

Taking Ownership in Writing, Producing and Acting in a Class Play

by George Bennett, Village School 4th-6th grade teacher

One effective way to motivate children is to give them responsibility, particularly if they see value in a project or an activity that has been entrusted to them. At the Village School, an independent elementary school in Royalston, the 4th-6th grade class is given the annual responsibility of writing and performing a play together. It's a task the children embrace with enthusiasm and energy.

Of course the class teachers are involved, but the ideas for the play come from the children themselves, as does the script. This year's play, which the children recently performed before a large public audience in Royalston town hall, was based on the theme of 'The American West', which the class had studied throughout the year.

Drawing on elements of the theme, including western settlement, immigration, the construction of railroads, the Gold Rush and the Civil War, the children produced a complex and amusing script that ran to well over an hour of performance, involving nineteen writer-actors.

The beginning of the writing process can be somewhat chaotic and hazardous, as the class breaks into several small groups to brainstorm ideas. The class then comes together to distill an opening story line from the children's myriad suggestions. Some ideas are rejected, others are developed and, over a couple of days, the beginnings of a story line emerge.

Often the class begins writing without having a clear idea of where the plot will go, or who the characters will be. The only known criterion is that there will be a part for everyone, for a key element of the play is that every child has a speaking part, and every one of them contributes to the script.

As soon as a scene is sketched out, each child then writes his or her own version of the scene, either in the classroom, or for homework. The class teachers then take all the scripts and, choosing lines from all the various scripts, produce a composite version for the scene. The class then reads through the combined version, and makes adjustments where necessary.

Both script development and writing proceed at a rapid pace, with the children sometimes writing one scene at school and another the same evening at home. Such is their motivation that the task doesn't seem like 'homework' but more like fun.

Children regularly report that the play is their favorite writing activity of the year, and

that working on it helps give them confidence in all their writing. The class teachers also see that even the most reluctant writers become highly engaged in the process. This year, the script moved forward slowly at first, until the students came up with the idea of having a bank robbery at the center of the plot. They decided that several groups of people, with a variety of motives, would hatch separate plots to rob the town bank, and thereby foil the unscrupulous railroad boss, who was about to embezzle the railroad funds for himself. At this point the process took off, and the result was a highly amusing comedy of errors.

Once the script was completed, the students had two weeks of rehearsals in the classroom, and only in the last week did the class move into the town hall to work out stage positions and movement, and to design and paint the sets. The Village School play always works to a tight schedule, firstly to avoid having the play dominate the whole curriculum but also because a short deadline gives a useful energy to the process – ask any writer!

Over the years, the Village School teachers have debriefed a wide variety of students, past and present, about their experiences of writing and performing the class's annual play, and they report a range of benefits. Many have noted that it improves their general writing, and that they are motivated to write much more than usual – and in a much shorter time.

All of them, without exception, have affirmed that writing the play themselves is a vital element of the process. As one former student reported, 'It's our play, and that makes all the difference.' Others have said that performing the play gives them confidence, and this has been very clear to their teachers.

Finally, writing and performing the play together gives the children a strong sense of community, in the unspoken but shared recognition that they have produced something fine together. That sense of satisfaction in work well done is an important experience for children to recognize, and one they can build on in the future.