercise, also, is student script writing. If your students have not seen a script recently, bring one to class prior to the exercise and explain what one is and how it works. Be sure to stress that all names, relationships, and other background information are contained in the *spoken* lines as well as in the scene settings. As your students write, warn them not to assume too much knowledge on the audience’s part and to *show* things happening” (p. 378).

Nold provides students with the beginning lines of dialogue from two or three scenes from actual short stories. “You must select the stories and write the lines yourself. Do *not* let your students know that the scenes are from real stories” (p. 378). (They will learn this fact after

they engage in the scripting activity.) Then, within the article, she shares the actual instructions, descriptions, and scene starters that she gives to the students. Students work together and complete their scripts; then they gather with others who chose the same scene. In their groups they discuss each script and choose the one which is most believable and skillfully written. Then they read the scenes aloud to the rest of the class. “The first set of scripts,” she warns, “will likely be bad, but you will be surprised at how quickly they improve” (p. 378).

After this script writing, the students read the original published short stories. Nold then held discussions that focused on several excellent questions like: How do your characters’ personalities differ from the ones in the stories? How was your ending different? Does your ending seem sensible given the personalities of your characters? Does the author’s ending seem sensible? How many scenes would it take to write the whole story? (p. 379). She concludes her article with encouragement for teachers: “Whatever uses you find for this exercise, you should find that involving students with the creative process and encouraging them to make decisions like the artist makes will develop both your imaginations and critical awareness. Try it” (p. 380).

“Perhaps the most difficult time for a senior and a senior English teacher is the last month of school.” So begins a 1977 article by Helen Larsen. In it, she details a five-week end-of-the-year original one-act play writing unit that she and other teachers created. “My colleagues and I think we have a solution that not only grows and expands each year, but one that has kids banging on the school doors at 6 a.m., refusing to go home at 10 p.m. and skipping classes to come to English. It involves students of all abilities and backgrounds and pushes them into a workable, creative unit where they demand excellence from each other and themselves” (p. 54). Each one-act play was written, produced, directed, costumed, and staged by a group of five or six students. The students received little specific guidance on ideas for their play. The main stipulation was that their play must run for approximately 20 minutes and be original (p. 54).

Over the years the author reported that the themes of the plays reflected the concerns of youth (politics, ecology, and violence) or television’s influence (westerns, crime stories, and comedies). Melodramas, tragedies, comedies, musical comedies, and pantomimes outnumbered serious plays. “The rewards, however, are countless. Even the most ‘turned off’ students want to help produce the best play. Students thanked us for making them work with people they have never really gotten to know. Others have broken out of their introspective shells. Actors, directors, and writers are born. And as each student finds out that he/she is indispensable to his/her group in some way, self-respect grows. . . . The drama unit is hard work, but it is a source of satisfaction for the community, the school administration, the students, and the teachers” (Nold, p. 56).

1980 – 2000: A Reason for Reading, Calling on Creativity, Investing in the Product

In 1980, Jeannette L. Miccinati and Stephen Phelps asserted “that dramatization and improvisation should be part of children’s formal learning experiences” (p. 272). They described classroom drama activities that progress to story dramatization. Students chose a story and decided which scene or scenes to improvise. “Major actions in the story are outlined on the board or on paper. This listing may become the first step toward preparing a script” (p. 271). An example: Three fifth grade authors observed as their classmates used the list of major actions and improvised scenes from *Rapunzel*. “Then the three authors wrote scripts for their respective scenes which incorporated ideas from the group improvisations and several personal

flourishes. . . . The finished product, a funny, fast-paced, and modern version of the original fairy tale, was enthusiastically received by the members of the class” (p. 272).

Miccinati and Phelps stressed both the motivational power of classroom drama and its learning benefits. “Children are encouraged to read for many reasons: to find a story for dramatization, to decide what parts of a story should be dramatized, to understand the characters and actions of the story, to find the spelling of a word for their script, and to consult other books for suggestions about characterization, variations of plot, and possible scenic accessories for their dramatization” (p. 270). Perhaps, most significantly, the authors reminded educators and readers that “Drama calls upon the creativity of children, one of the least used and most potent resources they bring to the classroom. Learning becomes fun...” (p. 270).

