An Exercise in Empathy: Sociodrama in the ESL Writing Classroom

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Agenda

- Our Class
- What is Sociodrama?
- Applying Sociodrama to Our Class
- The Pilot
- Pedagogical Implications
- Application
- Q & A
Our Class

- Teaching assistants (TAs) in a First-Year Composition Multilingual class at San Francisco State University
- 18 students: 15 international, 3 generation 1.5; primarily 1st semester sophomores, some 2nd semester freshmen
- Course units: identity, empathy, and homelessness in the Bay Area
What is Sociodrama?
“The two procedures, role-playing and sociodrama, are closely related and frequently blend into each other. Generally both are unrehearsed, spontaneous dramatizations: the role playing stresses the role of the individual, whereas the sociodrama is used to depict a social problem. In either case, the individual may take his usual role and act as he normally would, or he may assume the part of someone else.” (Hopkins, 1971, p. 177)

“Sociodrama is an action-oriented method based on the belief that people learn best if they can be involved in exploring issues from a variety of perspectives engaging thoughts and feelings” (Eckloff, 2006, p. 261)
Applying Sociodrama to Our Class
Pre-Day 1:

Inform students of activity
Day 1: Introduction to Town Hall Meeting

**ENG 209 Town Hall Meeting: Character Identity List**

Below is a list of character identities organized by the group topics. You must choose a character identity to represent at the town hall meeting. You may choose from the list of the character identities below, or create your own character identity based on the research you have done on your subtopic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing:</th>
<th>Populations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Homeless tent owner</td>
<td>• Pregnant homeless woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Homeless shelter coordinator</td>
<td>• LGBTQ young man or woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tent advocate</td>
<td>• Parents of homeless LGBTQ youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Person who moved from the streets into long-term housing</td>
<td>• Homeless mother with children</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Homeless person who stayed in a shelter</td>
<td>• Homeless veteran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Homeless person with pets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Young homeless man or woman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges:</th>
<th>Other:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Cop</td>
<td>• Historian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Physician (physical health)</td>
<td>• Former city official/council member/mayor</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Nurse</td>
<td>• Non-profit manager</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Social services professional</td>
<td>• Policy writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Physically ill homeless person</td>
<td>• Public health director</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Mental health professional</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Drug rehabilitation facility professional</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Neighborhood crime watch person</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Local resident dealing with homeless people around their home</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Resolution: Proposition S

The proposition would require the city to allocate a portion of its hotel tax money to provide temporary shelter and relocation assistance for homeless families. The proposition requires two-thirds of the citizens’ vote to pass.

Character Name: __________________________

Role: __________________________

Your Position (circle one): Yes (in favor) No (against)

State your reasons for your position:

Point 1: __________________________________________________________

Point 2: __________________________________________________________

Point 3: __________________________________________________________

Answer one of the following:

How might your character respond to Proposition S?

OR: How will you prepare your character’s response before the town hall meeting?

On the day of the town hall meeting, be prepared to talk for 2 minutes to share the following:

1. Introduce yourself and your role
2. State your position
3. Provide your reasons for your position

*Please wear one piece of clothing or an accessory that represents your character.*
Post-Activity

ENG 209 Town Hall Meeting
Reflection Response

Please answer the following questions in a one-page response:

1. Choose one character from the town hall meeting. It could be your own character or someone else’s character. Did learning about this character make you become more empathetic towards people who may be in a similar situation to that character? Please explain.

2. Would you recommend that a similar activity be used in future 209 classes? Why or why not?

Please upload your response paper to iLearn no later than 5:00 pm on Friday, December 15th.
Pedagogical Implications for the Writing Classroom
Benefit: Enhanced Learning
“I personally think that the kinds of activities are much more effective than reading books because I actually needed to think about the character I was presenting, and I also needed to do some research about it.”

- H.
“This activity is much more funnier than a Powerpoint... It’s a useful way to refresh all the resources I got and to use it in a “real life situation”, like town hall meeting.”

-Y.
“[This project] only makes the person understand their research even more.”

-C.
“Students can actually learn more about what the teachers are trying to teach.”

- V.
Benefit: Shift in Thinking
“There was one character in the town hall meeting [Amy] that made me unforgettable and she made me become more empathetic towards people who may be in a similar situation. The points she discussed in her presentation really convince me. I was disagree at first, however, after her speech, I changed my mind for this proposition.”

-A.
“I was totally inspired by Amy. If I were her, I might be so crazy and want to clear off the tents immediately. However, she wasn’t. She could still think about the homeless kids objectively. Her kindness made me become more empathetic to people who might be in the similar situation to her.”

-Y. (about her own character)
Benefit:
Expansion of Empathy
“Pretending to be in someone else's shoes, who is in a bad and difficult situation is heartbreaking... I felt [Barbara’s] pain and struggles, it made me so angry that after all the things she went through, losing her family and being abused, she ended up alone with a baby on the streets...This experience changed me, it changed the way I look at people. I think that this activity is an excellent way to make students relate to those struggling on the streets. I think that this activity will rekindle empathy in humanity.”

- A.D. (about her own character)
“I feel awful reading and hearing stories about homeless youth in the streets on the Internet, especially queer youths in the streets since there's a higher risk for them to get advantage of for being queer, same with women. Putting myself in their shoes and walking in their shoes for just two minutes made me feel a special type of sadness. And it was only for two minutes, I can't imagine how it is for a daily basis. I imagined myself being kicked out from my parents house for being bisexual and it made me sad almost cry even because I don't know what I would do or where to go.”

- C.
“We can not experience every identity, but we can imagine that.”

-L.
Areas of Improvement
1. Adjust the classroom space
2. Make space & time for debate
3. Set clear expectations from the start
Application

Question: *How might you apply the concept of sociodrama to your classroom?*
1. Consider the unit or class topic - what are students already learning about that relates to a larger social issue?
   a. Is the topic relevant? Authentic? Interesting? (Does it speak to the lived experiences of your students? Does it engage students in an inquiry to learn more about something of interest to them?)

1. What are the assignments and readings required in the class/unit?

1. What real-life situation could be enacted in class to help students better engage with the materials (i.e. to put themselves in someone else’s shoes)?
   (Some possible situations include: a town hall meeting/public forum; a rally, march, or boycott; a birthday party, funeral, or wedding; meal time; a parent-teacher-student conference; recess time, etc.)

1. What needs to happen before the activity to prepare students for engaging in the activity?
Questions, comments, excitements?
“We only observed outside of them, but never putted ourselves into their heart.”

-Y.
Thank You!

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