

Tanner, J. M. (2012). Using dramatic activities in an English-Language Arts classroom to improve student comprehension of literature. *Wisdom of Practice: An Online Journal of Action Research*.

Using Dramatic Activities in an English-Language Arts Classroom to Improve Student Comprehension of Literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine the effects of drama-based activity in an English-Language Arts classroom on student comprehension of literature. The study took place over a two-month period in an eleventh-grade English classroom in the state of Washington. Ten students were the focal subjects for an analysis of interviews, observations, surveys, and documents. Secondary subjects included 65 junior students who participated in surveys and observations. Data suggested that (a) students' comprehension of literature and their perceptions of their comprehension increased, (b) increased engagement led to increased comprehension, and (c) the collaborative nature of drama improved community, engagement, and comprehension.

Introduction

Halfway into my student teaching experience, I grew weary of telling students to open their novels to read, then hearing a chorus of displeasure. How could it be that students were not as willing to dive into the masterfully-crafted *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley as I had once been as a high school senior?

"Try to engage them with drama," said my colleague. "The last thing they want to do at the end of the day is sit in an uncomfortable chair and read a nineteenth-century text." I decided to design a unit using the methods of dramatic activity, something I had not previously considered.

Despite the success my school had had in the past with testing results, administrators had made it a goal to reach achievement levels as near to perfection as possible. This goal had prompted administrators to encourage teachers to try new, cutting-edge, and innovative ideas that might bolster test scores while preparing students for successful collegiate and post-collegiate careers. In this atmosphere, I felt encouraged to put my idea of using dramatic activity in my English-Language Arts classroom into practice.

With the support of colleagues and professors, I designed a unit centered on the text of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and incorporated dramatic activities to supplement reading of the text. I also designed an action research project focused on the research question: *Will implementing dramatic elements in an English-Language Arts classroom improve reading comprehension in my students?*

Review of Literature

Dramatic activity can be defined as "making personal meaning and sense of universal, abstract, social, moral, and ethical concepts through the concrete experience of the drama" (Bolton, 1985, as quoted by Robbins, 1988, p. 2). I organized what I discovered from my limited review of the literature by four themes: (a) effects on self-consciousness and empathy, (b) collaborative benefits, (c) comprehension and academic skills, and (d) student engagement.

Self-Consciousness and Empathy

In a study with middle-school students, Schiller (2008) found that "drama contributed to an improved self-concept by providing opportunities to gain personal confidence by working in an uncritical atmosphere" (p. 15). Way (1967, as cited by Schiller, 2008) confirmed that drama develops social growth in two parts by overcoming self-consciousness and accepting and sharing with peers.

Dramatic activity shapes the individual learner by overcoming self-consciousness through self-expression without fearing censorship and the encouragement of self-concept (Jensen, 2001), specifically for students labeled at-risk (Schiller, 2008). Drama also creates trusting relationships and thus serves as an important instructional tool to teach empathy (Schiller, 2008).

Empathy development is facilitated by activity where drama is used in pretending to be characters other than themselves, where students "assume the role of others, where they learn and become sensitive to the problems and values of persons different from themselves" (McCaslin, 1990, as quoted by Coney & Kanel, 1997, p. 2). Through drama, students actively engage in exploring the motivations and lives of different characters and subsequently are able to explore the motivations and lives of their peers (Schiller, 2008). Dramatic activities may provide their first exposure in developing themselves as empathetic individuals in a diverse community (Coney & Kanel, 1997). Drama promotes self-esteem and empathetic development when learners are encouraged to express personal ideas in uncensored public activity (Coney & Kanel, 1997; Schiller, 2008).

Collaborative Benefits

A collaborative benefit has emerged in the research literature about dramatic activity:

Drama facilitates social growth by developing an understanding and acceptance of self and then by accepting others and sharing with others. Students

collaborate and cooperate with each other which allows for positive experiences with peers. (Schiller, 2008, p. 15)

Because of the social nature of dramatic activity, students develop a strong sense of self and an ability to apply that sense of self in positive experiences with their peers (Jensen, 2001). As they collaborate, they talk with peers and obtain different viewpoints (Feinberg, 1979). In discussing a dramatic activity called Poetry Theater in which students are encouraged to collaborate by using poetry and the performance arts, Feinberg (1979) stated that “students gain positive group experiences, learn to become more creative in their thinking” (p. 11). Students learn different perspectives on the same passage of literature and engage in high-level conversation which stretched their thinking. The world of possibilities is opened when collaborating in an active way through sharing differing ideas with others through drama (Feinberg, 1979).

Dramatic activity requires students to engage in “social contact and bonding, and students involved in dramatic arts form lasting friendships” (Jensen, 2001, p. 80). Students learn life-long lessons, also applicable across content areas, by engaging in cooperative activities (Coney & Kanel, 1997). In addition, students “are learning to work cooperatively in groups, for drama is a communal art, each person necessary to the whole” (McCaslin, 1990, as quoted by Coney & Kanel, 1997, p. 2). Students quickly realize their value in the larger context of the group as they take responsibility for parts integral to the production, “learning the responsibility of being there for their fellow performers. They also learn that ensemble (or small group) is important as well as whole group” (Annarella, 1999, p. 6).

Increased collaboration in the classroom gives opportunity to exercise social and leadership skills such that, regularly,

students who perceive themselves as leaders will take on this role in collaborative work and will delegate instructions to other members. Students who consider themselves as followers will often allow others to make choices for the group without complaint. In collaborative drama experiences, it is only when students step out of these perceived roles that drama becomes meaningful. (Schiller, 2008, p. 17)

Through drama, students feel comfortable taking risks as they experience roles of leadership (Schiller 2008).

Comprehension and Academic Skills

Jensen (2001) justified the use of the dramatic arts not only as a vehicle to foster learning in the classroom but also all types of kinesthetic movement in stating, “We are always creating an effect that involves our mind, our body, and the environmental stimuli. In fact, there’s no doubt that kinesthetic arts activate far more brain areas than traditional seatwork” (p. 72).