Readers Theatre with its focus on the reading of a script (as opposed to fully acting it out with movement, costumes, props, and a set) offers teachers a simplified way to involve students in script writing (Latrobe, 1996). In his 1982 book, *Handbook of Educational Drama and Theatre*, Robert Landy describes the work of educator Shirlee Sloyer. She led a group of fourth and fifth graders through the steps of a readers theatre process, which included the selecting, writing or adapting of a story, and eventually staging, rehearsing, and presenting their script. “From the general idea of “Fairy Tales without Fairies,” the children selected the specific theme ‘showing how silly the bluebloods were.’ The story they chose to exemplify the theme was ‘The Princess and the Pea’ by Hans Christian Andersen” (p. 50).

Sloyer asked the students to tell the story in their own words and then questioned them to explore reasons why Andersen wrote the story. The intention of these questions was to help the students clarify the author’s intentions and prompt them to consider how to transform narration into dialogue. From there, Sloyer moved the students directly into script writing. “They deleted lines, added their own lines, and divided much of the narration among characters, while leaving some narration for an actual narrator. Finally, they produced a script true to both the spirit of Andersen and their own sense of satire and playfulness” (p. 50). After rehearsing, the children performed their script for an audience.

Both examples from the early 1980s described above preceded a publication by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in 1983 and reflect a waning era in which individual teachers could decide how to approach the teaching of the skills they believed their students needed. Urban & Wagoner (2014) report on that publication—*A Nation at Risk* (1983)—which declared that the test scores of American students in reading, mathematics, and science had declined, that academic requirements for high school graduation and college admission were lower, and that school curricula and textbooks had been “dumbed down” for the benefit of students who were not as capable as their predecessors or students in other countries” (p. 322). *A Nation at Risk* was one catalyst for the “back-to-basics, standardized test-oriented, accountability laden programs that became more and more prevalent in public education” (p. 426).

A 1993 article by Margaret Salvante in *Arts Education Policy Review* advocated strongly for playwriting in the K-12 curriculum, emphasizing how “its power to enhance learning is derived from its ability to connect imagined circumstances with concrete concepts” (p. 35). Her article describes what the work of an imaginary professional playwright with students in classrooms could look like; she grapples with how this work may be deemed significant to the basic skills instruction and emphasis on test scores reform movement underway in the U.S. education system at that time.

Salvante's article identifies major issues that were obstacles to playwriting units in the 1990s—primarily the overburdened American educational curriculum. “Educators who are desperately trying to keep up with the ever-increasing pace of technology and worrying about test scores being published in the newspaper will not immediately be receptive to anything they perceive as taking time away from basic-skills instruction. Although they may recognize the value of encouraging their students' creativity, teachers who already need to squeeze their own agenda into forty-minute sessions between vacations, half days, and practice drills for standardized tests may not find time for more than an occasional drama workshop” (p. 37).

Two years after the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the U.S. Congress called for a study of the state of arts education in the country. This study, *Toward Civilization*, published in 1988, called for basic arts education for all students, which included the disciplines of writing and theatre and endorsed an interdisciplinary approach to teaching the arts. The authors of articles described in the following paragraphs appear to have been more influenced by the thinking reflected in that document than by the looming threat of testing and accountability in education.

In 1993, Elfie Israel found what she called “dramatic skits” to be an effective tool for evaluating high school students' comprehension of literature. Used initially as classroom activities, the short student-created scenes served to “stimulate the students to read the text closely, unlock the meaning of ambiguous and difficult works, or emphasize themes in the text” (p. 69). For example, “[b]efore seeing *Macbeth*, the students wrote and acted out their own skits on ambition, power, fair, foul, betrayal, wife, fortune. Pairs of students made skits using assigned words” (p. 69). Israel's teaching goal was for students to understand an entire literary work and its characters and themes, so she began thinking about an end-of-semester assessment that would reveal more than whether students could spell the names of minor characters. “I needed a test which would check on concepts I had emphasized. My students recognized, before I did, that a recall test was not an accurate assessment of our goals” (p. 69). Instead, the final project became “to select one character from each of the different genres we had studied and place the characters in contemporary society. [Students] then had to write either one long skit or four short ones using the selected characters. Each skit would relate a major theme or idea in the work and incorporate five vocabulary words. The students would type and hand in a script, a discussion of the theme(s) selected, and a list of vocabulary words used” (pp. 69-70).

