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Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre: Setting the stage for reading and retention



Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre uses scripts that come directly from classroom content. They are informing and entertaining and can address many U.S. national standards of learning.

Playwrights are often commissioned to create scripts about specific topics. This is especially true in the creation of dramatic works for young audiences. Novels, events from history, social issues, and lives of significant people provide subjects for theaters that hire playwrights to write original or adapted dramatic works.

I asked myself several years ago, “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, a novel, or a collection of facts? If playwrights create lines of dialogue for a given number of characters, couldn’t teachers and students write lines so that every member of their group—or even the entire class—has a speaking role?”

I am an educational drama specialist. My work in professional development focuses on helping teachers around the United States learn how to incorporate drama and theater techniques with their teaching. Applying the commissioned playwright idea to my Readers Theatre work with teachers and students in classrooms made sense. Here was a chance to merge drama, theater, writing, reading, speaking, listening, and content learning. Even math and science information could be dramatized in this fashion: Teachers and students function as

playwrights commissioned to write Readers Theatre scripts based on curriculum material. Their focus is to create and then present a short script that must inform as well as entertain.

What is Readers Theatre?

Readers Theatre is a rehearsed group presentation of a script that is read aloud rather than memorized. No attempt is made to hide the scripts that the performers hold in folders or place on lecterns in front of them. Lines are distributed among individuals, pairs, small groups, and the whole group. The emphasis is on spoken words and gestures, not on staged action or *blocking* (the official theater term for stage movement).

There are many published and Internet resources for Readers Theatre scripts. They are overwhelmingly based on stories or pieces of literature. Teachers who find or create scripts of stories that pertain to their curricula report using them successfully with students, who react enthusiastically (Larkin, 2001; Prescott, 2003). Stories and literature are also the primary focus of most books dedicated to Readers Theatre resources and methods (Adams, 2003; Dixon, Davies, & Politano, 1996; Sloyer, 2003).

But what if stories and literature are not integral parts of your curriculum? Even if they are, what if you lack the time to search through books or the Internet to find a Readers Theatre script that directly addresses what your class is studying? What if your school system requires reading and writing components as parts of the instruction in any content area? What if textbook information and facts

could receive a theatrical treatment in your classroom? Enter Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre.

Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre

Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre differs from traditional Readers Theatre in that its script topics come directly from classroom curriculum content, not from published scripts or stories. Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre (CBRT) scripts are based on curriculum topics and are written to address prescribed standards of learning. They can focus on, but are not limited to, stories and literature.

CBRT's written emphasis is on informing and entertaining through dialogue. Because the playwrights are teachers and students, CBRT scripts concern precisely the topics of study particular to the class that writes and performs the script.

Standards on stage

The creation of a CBRT script addresses a number of local, state, and national standards of learning in the United States that require students to write in different formats and styles. The fifth National Standard for English/Language Arts (National Council of Teachers of English, n.d.), for example, identifies the following goal:

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

The 12th National Standard for English/Language Arts also lends support to CBRT learning activities:

Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

CBRT script topics can directly correspond to curriculum standards for any course of study. Five classes at an elementary school in Georgia involved in a CBRT residency I conducted, for example, created an American Revolution Readers Theatre script that addressed the following United States History Standard for grades 5–12:

The student understands the causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the

American victory. (National Center for History in the Schools, 1986)

In addition, one of the national standards for theater that calls for students to write scripted scenes based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history can be met through CBRT. The more I researched the standards, the more evidence I found to support writing, reading, rehearsing, and performing CBRT. Its activities involve students in demonstrating comprehension, paraphrasing, summarizing, synthesizing information, and communicating ideas and information orally. Students read, write, and speak across the curriculum.

Reading fluency

Rehearsals and performances of CBRT scripts increase students' abilities to read the text fluently. Fluent readers read aloud smoothly and with expression. They recognize words and understand them at the same time. Reading educators emphasize the importance of fluency—the ability to read a text accurately and with the appropriate speed (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Martinez, Roser, & Strecker, 1998; Rasinski, 2000). Because there is a close relationship between fluency and comprehension, fluent readers tend to be higher achieving students (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Rasinski, 2000).

Readers Theatre gives less skilled or struggling readers fluency support from more capable readers. When readers speak lines with others, they see and hear words simultaneously. As part of this group speaking experience, they practice correct pronunciation, intonation, and expression. Such teamwork also implicitly motivates attentive reading. To create an effective performance, all readers must remain focused on the script, paying attention to solo lines, group lines, cues, and gestures.

Reading the same passage several times orally is an effective strategy for developing reading fluency because repeated reading provides the practice needed for reading to become automatic (Samuels, 1979/1997). Readers Theatre requires repeated oral reading because the text is a script and a script requires rehearsal. It is not unusual for students to rehearse the same script 15–20 times before presenting it in performance. Rasinski (2000) called Readers Theatre a “natural and authentic way to promote repeated readings” (p. 148).

A SAMPLE CURRICULUM-BASED READERS THEATRE SCRIPT

The following is an excerpt from a CBRT script developed with students. The numerals to the left of the lines of dialogue indicate the number of the student or students who speak.