In addressing the question of whether the use of dramatic activity in the classroom waters down curriculum, Sun (2003) found “that the mental requirements for

understanding drama are similar to those for reading” (p. 3), that students use similar cognitive processes for reading comprehension and dramatic activity. In fact, a beneficial aspect of using dramatic activities is an increase in comprehension of subject matter, according to Deasy (2002) who found that

when children are involved in the process of integrating creative drama with reading they are not only able to better comprehend what they’ve read and acted out, but they are also better able to comprehend what they have read but do not act out. (p. 33)

The use of drama in a classroom in no way lowers cognitive function but, rather, offers a justifiable alternative way of presenting and comprehending information, especially for individuals with a different learning intelligence (Sun, 2003). Drama can have a positive impact on the development of literacy:

Drama can be an invaluable teaching method, since it supports every aspect of literacy development. From developing their decoding knowledge, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge to comprehension of extended texts, drama and theatre in many ways educate children as a whole, and they offer children a more free and flexible space in which to grow and to learn. (Sun, 2003, p.5)

Sun (2003) found that, from acting out a scene, a student is able to comprehend his or her character through an author’s use of characterization. In order to portray a character from a novel, a student must look for ways the author makes the character unique, “must pay attention to characterization. That is, they should always be aware of a character’s major traits and figure out how to communicate those through tone, pacing of speech, pausing, and so on” (Zelasko, 2002, p. 3). In addition, students may be given the opportunity to discover and form their own opinions regarding how an author characterizes rather than having the information forced upon them (Zelasko, 2002). Through the continual experience of using dramatic activities in the classroom, the understanding of “character development will emerge as someone works on a role, not as a result of being told that ‘Shakespeare is a wonderful delineator of character’” (Wolf & Miller, 1970, p. 19).

In a study analyzing a collaborative script-writing unit, Stanford (1978) found the social aspect of using dramatic activity in the classroom to develop academic skills in writing and revising:

Three important things happen that can aid the growth of the student writer. During the initial brainstorming for ideas, each member has the opportunity to have his or her ideas aired and incorporated into the script. Such a process helps the individual writer learn how to select topics, how to find supporting details, and how to eliminate extraneous material. Secondly, as the group works together, reading and re-reading its script aloud, individual students learn valuable editing techniques. Lastly, and perhaps the most important element in

an individual's growth as a writer, each member of the groups shares in the final success of the composition. (p. 52)

Research has supported the idea that dramatic activities can benefit a student in content areas other than English-Language Arts, and grades can improve generally because the “neurobiological systems necessary for improved grades include quick thinking, mental model development, task sequencing, memory, self-discipline, problem solving, and persistence. These are developed through the dramatic arts” (Jensen, 2001, p. 81). In confirmation, students who are involved in studying drama score higher on standardized tests than students not involved in the performing arts; even higher standardized test scores are seen in students that have had experience with acting and producing (Jensen, 2001).

Student Engagement

Annarella (1999) found that K-12 students must feel able to extend themselves as learners and take risks without fear of judgment and failure, stating, “It is important that each student become involved in a nonjudgmental way” (p. 8). This advice is confirmed by Schiller when she discussed that students need an atmosphere that is uncritical (2008).

In order to perform, students need to engage themselves at the mental, social, and physical levels and then in the text (Annarella, 1999). “Because there is total student involvement through the performance of the literature, students can become engaged and develop a feeling of investment in the lesson” (Annarella, 1999, p. 7). This type of activity encourages students to become active, involved learners, especially those who may tend to take a less-engaged route of completing an assignment (Coney & Kanel, 1997). According to Lin (2003), students become more involved in dramatic activity because they take ownership over their products; it is through this involvement that students are able to engage in literature with their peers. Coney and Kanel (1997) agree when they say that “drama is simply a vehicle by which [students] can become involved with literature. Although it involves *performance* in some sense, the goal is not performance, but involvement” (p. 3).

Methods

Mixed methods were used to design an action research project to understand the use and impact of dramatic activities during the exploration of the novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Subjects

The research involved both primary and secondary subjects. My primary subjects were ten junior students enrolled in my English class. Four who were earning either an A or a B were selected and identified as higher-achieving students (pseudonyms of Colin, Cameron, Molly, and Sally). Three who had earned from a B- to a C in my class during their first junior semester and similar grades in previous English classes were selected and identified as middle-achieving students (pseudonyms of

Kelen, Daniel, and Carrie). Finally, three who had earned a D or a failing grade in my class and similar grades in an English class in the past were selected and identified as lower-achieving students (pseudonyms of Bill, Sandy, and Jacob). Student skill level regardless of grades was also considered in selection of the subjects. For example, Daniel earned an F during his sophomore year in English, but an extenuating circumstance (a death in the family) had led to abundant absences and his loss of credit. Sandy was verbally intelligent and communicative, but her absenteeism had a negative effect on her written communication grades. The primary subjects were drawn from all of my classes (four were from period one, four were from period two, and two were from period six).

Secondary subjects were the rest of the 55 students enrolled in my classes. These students were of a diverse skill-level including five special education students and four pre-Advanced Placement (AP) students.

A formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was approved to guard against any harm in the conduct of this research. All participation in this study was completely voluntary, and participation was not permitted without formal consent (see Appendix A).

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods used during this study were interviews, surveys, observations, and document analysis.

Interviews. A total of ten students were interviewed. These students were asked about their perceptions of engagement when using dramatic activity in the classroom, and their understanding of literature after experiencing drama in the classroom (see Appendix B). These ten- to fifteen-minute, individual, semi-structured interviews took place at the end of the unit and were audio-recorded.

Surveys. Students participated in a paper survey involving identifiers where they reported their learning styles, rated their engagement in activities, elaborated on their experience with the dramatic arts and how they felt about it in their English classroom (see Appendix C). After the unit, students were asked to complete a similar survey where only the open-ended, free-response questions were altered (see Appendix D). The questionnaires were administered during a class period to 65 participating individuals and 61 students returned responses.

Observations. On three occasions, the classes were formally observed planning and performing dramatic activities. Each observation lasted a standard class period of 55 minutes. One activity was observed near the beginning of the unit (see Appendix E), one near the middle (see Appendix F), and one near the end of the unit (see Appendix G). Detailed notes for each class period were kept to document the details of the observation. A staff assistant present at the time of each observation validated the typed account.

Document analysis. The types of documents collected and analyzed included chapter quiz scores, post-activity reflections, state testing scores, attendance records from the second semester of the 2010-2011 academic school year, and finally, academic histories which included past classes and grades earned. Each of these documents was selected in order to better understand student comprehension of literature during a drama-based unit. Only documents from the ten primary students were analyzed.

Data Analysis

A multi-phase strategy was implemented to analyze the data. Interviews and surveys were analyzed first: data was read, organized, and analyzed for emergent themes. Each interview was transcribed from audio-recording into a typed, digital document. During each read-through, new ideas and themes were recorded on a laptop computer into an electronic file of preliminary themes.

Surveys were analyzed next. The survey data were transferred from handwritten tallies to spreadsheets and tables. Another document was kept open to log thoughts and evidence of emergent themes in the surveys. The survey themes matched those which had emerged during the interview data analysis. The data spreadsheet was analyzed and visually represented in charts and graphs.

Next, documents produced by or related to the primary subjects were analyzed for support of the emergent themes from interviews and surveys, and evidence of triangulation was sought. Finally, the observational data were similarly analyzed thematically. Assertions of findings were constructed through synthesis of thematic elements across all four data types and supported with triangulated evidence from all data.