Israel was pleased and impressed with her students. “Their skits and writing proved their mastery of the subject area and showed that they understood major themes and were able to apply them in creative and original ways” (p. 70). “Oedipus became a modern man who, when warned by the fortuneteller that he would die in a car crash, elected to stay home. A drunken driver crashed into his bedroom, killing him; one cannot escape fate. Holden Caulfield walked around dispensing condoms and advice to the homeless” (p. 70). Some students videotaped their performances and incorporated vocabulary words into advertisements such as: “I'm gonna purge that gray right out of my hair” (p. 70). Israel felt confident that because skits promote many areas of critical thinking, the writing and performing of these short scenes that met given criteria worked well. “This performance-test accurately measured what happens in my classroom and what I consider important” (p. 70).

“Two knowns + one unknown = drama.” This is the formula Eloise Hollyfield Jurgens used to guide her students in the creation of their collaborative one-act plays. She describes her classroom writing project in a 1993 article. “[W]e brainstorm . . . all kinds of names, writing them on the board. I ask students which two would most likely know each other (the two

"knowns" in the formula). . . . Next, I ask them which one from the list (the "unknown" element) would most likely have some reason to meet the other two; we discuss the possible reasons for their meeting" (p. 67). This fifteen-minute activity launches the writing of a one-act play with "three characters: two who know each other (positively or negatively) and a third party who affects the other two in a dramatic way" (p. 67).

In groups of three, each student responsible for one of the characters, the students collaborate on ideas for settings, characters, and plot. "On the second day, students receive instruction and practice in script writing; special emphasis is given to writing dialogue" (p. 67). Students spent the next three class periods writing and then submitted their drafts. The project culminated with play performances. Some were performed live, but with the new availability of video cameras, some groups filmed "on location," added music and props, and submitted videotaped versions. Because Jurgens struggled with how to grade creativity, she enlisted student help. "Once plays have been presented, students, by secret ballot, rank the plays: best, second best, and so on. The top two (or three, depending on the number of plays presented) receive an A; most others receive a B; occasionally a C has been given" (p. 67). She found students to be overwhelmingly fair in their judgements, but she intervened if she thought the grades were influenced by student popularity or lack thereof.

The themes of the plays varied. "I've noticed that over the years the themes have become increasingly serious, dealing with current social issues. The destruction of youth through the use of drugs has appeared . . . The last two years have brought teen-suicide and spousal abuse to the foreground. I realize that students are expressing an awareness of problems that plague our society" (p. 68). Jurgens also offers some practical advice for this project, warning teachers to be prepared for noise, especially at the start of the writing. "As students brainstorm, they tend to become somewhat absurd, mentally creating all manner of hilarious scenes, getting up and acting out the possibilities. I'm not an uptight person, and I understand it's all part of the creative process" (p. 68). The students loved watching watch themselves and other classmates perform, and they learned more than the craft of structuring a one-act play. "Students have told me how surprised they are at the hard work required after the scripts have been written. They have learned that they must pull their own weight in order to complete the project. They have had to work together, and this has taught them a great deal about responsibility to others" (p. 68).

In 1994, high school English teacher Diana Michell wanted her students to try a new approach to book reports. Because each student was reading a different novel, she assigned them to write a script that would make other students want to read their book. "I encouraged each student to carefully choose a chapter of their novel, write a script of it, and read/perform the script to the entire class" (p. 82). She explained how to choose a chapter and decide what to put into the script. "We talked of action, dialogue, and suspense. We looked at why it was important to include a narrator who could give details of setting, provide necessary background, move the action forward, and even report the thoughts of a character" (p. 82). When it came time to perform, the student writers chose the readers for their scripts. "Students who took the job seriously and to read with expression were most often picked by their peers" (p. 82). Mitchell noted that the more students read aloud, the better their oral reading became and that the script writing was motivational, even for those students considered unmotivated learners.

She found that the students liked the script writing because they were not answering teacher-created questions on their book. The writing gave her students a taste of what the characters were like and the opportunity to use lively language. In future semesters, she

progressed to having students write scripts to show their understanding of characters and themes in short stories and scripts in a talk show format focused on a story's issues. The script writing and performing helped her students adopt characters' points of view and they commented on how much more they got out of challenging literature like *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Scarlet Letter* by scripting it. The writing and read-alouds also made them aware of what makes a script effective.