Triangles

Playwrights/performers: sixth graders

Setting: Math class

National standards of learning addressed by this script:

National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (n.d.), Geometry Standard 6-8.1—analyze characteristics and properties of two- and three-dimensional geometric shapes and develop mathematical arguments about geometric relationships.

- precisely describe, classify, and understand relationships among types of two- and three-dimensional objects using their defining properties;
- create and critique inductive and deductive arguments concerning geometric ideas and relationships, such as congruence, similarity, and the Pythagorean relationship.

Information source: Textbook

A portion of the script:

- 1: You mean there are different types of triangles?
2: Hello! All triangles don't look the same. [gesture]
1: Well, how different can a three-sided shape look?
3: Way different!
1-10: There are seven different ways.
4: Way different!
11-20: Seven different ways depending on the...
5: Angles.
6: Or sides.
1: OK. So, what are they?
All: Equilateral, isosceles, scalene, acute, equiangular, right, and obtuse. [gesture]
1: Whew!
7, 8: An equilateral triangle means each side and angle are congruent.
1: Congruent?
9, 10: Congruent means "the same."
1: Equilateral, the same. Equilateral, the same. OK, what else?
11, 12: An isosceles triangle has two congruent sides.
1: Isosceles—two congruent sides, two congruent sides. Got it. Next?
13, 14: A scalene triangle has no congruent sides.
1: No congruent sides! No congruent sides! I'm getting it now.
10: Now we switch from sides to angles.
All: To describe a triangle. [gesture]
1: What? What?
10: Calm down. [gesture]
2, 3, 4: Acute triangles have three acute angles. That's how you know them.

(continued)

Movement aids memory

Scripts held in one hand leave the other hand free for gesturing. Readers Theatre is more interesting to perform and to watch when the dialogue is emphasized by appropriate movement—waving hands, pointing fingers, shrugs, raised fists, scratched heads, snapping fingers, wiped brows, thumbs down, thumbs up.... Any relevant gestures contribute not only to a more dynamic performance but also to increased retention of the material. Learning that incorporates a physical process is more likely to be recalled (Jensen, 1998).

Rehearsal equals repetition

The term *rehearsal* is a learning strategy as well as a theatrical practice. Basic rehearsal learning strategies refer to the learner's active reciting, repeating, or naming the presented items during learning (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). Rehearsing any Readers Theatre script means reading, repeating, and reviewing lines, sound effects, and gestures to prepare for a performance.

Together all the students involved—from the most reluctant readers and speakers to the brightest class hams—read, speak, listen, and gesture repeatedly. Even the youngest and least experienced "actors" enjoy having a script with their own lines. They often take their scripts home to rehearse, increasing their oral reading practice and their exposure to the content.

Repetition enhances retention

Why can most actors recite entire speeches they made in plays years ago while they may not be able to recall the ingredients of a recipe they made just last week? It has to do with rehearsal: Reading + recitation + repetition + review = retention. We remember what we read and rehearse in preparation for performance.

A test is a performance. Teachers nationwide are concerned with helping their students perform better on assessments prescribed by national and state laws. Dramatizing the curriculum with CBRT is one way to rehearse for improved test results.

Many standards of learning require students to retain information that requires what Jensen (1998) called semantic memory. It's the type of memory that involves words—names, facts, figures, and textbook information; it is the weakest of our

retrieval systems. Rehearsal, review, and reactivation strengthen semantic memory.

It would be difficult to get students to read or listen to a reading of the same content material 10 to 15 times. Instead, have them script it (or help them script it) for CBRT, and then rehearsals become eagerly anticipated events. Reading aloud proceeds more and more fluently. The repeated content eventually becomes reflexive or automatic. Ideally, it enters the long-term memory—retained for performance and assessment.

Loren Zander, a sixth-grade teacher at a middle school in Virginia found this to be true of students who participated in the creation and performance of a CBRT script about the U.S. Bill of Rights. “My students remembered some of the lines from our script and, more importantly, the concepts of the Bill of Rights that appeared as items on the Virginia State Standards of Learning test,” she said.

Barbara Liptak, a curriculum support teacher in Georgia, also voiced her support of CBRT. “Through reading scripts and utilizing hand gestures and inflection of voices, the students not only retained more information, but were successful on end-of-unit written assessments. As a result, we have continued to use this instructional strategy every year when we teach the American Revolution.”

Liptak’s colleague, Debbie Pernice, elaborated: “The test we designed to measure learning gave us concrete data. In my class, out of 22 students, only 3 failed to demonstrate mastery of the required knowledge. Thirteen children scored 90% or above, 5 received Bs, and there was 1 child who made a C on the test.”

A scenario of classroom events: The process

Simply described, the process of creating a Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre script begins with content: What standards are students required to meet and what do they need to know? Provide students with a source for that information—a textbook page, a fact sheet, a story or piece of literature, or a set of instructions. Invite them to create a context for presenting the facts through the dialogue of a script, with lines assigned to narrators and characters and individual and group voices.