Limitations

Data would have been stronger if the study had begun at the start of the school year to track the longevity of the effects of drama on comprehension of literature over the course of a year. More time might have created opportunity for stronger or more evident effects on comprehension.

Second, for understanding how drama can be applied to the classroom, my research focuses on dramatic activity only in English-Language Arts and only in my own classroom. This small-scale limits generalizability to other classrooms and content areas.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Using dramatic activity in my classroom increased comprehension of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald. By using the data analysis methods discussed previously, I was able to come to the following conclusion: *Using dramatic activities in my junior English classroom significantly increased lower-, middle-, and higher-*

achieving students' comprehension of the novel *The Great Gatsby* through higher engagement and the collaborative nature of the activities.

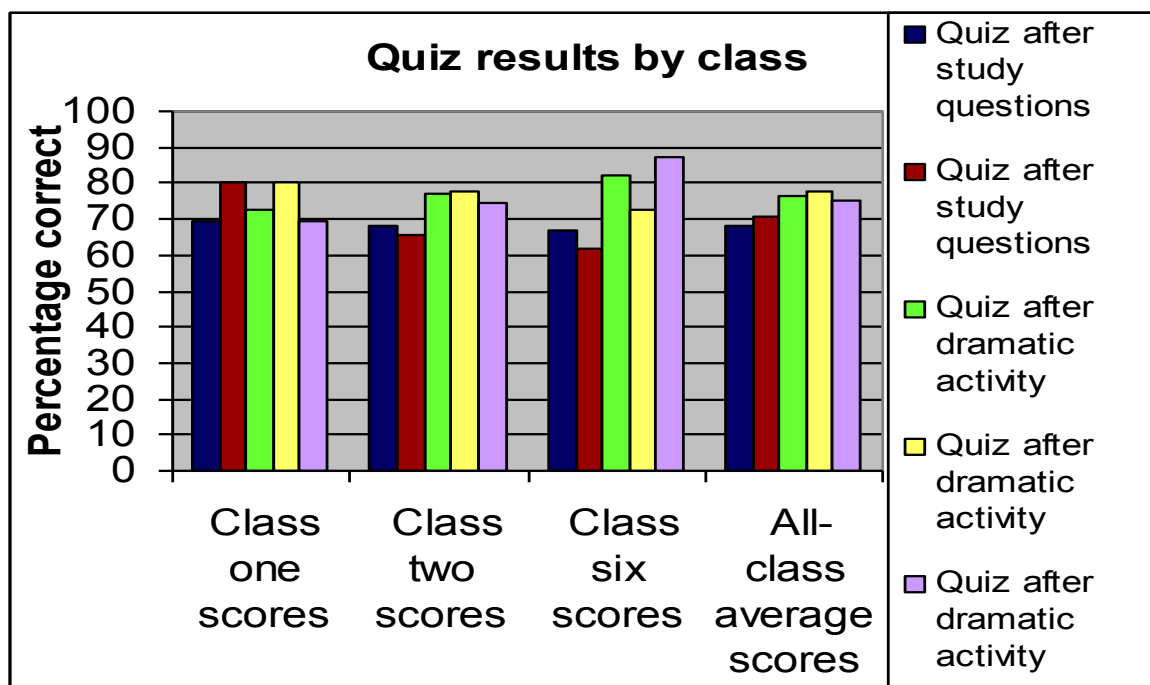
Increased Comprehension of *The Great Gatsby*

After my students read each chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, the class either participated in a dramatic activity or answered study questions, depending on the chapter. Next, I administered a quiz that assessed reading comprehension. All test questions were of a short-answer or fill-in-the-blank format and attempted to obtain an accurate understanding of student comprehension. I gave five quizzes throughout the eight-week unit.

Scores from chapter quizzes that were supplemented by a drama-based activity were consistently higher than scores supplemented by study questions only (see Figure 1). When a quiz was administered after the use of a dramatic activity, students performed on average 4.5 percentage points higher than when the quiz was given after the use of study-guide questions alone.

Figure 1. Quiz results showing higher scores after drama-based activities and lower quiz scores after study questions

(n=65)



In addition, records for the ten focal students showed that the use of dramatic activity had a positive effect on their grades (see Table 1). The higher-achieving students all maintained their A grades during second semester and, in the cases of Sally and Cameron, increased the percentage earned by at least 2%. The middle-

achieving students all increased their grades from first to second semester. Daniel and Carrie both increased their grades by a whole letter, while Kelen increased the value of his A by 2%. Of the lower-achieving students, Sandy and Jacob both increased their grades. Overall, comparing data for first semester versus second semester grade percentages showed that most students increased their grades by at least 2%.

Table 1. Students' English grades and percentages over two semesters

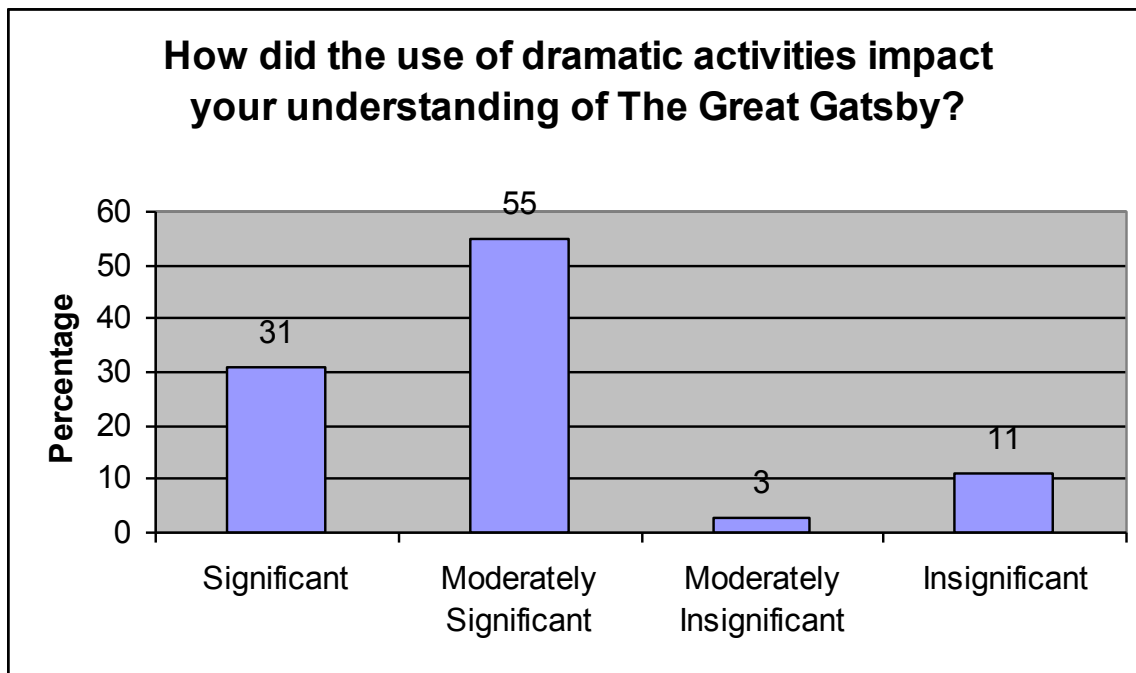
(n=65)