Eventually Michell gave a script writing assignment as part of the final exam in her American Literature course. The students' goal was to use nine authors or characters, bring them together in any setting, and focus the script on showing how they interact in terms of specific issues like the death penalty. Mitchell found that script writing benefitted her students by motivating them to become deeply involved with characters, issues, and themes, to get at the heart of an author's message, and synthesize what they know about characters and authors by placing them in new situations. "Above all, scripting works because scripts are student-created; they have invested themselves in the product. Students share their insights through performance which expands the audience from just the teacher to the whole class, providing a more realistic and more interactive form for the writing" (p. 85).

Readers Theatre has a long history of classroom use because of its simplicity. "The audience envisions a story by hearing dialogue presented by readers who do not rely upon costumes, full-scale movements, props, or scenery. It provides a dramatic experience without the investments of time, space and physical resources that traditional drama requires" (Latrobe, 1996, p. 16). Published Readers Theatre scripts have served teachers and students well for decades, but some teachers have moved students beyond the reading of scripts and launched them into writing their own scripts.

In a comprehensive article published in 1993, Terrell A. Young and Sylvia Vardell promote and explain how to "incorporate content reading and learning with the dynamic and interactive process of Readers Theatre." (p. 398). "Whereas narrative story and poetry are usually the suggested text for Readers Theatre, we are suggesting that teachers also use Readers Theatre as the medium for bringing nonfiction into the curriculum" (p. 398). Nonfiction trade books in the content areas are the source material for the scripts. The process of reading, writing, and performing offers abundant learning benefits. "Students can retain more information, find greater enjoyment in reading content, and be more actively involved in their learning than in a textbook-based content curriculum" (p. 398).

Within this article, the authors illustrate how a script about Sojourner Truth was adapted from a book. In the left-hand column, the original text from the book appears. The Readers Theatre adaptation with narrators and characters is in the right-hand column (p. 401). Further along in this article are other ideas for using Readers Theatre with topics such as Health, Math, Science, and Social Studies along with examples of script sections. When the process is complete, "students are often interested in going beyond the excerpt to read the rest of the book, or another book by the same author. This exposure to new information also provides a kind of scaffolding into the content that can lead to further reading on the subject" (p. 400).

"Experiencing this [nonfiction] literature through Readers Theatre is an option that gives the words on the page a voice, and the students in the classroom an active role in internalizing and interpreting, new knowledge" (p. 408). They read, write, perform, listen, and engage in a literacy event. "Their participation in the process, and performance of Readers Theatre becomes

not only a means of reading and learning content, but also a source of personal pride and accomplishment” (p. 408).

In 1996, librarian Kathy Latrobe described her process for having students develop a Readers Theatre script from a scene in a novel, encouraging them to seek scenes with dramatic appeal, captivating characters, rich, figurative language, and a sense of wholeness (a beginning, a middle and an end). She instructed students to read the entire work that their scene was drawn from, omit unnecessary descriptions or narration, write narrator lines that bridge gaps, show lapses of time, or summarize action, identify speakers by sometimes including the name of the character to whom the conversation is directed, cut minor characters and omit their lines or give those lines to major characters, include descriptions of the tone of voice, gestures, or facial expressions, begin the scene with the narrator's introduction of the work, and end each scene with the narrator's closing lines that link the scene to the theme of the original work (Latrobe, 1996, p. 18). The article then includes some advice on how to coach students to deliver the scripts effectively—vocally and physically with facial expressions and gestures.

“Although readers theatre's most direct curriculum ties are to listening, reading, and writing activities, it can also be an avenue for other learning experiences,” writes Latrobe. “In the area of social skills, Readers Theatre requires collaboration and teamwork, and because an audience's focus is on a group, not an individual, it is a safe mode through which a shy child may gain poise and confidence in making presentations. In language arts, it can be a pleasurable alternative to the traditional book report” (p. 18). The author ends by expressing her belief that readers theatre “can exercise imaginations, enhance presentation and writing skills, link diverse disciplines, and inspire independent reading” (p. 18).

2000 - present: Enter the Internet, Standards, and Testing

Australian educator Adrian Bruce's class participated in the 2003/04 Global Virtual Classroom Project (GVC), a worldwide, online collaborative competition where three teams on different continents collaborate on a website on any topic they choose. In 2004, a team comprised of elementary age classrooms in Valencia, Spain, Gulfport, Mississippi USA, and Bruce's Year 3/4 class in Byron Bay, Australia won the GVC grand prize. Bruce wrote an article describing the project (2005).

