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Reviving Ancient Myths with Seventh-Graders

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Greek mythology has always been a favorite subject of mine. I taught it to high school students for several years, but this was my first year teaching this subject to seventh-graders. The day before the winter break the students worked on an activity that tapped into their prior knowledge about ancient history. They seemed enthusiastic at the time, although, in retrospect, they may only have been showing enthusiasm for the upcoming vacation.

After the short but relaxing break, I was ready to dazzle the students with my plans for the mythology unit. On the first day in the middle of my third hour while struggling to engage the students, I realized I was failing miserably. Blank stares multiplied, and I questioned my ability to spark any fire into these young minds for the glorious days of the Greeks. However, something struck me as I fumbled through that third hour. One of my students asked a question, and I threw out this response: "Do you ever wonder what it would be like to talk to someone like Zeus or Hera?" This wasn't greeted with resounding energy. Then I thought aloud: "I wonder what it would be like if we did a modern talk show interviewing these gods/goddesses?" I hadn't finished the question when one student broke in with: "Could we? That would be so cool!" I could see no reason not to. For the rest of that third period, I stood at the board writing furiously while the students brainstormed what was necessary for a successful talk show. They

came up with the following list of roles and jobs: host/hostess, anchor, guests (at least five), camera persons, producer, stage manager, makeup artists, cue card holders, commercial creators and actors, scenery/stage props crew, sound effects crew, and, music director(s).

After third hour, the word was out. In each succeeding class, students asked if they too could do a talk show as they walked in the door. Of course, with this enthusiasm, there was no turning back. I followed the same pattern throughout the day, having the students generate what was needed for a successful talk show. I merely facilitated, but never took charge of this project. Student ownership of the six-week journey began on this day.

Challenges

It was clear that my students needed more information than was included in the text to fully understand the characters some students would portray. Thus, as facilitator, I checked with the librarian for mythology texts. She asked if I had ever seen the pictures in mythology texts. I said I had. Due to the Greek's accurate depiction of the physical anatomy, it seems these are the first books to disappear from junior high libraries. The only other resource I knew I could acquire quickly was Edith Hamilton's text, *Mythology*. Even though this text had a tenth-grade reading level, it was my only choice. I called a friend at the high school, and she sent me 35 copies.

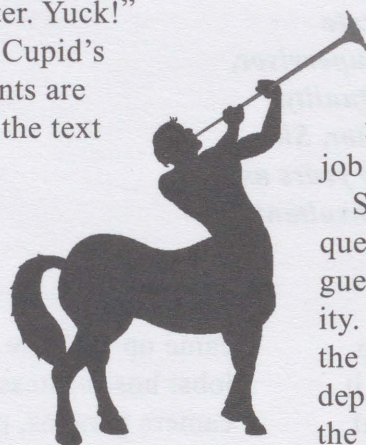
I carefully watched the reaction of my students as they started reading Hamilton's book. They went right to the character they wanted to portray on the show reading voraciously. I waited for someone to complain about the large vocabulary words and the small print, but all I heard were comments like: "Look what it says here, Zeus married his sister. Yuck!" or "I didn't know this is where Cupid's name came from!" When students are motivated, the reading level of the text is apparently quickly overcome.

There are six 55-minute periods in our school day. The first 10 minutes of every hour is devoted to silent reading. Thus, there are 45 minutes of classroom instruction each hour. I divided lessons as follows during the talk show planning: the first 20 minutes would be devoted to our regular curriculum; the last 20 were devoted to the talk show. This format was productive because the students always eagerly awaited "talk show" time, doing their best on the first half of the hour's activities to move quickly to the second half.

Letting Go

Students established all the ground rules for each step of the production. Below is a list of their rules:

- Students must apply for each part writing a paragraph stating why they should be chosen for a particular part.
- All students must participate in writing the talk show questions for the host/hostess so that everyone understands and fully appreciates the characters being interviewed.
- All students must participate in some way.
- Students who want main roles must look the part using costumes and make-up.
- Students may apply for male or female parts.
- All students can contribute to props, makeup, etc.



Students all agreed that the final selection of who would get what part should be left in my hands. I asked that students select at least two roles/jobs to make my selection easier. When the postings were finally made on the bulletin board, surprisingly, there were few complaints. For the posting I used a different bright colored sheet of paper for each class. These remained on the bulletin board throughout the production. It allowed students from other classes who had the same role or job to confer outside of class.

Students worked in small groups to write the questions and the answers for each talk show guest. Everyone had to participate in this activity. Students had a vested interest as they wrote the script. They knew their production's success depended upon a commitment to this portion of the project. They needed to pose enticing questions/responses, or there would be little interest in their show. A sample of questions for Persephone follows:

- Why did you disappear to the underworld with the dead?
- What encouraged you to eat the seven seeds from the pomegranate?
- What was it like to rise from the dead each spring?
- Since you live in the Underworld for four months, why are you known as the radiant maiden of spring and summertime?
- What do you really think of Hades?

A play's success is certainly influenced by the proper performance arena. The students decided they needed the school's stage for their production. When they asked me to make the arrangements, I declined. I gave a pass to two students and watched as they negotiated the entire transaction. My pattern was the same throughout this learning experience. Whenever something was needed like makeup, costumes, video equipment, etc., I posed questions and sometimes ideas but never physically performed the needed task. I wanted this to be *their* work, and it was. Miraculously, on performance day, everything, including parent volunteers, was in place. Each performance was videotaped and later edited by students with the librarian's help.

Assessment

Since these students had so much effort invested in this production, they felt it should be a sizable portion of their third marking period grade. I concurred. I brought in sample rubrics, explained how they were devised, and watched as they worked in teams to produce original performance and product rubrics. They also developed an original set of reflection questions including these:

- My main role in this production was ...
- A major problem I had while doing this task was ...
- The best idea I had for our show was ...
- The quality of my work is best shown in ...
- Next time I will do this differently ...
- The most important thing I learned from this experience was ...

The final assessment piece of their choice was an essay reviewing the positive and negative aspects of the experience.

My gift to them was an opportunity to select the "Academy Award Winning Talk Show." Hollywood's Academy Awards show just "happened" to coincide with our completed productions. After students finished editing the videotapes, I set aside one day to view all four shows. Students voted at the end of each hour. I posted the award winner the next morning on the bulletin board, and I brought treats for all. Our principal was also following the students' progress, and she also awarded all of the students with treats and had their videos shown during the lunch hours.

Final Thoughts

As teachers, we all have wonderful ideas, but unless we deliberately transfer ownership to our students we may not reap all of the benefits. This production taught me a great deal about "transfer." Every time I let go of a task I knew students were capable of completing, I saw growth in their independence. The relationship we had for the rest of the year was different. They knew that I respected their abilities and supported their developing educational paths. In the end, I really did pass along my love for Greek mythology. They never stopped talking about this experience.

Bibliography

Hamilton, Edith (1942). *Mythology*. N.Y.: Mentor Books.