	English grade semester 1 (no drama)	English grade semester 2 (drama)	Change in grade (increase or decrease)
Higher-achieving students			
Cameron	A (97%)	A (99%)	Increase (+2%)
Colin	A (94%)	A (99%)	Increase (+5%)
Molly	A (95%)	A (99%)	Increase (+4%)
Sally	A (98%)	A (100%)	Increase (+2%)
Middle-achieving students			
Carrie	B (87%)	A (95%)	Increase (+8%)
Daniel	C- (72%)	B- (80%)	Increase (+8%)
Kelen	A (93%)	A (95%)	Increase (+2%)
Lower-achieving students			
Bill	B (85%)	C (74%)	Decrease (-11%)
Jacob	B+ (88%)	A- (92%)	Increase (+4%)
Sandy	D (63%)	C+ (77%)	Increase (+14%)

Bill was the only student to have a negative change in his grade during the dramatic activity, dropping an entire letter grade despite his participation in activities and his declaration that “dramatic activity helps me learn more” (personal communication, May 31, 2011). I found that grades in all of Bill’s classes dropped by at least one letter grade during the second semester, suggesting the possibility that personal issues may have been involved. Bill missed a total of three days during the unit (7.5%), which contributed to the drop in grade. Overall, despite this single inconsistency, the semester grades of the focal students and the average quiz grades of the class suggest that dramatic activity contributed to an increased understanding of literature for most students.

Self-perception of understanding is an important indicator to comprehension because both are internal processes. To gauge students' perceptions of how well they understood the novel, survey questions asked how they perceived dramatic activities to affect their understanding of *The Great Gatsby* (see Figure 2). In addition, students were invited to agree or disagree as to whether they thought their understanding of material was greater when presented through the dramatic arts than when presented traditionally.

Figure 2. Post-unit student survey responses – understanding *Gatsby*



A large majority of students, roughly 86%, assessed themselves to be affected to a significant or moderately significant degree by the use of dramatic activity in the classroom. Students also responded to the question in a short answer format:

Significantly. By using dramatic activities I can visualize the things going on more so than just reading.

Significantly because I am a visual person so when I saw this, I felt like I was actually there when it happened.

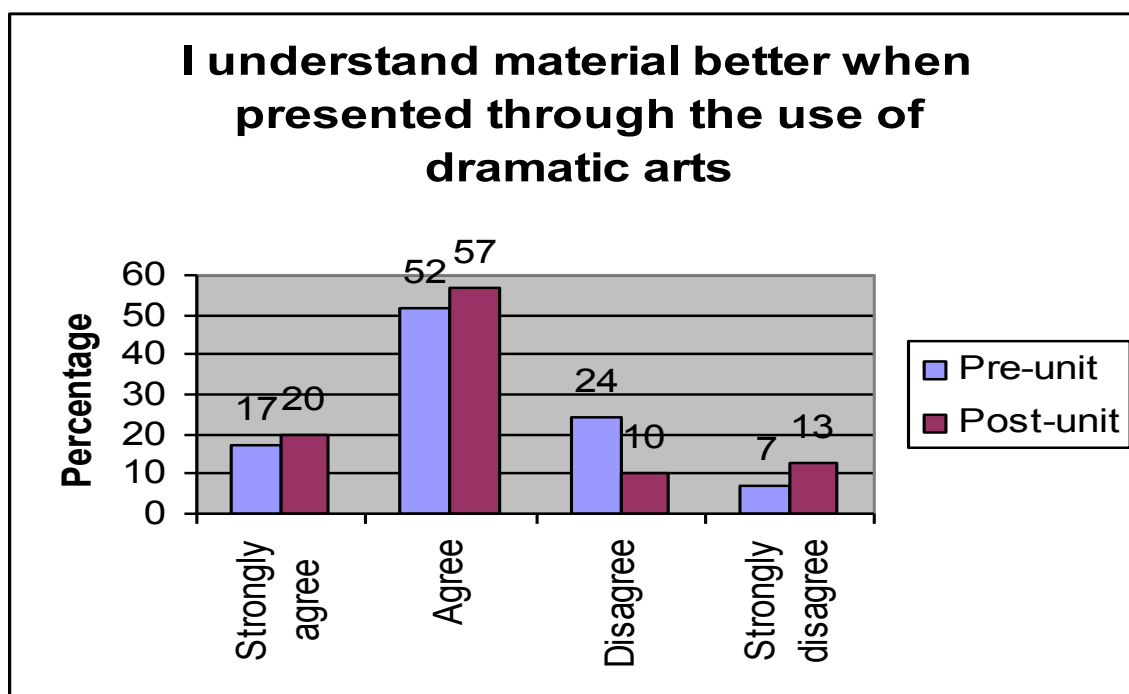
Moderately significant because I am more of a visual and spatial learner so to see the interactions instead of having to try to visualize them were very beneficial to me.

Moderately significant because the activities made me think a little deeper about the book. (survey data from May 31, 2011)

Student responses suggested that drama in the classroom positively impacted student understanding of literature for two reasons: (a) the visual and spatial aspect of drama and (b) thinking deeper about the meaning of literature.

Students were also asked to rate how they understood material when presented through the dramatic arts (see Figure 3). Roughly 69% of my students judged themselves to understand material better when presented to them through drama. When given the same question eight weeks later after having read the novel and having performed various dramatic activities, students' perceptions of how dramatic activity impacted their understanding had changed. Survey data suggests that, after participating in the unit, a total of 77%, an 8% increase, identified themselves as understanding material better when presented to them through the dramatic arts.

Figure 3. Pre- and post-unit student survey responses – understanding content



After reading the novel and participating in supplemented dramatic activity, a large number of students expressed having a better understanding of the literature. Sandy, a lower-achieving student, said, “When you put yourself in the shoes of the character, you learn more about them than you would just reading the book. I think you definitely learn more from activities like that” (personal communication, June 1, 2012). Daniel, a middle-achieving student echoed this sentiment about his understanding of *The Great Gatsby* when he said, “I definitely did feel more in touch with the characters, and that did change my understanding of the book” (personal communication, June 3, 2012). Carrie, a lower-achieving special education student, said, “When we are performing things, I actually understand what is going on in the book” (personal

communication, June 6, 2011). Thus, my students reported their perceptions that, through drama in the classroom, their understanding of the literature increased.