Their website was a collection of witty original Science Readers' Theatre scripts. The scripts were “based on some of our favourite science experiments and demonstrations” (p. 34). To shape the ideas, Bruce held script writing sessions in which everyone bounced ideas around and he scribed. “As we generated ideas I thought aloud as a writer, asking questions like, 'Will the audience understand what we mean here if . . . ?' 'How can we make this clearer?' 'Maybe we should do this the first and then this because . . . 'What do you think?' The children then took the scripts away and performed them or read them onto cassette tapes. They then noted any problems or suggestions for further improvement for the next time we worked on that script” (p. 34).

The first drafts of the scripts were typed up on a word processor and emailed to the partner classes. “We then waited patiently for their feedback. Any suggested changes were typed in a different colour and emailed back for the authors to consider. The emailing of scripts created a noticeable level of anticipation and excitement amongst the children. They would come in each morning to check the email to see if any new scripts had arrived or to see what the other classes thought of their efforts” (p. 35). The young students also used the Internet to confirm the validity

of their content. “We emailed some of the scripts off to various university experts to see what they thought. Their feedback was positive, constructive and very useful” (p. 35). The intention was that the scripts be available for the world to download and use. Unfortunately, this “body of good quality work that is now available for all to download and use to aid their Science teaching” is not available because the URL provided in the article is no longer active.

Goals 2000: Educate America, a school improvement initiative that began in 1989 and was signed into law in 1994, emphasized school reform and the mandatory use of standardized testing as a measure of achievement. The *No Child Left Behind* Law in 2002 continued the nation on the path of accountability standards for schools and school systems that were established on local, state, and national levels. As a result, Urban and Wagoner (2014) report, “curriculum narrowed in the interest of elevating scores on standardized tests” (p. 331).

Even though *Goals 2000* included the arts as core curriculum content and inspired the creation of national standards for arts education, artist educators in the early 2000s realized that their strongest way to help keep the arts in schools was to use other curriculum subjects as the content through which they involved students in dance, music, art, or drama. Two publications—*Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning* (1999) and *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development* (2002) endorsed arts learning methods as valuable approaches to increase student achievement and engagement. Both documents collected research that supported many enhanced cognitive capacities and motivations to learn, especially when the arts were integrated with other academic subjects and goals.

This emphasis on meeting standards, connecting curriculum content, and teaching testable facts strongly influenced the work described in the 2004 article “Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre: Setting the Stage for Reading and Retention” that I wrote (Flynn). I include a section called “Standards on Stage” and identify multiple national English/Language Arts, History, and Math standards addressed by the script writing and performing activities described in the article.

My Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre (CBRT) clearly reflects the approach now called arts integration— “arts learning that is deeply immersed in other curricular areas” (Burnaford, 2001). I posed this question: “If playwrights can take pieces of information, historical episodes, or narratives and adapt them as scripts with lines of dialogue, couldn’t teachers and students do something similar with the contents of a textbook, novel, or collection of facts?” (Flynn, 2004, p. 360). My article detailed how teachers could work with students to write short Readers Theatre scripts (1-2 pages long) based on curriculum content; these scripts would also address local, state, and national standards of learning. Students are provided with a set of facts or a source containing facts and “[invited] to create a context for presenting those facts through the dialogue of a script, with lines assigned to narrators and characters and individual and group voices” (p. 363). The student scriptwriters are also encouraged to add stage directions indicating where to perform gestures and sound effects. Working in small groups or as a whole class, students create a first draft that is then revised, and that version becomes the final draft. Students then rehearse the original scripts: “reading, repeating, and reviewing lines, sound effects, and gestures to prepare for performance. The repeated reading required by rehearsal enhances both retention of the script’s facts and increased reading fluency. “In addition to any educational benefits, integrating standards with curriculum content and Readers Theatre has resulted in lots of laughter and enthusiasm from teachers and students” (p. 364). Teachers reported that students

enjoyed getting to be creative in subjects like math and they had fun deciding what facts were important enough to include in their script.