A SAMPLE CURRICULUM-BASED READERS THEATRE SCRIPT (continued)

- 1: I don't know them, even if they are cute.
5, 6, 7: [sound effect] No, no. Acute means the angle is less than 90 degrees.
4: Acute isn't cute. Acute means less than 90 in the degree department. OK, OK.
8, 9, 10: If all angles are the same.
1: As in congruent!
All: Congruent! [sound effect and gesture]
11, 12: Then it's equiangular.
1: Then *equi* means...
All: The same. [sound effect and gesture]

CBRT challenges students to present accurate information in creative ways. Their script must be more than a dull recitation of facts. As playwrights, their goal is to create a script likely to evoke audience interest—it cannot be boring. This stipulation provides students with opportunities to infuse their writing with humor, contemporary references and expressions, sarcasm, and other uses of language. Older or more capable students can do the bulk of the script writing themselves; younger or less able students can contribute ideas for a script that the teacher assembles.

Before beginning their script, students use prewriting strategies (e.g., making lists; clustering or mind-mapping; answering the questions of what, when, where, who, and why) to generate, select, elaborate on, and organize ideas, vocabulary, and information. The teacher may take a leading role in this process, especially the first time students create an original script. As long as the script contains the necessary accurate information, students can be as imaginative as they wish in creating context, characters, and dialogue. The teacher, however, retains the right to act as the chief playwright, prompting or contributing ideas, making corrections or additions, and vetoing inappropriate elements.

Because the readability of nonfiction information, such as that found in textbooks, can be difficult and therefore frustrating for struggling readers, the goal of creating an entertaining script can increase students’ motivation to read and understand factual texts. The script writing is usually a group activity—the whole class, small groups, or pairs of students collaborate to read information

and incorporate it into a script. Thus, when faced with challenging text, stronger readers support classmates reading below grade level, and together they use the same information to create a new text (the script) and increase their comprehension of the information.

If a script is to be performed by an entire class, the teacher assembles the first draft. This draft is likely to be choppy and inconclusive; that's completely acceptable because it will be revised.

After the draft is read and critiqued by the whole group and the teacher, the first draft of the script undergoes editing. This edited version becomes the final draft, which is photocopied and distributed. Each completed CBRT script is usually just one or two pages long, requiring no more than 5 to 10 minutes of performance time.

Parts are assigned and the students highlight their lines. Initial rehearsals focus on reading lines correctly, listening for cues, and unison speaking. Subsequent rehearsals emphasize vocal volume and expression. As in choral reading, all performers remain onstage throughout the presentation. A CBRT performance, however, becomes more theatrical when it is enhanced with sound effects, gestures, and possibly music and costumes. Performers are arranged standing or seated in rows or a semicircle; they look straight out toward the audience or at an angle, rather than looking at one another (Shepard, 1993).

In contrast to the conventional presentation of information by one or two students, CBRT allows for more students—even an entire class—to be simultaneously engaged and attentive. All speakers must be listening and ready for their cues. When the whole class is performing, the teacher functions as the director, coaching for unison speaking, vocal expression and volume, and energetic and effective gesturing.

From process to product

When the students have rehearsed the script well enough, they present their performance for selected audiences. Maybe the performance is simply for their classmates or the class next door; maybe it's for a school assembly. With performance as a goal, students are motivated to read, repeat, and review even the least compelling curriculum con-

tent because it is scripted in new, different, and sometimes humorous ways. "Students love to perform for an audience when they are given sufficient opportunities to rehearse the script" (Rasinski, 2000, p. 149).

"My class really enjoyed doing the Readers Theatre on the American Revolutionary War," said Pernice. "I was a little worried in the beginning that the practice sessions we took to create and rehearse the script would take away from the time my students would need to learn the curriculum objectives required by our school system. But when I saw how enthusiastic the children were and how even my reluctant readers spoke their lines, I felt strongly that learning was taking place."

Learning with pleasure

"Think about things that are fun," wrote Cornett (1999). "They generally involve solving problems, doing interesting things, learning new skills, working with people, meeting challenges, moving around, and making discoveries. Compare these aspects of fun with what we want to happen each day at school" (p. 231).

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. Actors prepare and rehearse for hours and hours because they love the process, the people, and the performance. Many students react to CBRT in the same way.

"What my students especially enjoyed about CBRT was the opportunity to be creative in a way that doesn't usually happen in math class," said Jane Mohler, a teacher at an elementary school in Indiana whose students wrote a CBRT script about fractions. "During our class discussion, students said that they liked CBRT because it helped them learn the information, it was lots more fun than just learning from the book, it made them think about what was important to know about fractions, and they liked performing in front of the class."

Theatrical press releases promoting CBRT would include phrases such as requires repeated reading, improves reading fluency, motivates writing, models revising, increases retention of content information, addresses standards of learning, exemplifies arts integration, and incorporates

theater skills. Simply stated, Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre experiences that merge reading skills with curricular topics and the art form of theater can result in a variety of peak performances.

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