The data presented suggests that using dramatic activities in my junior English classroom significantly increased lower-, middle-, and higher-achieving students' comprehension of the novel *The Great Gatsby*.

Increased Engagement Through Dramatic Activity

Because student attention was hard to retain for a prolonged period of time, any teaching method I discovered that engaged their minds was a treasure to me. One student, Colin, described himself as engaged throughout *The Great Gatsby* unit:

The activities helped because it wasn't like the same thing over and over. Familiarity kind of helps promote boredom, and school is pretty much the same thing everyday. So, if you can switch it up, even though you are accomplishing the same thing, that helped. (personal communication, June 1, 2011)

A higher-achieving student, Colin engaged by empathizing with the characters from the novel: "I was engaged because you can put yourself in the shoes of the character. And then, when we acted it out, we were engaged because it was interesting, and you didn't know what to expect" (personal communication, June 1, 2011). However, the higher-achieving students were not the only students to become engaged in the novel, as I observed a group of three lower-achieving students do the very same in a performance activity in the following observation.

It was April 15, 2011 and the bell rang for class to begin. The three usual late-comers came strolling in. Tuvok, Tom, and Harry were viewed as the rowdy bunch in many of their classes by both their peers and their teachers, and my class was no different.

"Tanner! What's up, Teach?" Tom playfully jested as he sat down in the back corner, carefully placing his backpack in the middle of his desk.

"If the rest of you gentlemen would take your seats, we can get started with the performances," I said, noticing that the class was busy getting out the anticipated supplies for the day. It was time for the Freeze Frame activity, and I was excited to give it a go because of the high level of movement and deeper level of thinking it was expected to generate. The majority of students seemed interested in what the day had in store because they were ready with their previous day's work in front of them, a rarity without me having to remind the class.

The desks had been intentionally placed to emulate theater-in-the-round, a presentation style that optimized observation of performers and audience-performer transaction. The first group of students volunteered with grins on their faces and methodically arranged themselves into frozen scenes from *The Great Gatsby* as I declared, "Three, two, one, freeze!" A few nervous titters and giggles came from the audience and performers alike as the absurdity of the situation settled on the

students. Everyone fell silent. A frozen tableau of four individuals was created, and all students looked enthralled. Every eye was focused on the performers, as though the audience was trying to will the performers to continue the scene. To my surprise, even Tuvok, Tom, and Harry were transfixed upon the four students in the center of the room.

The performers fielded the required questions for the activity: *What are you doing? What are you thinking?* Each performer answered the questions satisfactorily, and their understanding of the text was evident.

“What are you doing, Chakotay?” I asked one of the first performers.

“Well, right now, I am pretending to be Tom, and I am driving to a secret love-nest with Nick, Jordan, and Myrtle,” responded Chakotay.

“And what are you thinking?” I asked.

“I’m thinking about how I can trust Nick and Jordan to not tell my wife that I am cheating on her. Also, I think that Nick is a pretty cool guy. I’m trying to impress him with how many lady friends I have,” answered Chakotay.

When it came time for the next group to take their places, I called up the first group to raise their hands: Tuvok, Tom, and Harry. They stepped confidently to the center of the classroom and took their places. “Three, two, one, freeze!” I said, and the room again fell quiet. This time, the nervous laughter subsided, and I asked the students about their characters and their scene. One by one, Tuvok, Tom, and Harry answered my questions.

“What are you doing, Harry?” I asked.

“Well,” began Harry. “I am playing the character of Nick, and I am hanging out with Tom Buchanan right now. I’m thinking that this guy is a bit of a scumbag, seeing as how he is married to my cousin and cheating on her and all. I’m also probably not that happy to be here. I am a bit uncomfortable with all of this adultery going on. This Jordan girl seems like she might be fun.”

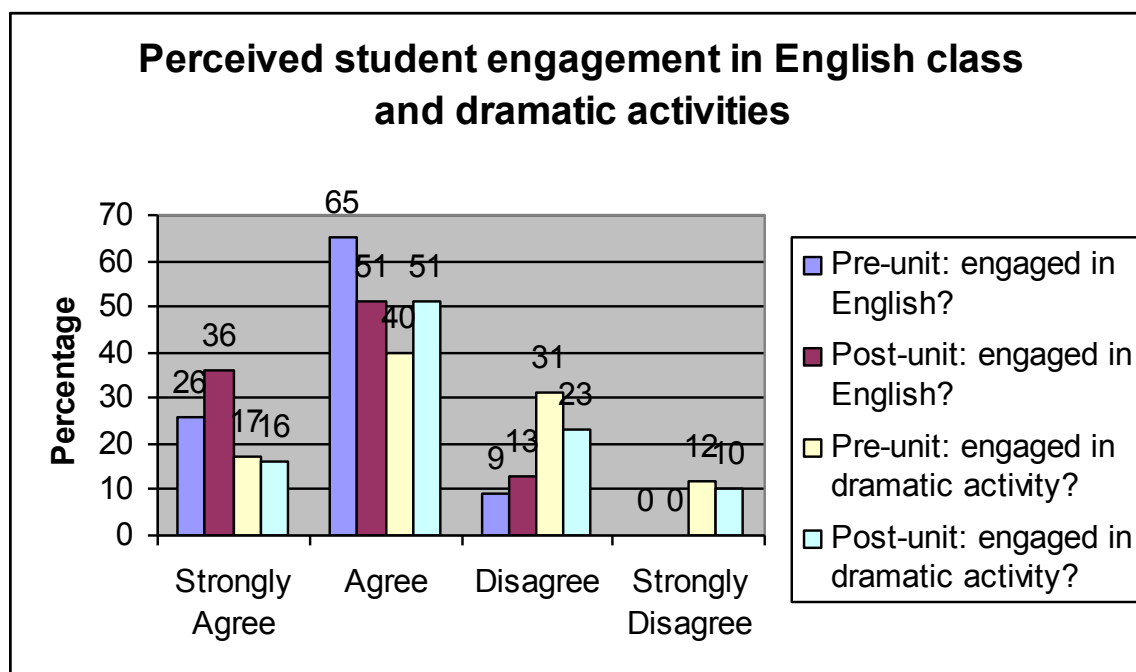
I was utterly flabbergasted at the level of detail that Harry explained, not in his capacity to do so, but because this was the first time I had heard oral evidence of his engagement with the text. Tuvok and Tom had detailed answers as well.