Senior high school literature and writing teacher Jason Whitney in 2006 wrote about the successful drama and fiction writing workshop he implemented deep in the midst of the nation's emphasis on standardized testing. He noted that "many students at the secondary level, particularly given today's focus on test preparation and academic writing, are surprised to discover that they are actually talented writers and that they can enjoy writing" (p. 55). "The exercise starts when I write four names on the board: Mom, Dad, Buddy, and Sis. Underneath the names, students 'flesh out' the characters based on what they know about characterization. As a class, students shout out suggestions and work toward a consensus regarding such matters as the relationships between the characters, their flaws, their ages, their ethnicities, and their passions" (p. 53). These characters are not always a traditional nuclear family.

Next, the students determine the setting and then a particular location. "In this step, students trap the characters somewhere so they have to talk. Trap the four characters in a car, late for something but stuck in traffic. Trap them in a jail cell. Trap them on a bus. Trap them at the dinner table" (p. 54). The final step before the writing begins is to invent a source of tension or disagreement for these four characters. Then, in groups of four, Whitney's students developed the scenario and wrote the dialogue for the characters. "Sometimes I supply guidelines," he says, "no melodrama, no profanity or other offensive output—that sort of thing" (p. 54). Finally, the students read and act out their group's script. "The students see the various approaches that the other groups have taken. This inspires the students to do well and to publish a product, which is the performance" (p. 55).

Whitney felt that this activity achieved his writing curriculum goal by providing "an authentic writing situation and an opportunity for collaboration that mirrors real-world writing. Students . . . practice using the skills used by professional dramatists: developing fictional characters, setting the scene, generating dialogue, creating conflict, and developing a theme" (p. 55). "All the explaining and lecturing in the world about what an author does and the decisions an author makes," he says "are not nearly as effective as allowing the students to become authors . . . Students learn where characters come from, how the setting and context affect the behavior of the characters, and so on. They learn the various elements of drama and fiction by wrangling with each element themselves; rather than using literary terms as isolated facts, they construct them for a real purpose, where the lesson has the most holding power" (p. 55). "Better writing means better reading, and vice versa (p. 55)" Whitney concludes.

One educational reality that schools in the 2000s began to face and incorporate was multiculturalism— "making a commitment to respect and teach about the many cultural backgrounds that children bring into the schools" (Urban and Wagoner, 2014, p. 340). In 2009, Alexander Chishik published an account of a study of an integrated playwriting program in an urban, low-socioeconomic status middle school with a majority Latinx population. "Playwriting can be a powerful method for classroom teachers to surmount the challenge to build strong connections between what is taught in school with what is culturally practiced in urban communities outside of school. In other words, the language arts teacher can communicate the importance of literacy outside the classroom context by bringing authentic playwriting into the classroom" (p. 388).

The classroom work involved two playwrights (teaching artists) who worked with teachers and taught playwriting for two hours once a week for 9 weeks (p. 395). The goal was to

help students develop three-scene plays about a subject they chose, thereby providing a context to reflect authentic cultural practices that exist beyond school borders (p. 389). “Throughout the playwriting program, students developed ideas based on their own experiences, observations, and imagination” (p. 398). “Playwriting exercises emphasized students’ developing plays based on what they already know, examining relationships between story and emotion, developing characters through dialogue and stage direction, establishing intangible goals for characters, developing reasons for all plot points, using script format, using standard English as the primary register of characters, and developing revision skills” (pp. 396- 397).

One important part of this program was that the students got to hear drafts of their plays performed by professional actors (the teaching artists and visiting actors). This opportunity helped them understand where revisions would help actors to perform the play as the young playwrights intended. “Once students revised the plays into final form, actors performed the plays for an audience of students, parents, and the community” (p. 399).

An analysis of the results of this study yielded many academic and social benefits. The playwriting program supported students in developing an understanding of story elements, adding details to their compositions, improving their confidence in writing, and increasing their feelings of autonomy, competence, and belonging. “In fact, findings from this research support the notion that a playwriting residency program improves students’ writing skills to a greater extent than traditional language arts instruction, as measured by a standardized writing assessment” (p. 405).

2010 - present: Scripting Fiction, Representing Research, Time Effectively Spent

Beginning in 2009, the Common Core academic standards in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) outlined what U.S. students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. These voluntary standards, developed by a group of governors, chief state school officers, and education experts from 48 states, sought to provide uniformity among the U.S. states and territories that adopted them. One Common Core English Language Arts Writing Standard requires students to: “Use dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations” (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.3.B). While not specifically referenced in the next article, this standard would be met by the Readers Theatre writing process described.

“Voice in writing adds to the meaningfulness and engagement quality of the reading experience,” wrote Chase Young and Timothy Rasinski in 2011 (p. 24). In their article, these educators describe how they involved young students in exploring voice by re-creating stories as Readers Theatre scripts. The first step in this process is to choose a story with strong voice exemplified by characters, read the story aloud, connect the idea of “voice” to the unique voices of the students in the classroom, and then analyze the voice in the story (p 25). “The next step is converting the literature into a script” (p. 25). The teacher and students discussed whether to script the entire story or a portion of it and collaborated on the script writing. “Students know we will perform the script later, so they strive for a quality product” (p. 25).

The teacher and students worked together to list all the speaking characters, determine how to include everyone in the group, establish the number of narrators needed, write the script, examine it, and discuss any necessary deletions or additions (p. 26). “After the script is complete, the group practices the script for performance” (p. 26). The ultimate goal of this work is for

students to be able to adapt scripts independently. Working in pairs or small groups and reading scripts in progress to hear the voice in the writing are good intermediate steps towards this goal. “Once the students are comfortable scripting with peer support, they begin to script on their own” (p. 27). The authors encourage students to script another fiction book and then move on to expository texts, which tend to be more difficult because they usually do not contain dialogue (p. 27). Scripts about historical figures also work. Poetry can be scripted and even research projects “are well received, when scripted” (p. 27).

The next article describes another approach to “integrating the arts into classrooms that are increasingly limited by test-driven pedagogies” (Buckley-Marudas and Block, 2015, p. 103). “Teachers have long expressed their discontent with the rigidity of the traditional research paper. Yet it remains a fixture in most schools” (p. 102). Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas and Joshua Block offer “a dynamic and multifaceted alternative to the research paper. [They] offer playwriting as research” (p. 102). Their description of how they involved tenth grade English students in researching a topic and representing what they learned not only in writing, but also in a dramatic performance, is detailed and persuasive for the following reasons:

The assignment: Conduct research on a human rights issue and represent the research in a five-scene play (p. 103). (Note: The “play” was actually a series of monologues, not a multi-character story with a through-line.) “We wanted to know what happens when students act and perform, instead of report, their research” (p. 103).

The setting: A public high school in Philadelphia. “Student participants were diverse in regards to class, race, gender, and other factors” (p. 104).

The unit was a collaboration among the English class, the teacher, and a Philadelphia Young Playwrights teaching artist. The research was prompted by three essential questions: “(1) How do people find hope in the face of struggle? (2) How do people find ways to resist power? (3) How does individual change happen?” (p. 103). The students’ scripts needed to address one of the questions. The article’s authors believed that incorporating dramatic writing with a performance goal would enable students “to interact with research, and each other in unique ways” (p. 103) and also “expand the audiences for whom students write” (p. 104). Students researched, wrote, and revised their monologues. “At different points [they] were required to share drafts, in writing and performance, of their plays and receive ongoing feedback” (p. 104). This feedback came from the teacher, the teaching artist, and their peers. “Peer audience was significant because it repositioned student research as a communal endeavor. Instead of writing solely for a teacher, students were writing for other students and a wider audience that would have access to their published plays [on a public website]” (p. 104). Research topics included food and medicine scarcity in Zimbabwe, China’s takeover of Tibet, the U.S. economic crisis of the early 2000s, religion and homosexuality, women’s rights, and more. The research, explained one student who examined websites, books, and newspaper articles, required “Tons and tons of research. I mean, hours, literally” (p. 106). “As students began to write monologues based on their research, their need to understand the nuances of these issues, increased” (p. 104).

Merging research with playwriting increased students’ connection to complex ideas, prompting them to interact deeply with their findings. “The requirement to script a series of monologues facilitated an in-depth investigation of multiple perspectives” (p. 105). Students had to do more than write a paper that presented what they discovered. “Instead, they crafted a storyline, complete with characters, settings, and interactions that were believable” (p. 106). “Students had to think about the script on paper, the script interpreted by performers and the

script received by spectators” (p. 106). Writing scripts to be acted on stage “changes how a piece of writing lives in the world” (p. 106). The article authors also felt strongly that research can be represented through the arts (p. 107).