When the students took a quiz over the chapter supplemented by the Freeze Frame activity, Tuvok, Tom, and Harry all scored above an 85% on the quiz. Not only did I observe these once-disengaged students fully participate and show comprehension of the literature, they produced evidence of good understanding on the quiz. The higher level of engagement that Tuvok, Tom, and Harry showed during this unit contributed to their increased comprehension of *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925).

Student self-perception of engagement in class is important to analyze in order to obtain a better understanding of total student engagement. I wanted to gauge students' perceived engagement level when dramatic activities were used through pre- and post-unit surveys.

Students filled out questionnaires that asked whether or not they believed themselves to be engaged in English class (see Figure 4). Prior to the unit, 91% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am engaged in English class" but, after the unit, the number of students describing themselves as engaged declined to 87%, a decrease of 4%. At first, I was confused by this data. Student answers were intriguing for two reasons. First, no student strongly disagreed with being engaged on either the pre- or post-unit survey. Second, despite the 4% decrease in students who described themselves as engaged in the unit, there was a 10% increase of students who strongly agreed with the statement, "I am engaged in English class."

Figure 4. Pre- and post-unit student survey responses – engagement



The questionnaires also asked whether or not they believed themselves to be engaged in our dramatic activities. Before any dramatic activity, 57% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I am engaged in activities where drama is used." Thirty-one percent disagreed with the statement, and another 12% claimed they strongly disagreed. After participating in the unit when students again responded to this statement, it became clear that they perceived themselves as more engaged when dramatic activity was used. The initial 57% of learners who either agreed or

strongly agreed with the statement increased to 67%. Thus, having experience with dramatic activity, students identified themselves as more engaged.

The data presented suggests that using dramatic activities in my junior English classroom significantly increased lower-, middle-, and higher-achieving students' comprehension of the novel *The Great Gatsby* through higher engagement.

Collaboration

According to the literature, drama encourages ties between individuals through the collaborative process of sharing ideas and information to create a product and through the social transaction that occurs between performer and audience. In drama, students step into an inherently social realm as they think and learn about the views of others.

In interviews, students talked about the social aspect of the dramatic activities they experienced in my classroom. No interview protocol questions were specifically designed to elicit students' perceptions of their collaborations, yet students turned the direction of the interview toward the social implications of drama. Discussions about the benefits of the collaborative, social aspects of drama came from two angles: developing and understanding the opinions and perspectives of others, and more positive classroom community and engagement.

One benefit of collaboration that students reportedly enjoyed was encountering the differing perspectives of their peers. This was documented when Sally, one of the higher-achieving students, described working with others as “a positive experience. It was good to see. They had different opinions, and it was good to hear different opinions other than from myself and the people that I had been hanging out with” (personal communication, June 2, 2011). All levels of learners commented about benefits from the social-collaborative aspect of dramatic activity. Not only were kids learning new ideas from each other through the planning process, but they were also learning new perspectives and understandings by observing the performances of classmates:

A lot of the time, it gives me a different point of view that I hadn't considered before. For example, in the unit, you had to prove that someone in the story was guilty of a crime. And I have to admit, there were a lot of arguments that I hadn't considered when it came time to share with the class. I had to try and decide if they were valid, and a lot of them were. It really made me reconsider my argument and look at the other characters in more depth. (Daniel, personal communication, June 3, 2011)

Daniel's deepening perspective on characters developed because of the social interaction involved in the dramatic activity. Instead of experiencing a one-sided understanding of the novel, Daniel's encounter of others' ideas helped to create a new, more complex understanding of *The Great Gatsby*.

Cameron, a higher-achieving student, gave a very similar sentiment when he described his favorite activity, Freeze Frame, as “awesome because you got other people’s point of view more than yourself. You had your ideas, but they had their ideas. So, it gave you a different insight on the book” (personal communication, May 31, 2011). Other students similarly described how the varying perspectives of their peers contributed to their increased understanding of the novel.

Students also expressed their appreciation of the reinforcement of main ideas that the dramatic activities offered. By working with peers who understood the novel differently, lower-achieving students could modify their tentative or incorrect assessments of the novel with the better reasoned opinions of peers. Jacob, a lower-achieving student, considered his understanding to increase from the use of dramatic activity:

Some people would think something else was going on, but when they saw the Freeze Frame, they understood that this guy was doing that, and this is how he was reacting. So, if they weren’t following really well, it would help them understand what was going on and help them on a test if they had a question about what happened at that part. (personal communication, June 3, 2011)

It was apparent to me that Jacob’s constant reference in the interview to *they* was actually a reference to himself. An eager learner, Jacob tried his best to attain and comprehend everything throughout the year, although I noticed very early that he tended to overestimate his comprehension of novels and articles read in class. Taking a simple view of the reading process – read, then formulate an understanding – he often came to incorrect conclusions. Jacob would raise his hand confidently to add to discussions, then stray off topic. Dramatic activities clearly helped him understand through the multiple perspectives of his peers, both those with whom he worked and those whom he observed in performance.

Cameron, a higher-achieving student, noted that his reading comprehension increased because of the socially charged motivation to do well in front of his peers. He said that when “I have to actually get in front of the class, I’m going to put more effort into it than if I were just writing a paper that was going to the teacher” (personal communication, May 31, 2011). The element of social transaction between performer and audience was enough for him to exert more effort simply because he was aware the performance would be public. Cameron’s desire to perform well for his peers motivated him to work harder, encouraging his exploration of the text and increasing his comprehension of the literature.

The element of community also increased through the use of dramatic activity in the classroom. Students were observed to form stronger bonds, relationships, and, in some cases, even friendships as they participated in dramatic activities. These positive relationships led to an increased level of engagement in the class and in the literature we were analyzing. When asked about why he thought he was more engaged in dramatic activities, Kelen, a middle-achieving student, responded by referring to the social aspects of drama, saying:

If somebody is up here acting it out, I will tend to pay more attention to what is going on. If somebody is up here showing me what is going on, I'm more likely to grasp what's actually going on in the book. It's more interesting, and I think it gets more people to pay attention because you're always waiting on what they are going to say next, or how they are going to do it. (personal communication, June 2, 2011)

Kelen's class had quickly embraced the concept of drama in the classroom. On April 18, 2011, they entered class where the front whiteboard listed each important character's name from *The Great Gatsby*. Without prompting, students made their way to the board and signed up for their parts to be read during the class period.

"Sweet! Colin is going to be Tom again," said Marcus. Several students joined in the celebratory response, and giggles emerged from several corners of the room. Colin was having a particularly good time with the Readers' Theater method in which a group read a text aloud, assigning parts to members. Colin cleared his throat and began reading the part of Tom Buchanan in a thick southern drawl. The class erupted in laughter for a brief moment, then quickly quieted when the novelty of their classmate's new accent wore off, each student's nose buried in the novel.