In the final article I located from 2018, Claudia Haag explained how she used Readers Theatre in an ESL (English Second Language) classroom and worked with young students to create scripts based on picture books. She advocated for the many benefits of drama as a classroom teaching and learning tool. “One of its most underappreciated features lies in the issues of equity and participation. All students, not just the highly verbal ones, get to show what they know. Drama can also be an effective tool for teachers working with English learners as it gives students opportunities to use words, as well as actions, gestures, and props to relay meaning” (p. 115). The author acknowledges the abundance of commercially prepared scripts and affirms that these scripts provide practice and fluency, but “they lack the vital component of script writing in the classroom, where teacher and students negotiate and help create the text” (p. 115).

“[W]ith my first-grade group, we first read the selected fable, and developed a class story map to keep track of our players—the key characters settings and events” (p. 117). This story map is included in the article—illustrations and all (p. 118). “The story map posted nearby allowed my students to cross-check to ensure that we were capturing all key events. It was interesting to see how quickly the students took to changing third-person to first-person pronouns as we created each character’s lines. Writing this first script took a week of 15–20-minute meetings to create, but the impact was evident. Each time we added a new line, we first re-read the previous lines together chorally” (p. 117).

Older students (3rd and 4th graders) worked more independently. “Instead of my writing the script as the group verbally negotiated lines, they chose a group scribe and composed their own scripts” (p. 117). Once scripts were completed, typed up, and distributed, the teacher and students determined who would play each part. This article includes a copy of a script adapted by the first graders and a version of the same story adapted by third and fourth graders.

Like her predecessor Anna Buckbee did over a century earlier, Haag acknowledged the issue of time spent on the script writing and echoed the same sentiment: “[I]t is time well spent” (Buckbee, 1903). “This process sounds time consuming,” Haag writes, “but once I found some balance in our schedule and learned to bring in more student voice and choice to the negotiations. I found it to be time effectively spent” (p. 121). The author further refutes the obstacle of time, saying, “Many educators report that they are not using drama in the classroom because of time issues. Although I respect my colleagues’ position, I challenge their thinking and propose that we revisit the attributes of drama, to not only foster engagement in language and literacy development, but also promote the use of drama in any discipline to bring the current curricula to life” (p. 115). She concludes: “If teachers give students opportunities to engage in Readers Theatre and script writing through negotiation. I believe they will see the power in this often-neglected modality and will bring both drama and script writing into their classrooms” (p. 121).

Findings

Articles and books published between 1903 and 2018 reveal that student-written scripts comprised classroom learning activities grounded predominantly in literature and history. It was

in 1993 that the first mention of scripts on health, math, and science topics appeared, followed by scripts that examined issues of cross-cultural understanding, equity and inclusion, and contemporary world and social issues. Students dramatized historical events, myths, legends, and classics; they presented content information in script form, writing plays and scenes as alternatives to book reports and research papers. The educators who wrote about their experiences integrating script writing with curriculum reported many positive outcomes. Students achieved greater understandings of Shakespeare, short stories, literature, grammar, punctuation, dialogue, plot, character, theme, and setting. Their speaking, reading, and writing improved as they scripted a wide array of topics—from the Pilgrims inhabiting of Plymouth to China's takeover of Tibet. The authors repeatedly recounted that the script writing promoted collaboration, incentive for research, a departure from rote learning, retention of content information, and increased reading fluency. Many of them also acknowledged obstacles they faced in the work: the amount of time required, students who slacked off, and the need for tolerance of some classroom noise, movement, and increased commotion.

The student work on these scripts resulted in more than an achievement of curricular goals. The generations of teachers who wrote about their practices report benefits among their students that include increased motivation and incentive to produce a quality product, strong evidence of active learning, and a sense of ownership, satisfaction, and pride in the results of their work. The teacher/authors also noted how working as dramatists prompted students to create collaboratively and reach wider audiences with their writing and performances. They were engaged and empowered by creative, artistic, hard work. Just as significant, the teachers repeatedly declared that the arts integrated dramatic work had multiple and sometimes surprising professional rewards for them. Although it required a lot of classroom time, this student-centered approach to learning was a valuable source of satisfaction and pride.

The lessons of the past serve as excellent examples of how and why to promote and implement this purposeful, stimulating, artistic way of learning. A century from now, I hope that the literature on drama integration in general and script writing in particular continue to provide educators with multiple ideas and much inspiration.

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