"Tom Bue-cha-nan," purposefully mispronounced William, reading the part of the narrator. The class again erupted in laughter. It had become customary in this group to pronounce Buchanan's last name with exaggerated phonetics no matter how hard I begged students to pronounce it correctly. We had a meme, a cultural element in our classroom. After the laughter died down, William continued to read aloud, and each student's nose returned to its position three inches in front of their novels.

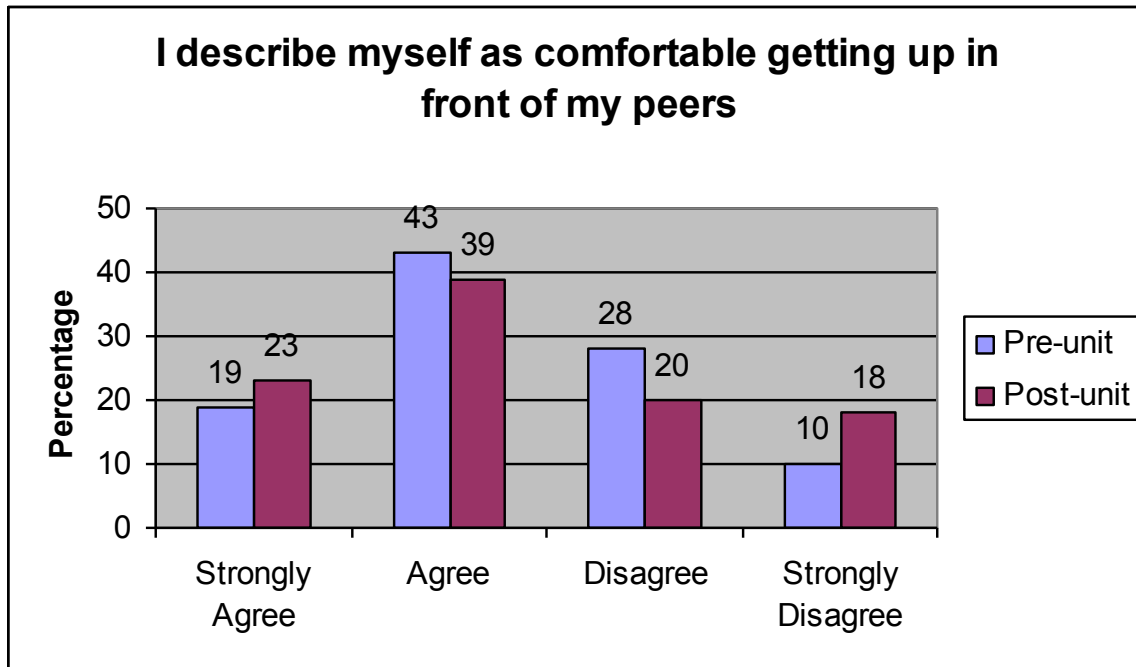
Because of their comfort level and strong sense of classroom community, these students were able to take risks which increased engagement in performances and reading and, therefore, a stronger comprehension of the literature. The data I have presented suggests that using dramatic activities in my junior English classroom significantly increased lower-, middle-, and higher-achieving students' comprehension of the novel *The Great Gatsby* through the collaborative nature of the activities.

Inconsistency. To gauge community, I asked students how comfortable they were with performing for their peers, expecting to hear an overwhelming number describe themselves as comfortable getting up in front of their peers.

Figure 5 shows pre- and post-unit survey data regarding student's self-described comfort-level of performing in front of their peers suggests no change in the percentage of students who responded with either disagree or strongly disagree (38%) to a survey question regarding personal comfort at the front of the class. Likewise, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with the same statement remained constant (62%). Interestingly, however, 8% more students reported being less comfortable getting up in front of their peers at the end of the unit than at the beginning of the unit,

while 4% reported growing more comfortable. So, overall, the data suggests they were less comfortable as performers after the unit's dramatic activities.

Figure 5. Pre- and post-unit student survey responses – comfort in performing



Not all of my students indicated they had concepts of themselves as masters of the stage, able to brave any challenge of public presentation set before them. Because 8% more students strongly disagreed with being comfortable after performing, the social element of performing was revealed to be not positive for everyone.

It is awkward to pretend to be a character in front of a crowd of adolescents, and shyness affects student willingness to take risks in front of peers. On the end-of-unit survey, when asked how she felt about using dramatic activity in the classroom, Jane wrote, "I think [drama] is a good idea, but it's not for everyone. Some people are shy" (survey data, May 31, 2011). Jane had transferred into my classroom during second semester, had made a habit of working alone, and had begrudgingly participated in dramatic activity. During the Just a Minute exercise on April 8, 2011:

Jane stood in front of the classroom, pressed one arm across her stomach, held her script in her left hand, and uttered her lines inaudibly.

"Please speak up, Jane," I said. "We can't hear you." Jane looked at me and rolled her eyes, then reread her previous line at the same level of inaudibility. After class, I pulled her aside to get feedback regarding her participation in class for the day.

“I just don’t like talking in front of people. I’m really shy and always have been. I much rather write an essay,” she explained.

I realized that, even when community and acceptance existed in my classroom, some students had not developed a sense of confidence sufficient to take willing risks in putting themselves on display for their peers. Although a small number of students were negatively impacted by the social aspect of drama, a majority of students were not.

Conclusion

Despite my success in using dramatic activity, I feel a general caution is in order regarding drama in the classroom. I saw that dramatic activities can have a strong, positive impact on classroom community by creating a shared experience that students can remember fondly. However, in order to create that experience, students need to feel safe taking risks, to feel comfortable with the teacher and with each other. My data show that dramatic activity, under these circumstances, had the potential to increase the classroom community, but, in my opinion, drama should not be used for the sole purpose of generating a community.

The school where I conducted this research is currently run by an administrative team looking for innovative ways to engage all learners in thoughtful, higher-level discourse and also to encourage teachers to conduct research and put new ideas into action. The success I had with my students has opened a department-wide conversation regarding the convergence of English-Language Arts and dramatic activity. My numerous conversations and observations around the building have revealed teachers in my department using dramatic activity in their own classrooms.

After this research, I find myself even more resolved to use dramatic arts consistently in my classroom. The observable and measurable difference that dramatic activities made on my students’ understanding of literature reinforced my desire to apply these activities to most of my units. Daniel effectively summed up the positive effect:

I think [drama] is a wonderful idea. I think it’s quite fun, and I know that it makes myself and other students interested in the subject matter if it is presented in a theatrical manner. It’s not something you can do without thought. You have to think about what you are doing, and it forces you to get a better understanding of the material. (personal communication, June 3, 2011)

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Appendix A Consent and Assent to Participate in Research

Greetings!

This is an invitation to participate in a research study to determine the effect that supplementing reading with dramatic/theatrical activities has upon student reading comprehension at Union High School. Your participation is very important to help determine the overall benefits of using the dramatic arts within the classroom. The research will involve:

- (1) Observations of student literary discussions.
- (2) Personal interviews regarding perception of dramatic arts being used in an English classroom (audio device will be used for the purpose of accurately transcribing the interview and immediately destroyed afterward).
- (3) Survey before and after unit that implements dramatic arts.
- (4) A collection of student work to determine a level of reading comprehension.

Participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose to participate (or allow your child to participate) in some parts of the study but not others, if you wish. There is no penalty whatsoever for not participating. All responses will be completely confidential – pseudonyms (fake names) but no real names will be used in reporting. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study, you may email me at justin.tanner@evergreenps.org. Please retain the top portion of this invitation for your records and information.

Please return the bottom portion of this invitation with your signature by April 15th, 2011.

Thank you!
Justin Tanner
justin.tanner@evergreenps.org

***** **PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY, DETACH, AND RETURN** *****

Parents and guardians of participating children

I consent to have my child, _____, participate in the research study of using the dramatic arts in an English classroom, including (check all your child may participate in):

[interview]

Signature: _____

[audiotape of interview]

Printed name: _____

Participating students

I consent to participate in the research study of using the dramatic arts in an English classroom, including (check all you are willing to participate in):

[interview]

Signature: _____

[audiotape of interview]

Printed name: _____

Non-participation

I do not wish to participate in the research study.

I do not wish to have my child, _____, participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

What is your grade level and what is the year you intend to graduate?

What are your post-high school plans?

Would you describe yourself as one who is successful in school? Why?

What is your favorite subject in school? Why?

How do you learn best?

What has been your experience with the performing arts (e.g., choir, band, orchestra, theater)?

Do you feel as though you learn more from an activity that requires you to move/act? Explain.

What is your opinion of using dramatic activities in an English classroom?

Describe your level of engagement when your English class uses dramatic activity. Why do you feel as though you are engaged at the level you describe?

What impact do dramatic activities have on your learning and understanding (comprehension)?

If adapted, would using dramatic activities allow you to understand other subjects on a deeper level (e.g., math, science, history)? Explain.

What other English-class activities have been helpful to your comprehension in the past? Why?

Appendix C
Beginning of Unit Questionnaire

Name _____

Describe yourself as a learner (check all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spatial (Visual) | <input type="checkbox"/> Kinesthetic (Body/Movement) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Linguistic (Language) | <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal (Social) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Logical (Mathematical) | <input type="checkbox"/> Intrapersonal (Self Interactions) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Musical | <input type="checkbox"/> Naturalistic (Nature) |

Describe your school subject strengths (check all that apply):

- English
- Math
- Science
- History
- World Language
- Art
- C.T.E.: _____
- Other: _____

Respond to each of the following statements with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Mark an (X) in the column that corresponds to the best answer for you:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am engaged in English class.				
I describe myself as comfortable getting up in front of my peers.				
I am engaged in activities where drama is used.				
I learn well from "hands on" experiences.				
I learn well from reading.				
I learn well from lecture.				
I learn well through the use of study questions.				
I describe myself as a reader.				
I describe myself as a writer.				
English (reading and writing) is a subject that comes easy to me.				
I understand material better when presented material through the use of the dramatic arts.				

Describe your experience with the performing arts (dance, theater, and choir):

How do you feel about using dramatic activity in the classroom?

How do you learn best in English class?

Appendix D End of Unit Questionnaire

Name: _____

Describe yourself as a learner (check all that apply):

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spatial (Visual) | <input type="checkbox"/> Kinesthetic (Body Movement) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Linguistic (Language) | <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal (Social) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Logical (Mathematical) | <input type="checkbox"/> Intrapersonal (Self Interactions) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Musical | <input type="checkbox"/> Naturalistic (Nature) |

Describe your school subject strengths (check all that apply):

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> English | <input type="checkbox"/> World Language |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Math | <input type="checkbox"/> Art |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Science | <input type="checkbox"/> C.T.E.: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> History | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

After having completed *The Great Gatsby*, respond to each of the following statements with strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Mark an (X) in the column that corresponds to the best answer for you:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am engaged in English class.				
I describe myself as comfortable getting up in front of my peers.				
I am engaged in activities where drama is used.				
I learn well from "hands on" experiences.				
I learn well from reading.				
I learn well from lecture.				
I learn well through the use of study questions.				
I describe myself as a reader.				
I describe myself as a writer.				
English (reading and writing) is a subject that comes easy to me.				
I understand material better when presented material through the use of the dramatic arts.				

How did the use of dramatic activities in the classroom impact your understanding of *The Great Gatsby* (Significantly, Moderately significant, Moderately insignificant, or Insignificantly)? Explain why.

After directly participating in a unit that uses dramatic activity, how do you feel about using dramatic activity in the classroom?

What dramatic activity had the greatest positive affect on your understanding of *The Great Gatsby* (*Just a Minute, Freeze Frame, Reader's Theater, Who is to Blame*)? Why?

What other activities would have helped you understand *The Great Gatsby* better?

Appendix E

Freeze Frame Directions

Get into groups of three to four. You and your group will be physically recreating three significant moments in time from the novel. Instead of reenacting the scene, you will be frozen, mid-movement, thought, or action as the character.

On a piece of paper, for each significant moment, you must explain two things about the character you are representing:

1. What is your character doing?
2. What is your character thinking? Write the hidden thoughts of your character for this moment in time.

Be prepared to present to the class at the beginning of the period tomorrow. You will be answering questions in front of the class as you are frozen. Good luck! Have fun!

Appendix F

Just a Minute Directions

Your task: Write and perform a script that lasts one minute and covers at least **FIVE** important events of chapter 5 of *The Great Gatsby*.

Important rules for Just a Minute!:

- Everyone in your group must participate.

- Three to four persons per group.

- Be ready to present at the end of the period tomorrow.

Appendix G Who is to Blame Directions

Blame one of the following characters for the deaths of Jay (James Gatz) Gatsby and George Wilson:

- Jay Gatsby
- George Wilson
- Tom Buchanan
- Myrtle Wilson
- Daisy Buchanan

Part One:

Craft three arguments that prove (without a shadow of a doubt) that your character bears the blame (or at least a large majority of it). Use the text of *The Great Gatsby* to show that your arguments are sound and logical; find at least one quote for each of your arguments.

Part Two:

Pretend you are an attorney prosecuting one of the characters from *The Great Gatsby*. Use your three arguments from part one to craft a compelling “closing statement” to persuade a jury to side with your case. Write out your closing statement.

Part Three:

Practice. Perform your closing argument to the class. The class will act as the jury and decide whether they deem the character you have brought up on charges is innocent or guilty.