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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Kaitlin Glause for her contributions designing and performing the process drama as well as Karenanna Creps for the introduction to the concept of a process drama.

Process Drama: A Creative Way to Assess ELA Understanding

Nicole Rausch

Twenty-six 5th grade students are sitting on the floor in four groups, anxiously awaiting the introduction to the anticipated Four Island project. Some students saw evidence of the project from previous years on walls in the hallway or heard bits and pieces from older siblings and friends, but for the vast majority, this will be a new experience unlike any they have experienced in a school setting before. I introduce the project by reading the beginning of four similar stories about the people who discovered a fictional island (see Appendix A). The only difference between the stories is the type of geography on each island. I end each story in the same spot, “Throughout the years, that’s how it was on the island. Life was slow and simple and the people on the island were content.”

The stories I read are only the beginning; they provide a description of the setting and a little context, but nothing more. How might the islands look? How do people contribute to the island? Will all the islanders work together? How will the islanders make decisions? What are their cultures like? The answers to these questions and the plot of the rest of this drama is largely controlled by the students. This student-centered work is the essence of process drama.

I was first introduced to a process drama as a pre-service teacher in an arts-focused education class. I have since used process drama in my 5th grade classroom in a suburban district in Michigan that serves primarily white students with diverse socio-economic backgrounds. In this article, I will describe how I incorporate a process drama entitled Four Islands, including connections to content standards, suggestions for assessments, and recommended adaptations for other classrooms. This article may be especially useful for teachers looking for ways to assess and integrate multiple subject areas while differentiating instruction to meet educational needs of each student.

Process Drama and Creativity

The Four Islands project relies heavily upon process drama, a pedagogical approach that invites students to engage in improvisational scene-building rather than providing them with a prescribed script. Through process drama, students and teachers design roles and scenarios to explore issues, events, and relationships, focusing on students’ exploratory experiences and processes rather than an end product to measure their learning (Kao & O’Neill, 1998). The concept was first coined in the United Kingdom by Dorothy Heathcote in the 1950’s, whose goal was to turn curriculum into drama to deepen learning and understanding. This tool for learning offers a way to mediate and focus the multiple systems that inform literacy development, while fostering students’ creativity (Schneider et. al, 2006).

Schools have been accused of “killing creativity” (Robinson, 2006). A famous study by George Land and Beth Jarman (1993) revealed drastic differences in creativity levels in kids versus adults. They found that 98% of kids age 5 scored at the genius level for creativity while later only 12% of the same kids scored at the genius level by age 15. According to Westby and Dawson (1995), teachers value creativity but are unable to support the independent thought, divergent thinking, and unconventional tendencies that come with creativity in the classroom. It is also possible that this decrease in creativity is due to the fact that creativity can’t be easily measured in students. It is easier to assess comprehension than creativity because creativity should be viewed as a process rather than a product (Runco, 2007; Shepard and Runco, 2016). Traditional tools used to assess creativity are limited because of the varying levels and styles of creativity so using an instrument that more broadly captures creative potential would be more fitting (Barbot et. al., 2011). Since creativity is more about the process, it isn’t surprising that creativity isn’t as commonly

assessed. Hence, schools typically assess content knowledge and very rarely assess the process used to achieve said knowledge.

Process drama allows for multiple means of assessment, both process and product. It is multi-disciplinary, which makes it especially attractive to educators who desire to integrate subject areas as a time-saving measure while also allowing students the space to be creative. However, process drama is unfamiliar to most educators in large part due to the recent push for more standardized curriculum, mandates, and testing (Grant, 2000). This article argues that process drama can be an effective solution in light of all those demands while also promoting creativity.

What Does This Process Drama Look Like?

The process drama, Four Islands, is enacted over 5 weeks in my classroom and includes a series of 9 activities

outlined in Table 1. To start, desks are arranged into four table groups, each representing one of the islands. I attempt to balance leadership, ambition, and other character traits when forming student groups to ensure a good mix. Room layout and student grouping all play a role in students taking responsibility for their learning throughout the experience because students have so much voice and ownership throughout the process.

After the introductory story, students are split into four groups, each “landing” on their own island with a unique geography. Students participate in a variety of activities to design their island and eventually build tension between islands. This manifests in their own creative ways and eventually reaches a conclusion that may look different for each island or for each student.

Table 1. Events included in process drama and resulting artistic products.		
Event	Description	Product created
Introduce story	Teacher reads story about explorers discovering land on each of the 4 islands (See Appendix A)	NA
Island sketch	Students individually, then as a group sketch ideas on paper making sure to answer questions about survival, government, jobs, etc. (Appendix A)	Printer paper sketch
Island creation	Half of each group works on painting, half on sculpting, switching halfway through.	3-D island painted on canvas
Essential agreements	Students write a set of rules and sign in agreement. This document also outlines how decisions are made.	Written document
Culture/values performance	Students decide what their island values most and demonstrate the top 3 values in the form of a skit with sound and movement.	Performance
Rumor spreading	Students analyze other islands and spread rumors about them using evidence from their canvas or values performance. For example, “they say that the people on X island are trashy because they have nowhere to collect their waste.”	Word battle
Perspective skits	Students perform skits using elements of theater (props, script, etc.) based on stories they were read by the teacher. When they perform the skits, they realize that they are two different perspectives of the same event.	Skit
Natural disaster	Teacher reads a breaking news story about strange natural disasters that have struck the area (Appendix A). Students have to work with their islands and follow their outlined decision-making policies to recover.	Recovery plan
Survival interviews	Newscaster (teacher) interviews each island about their solution.	NA

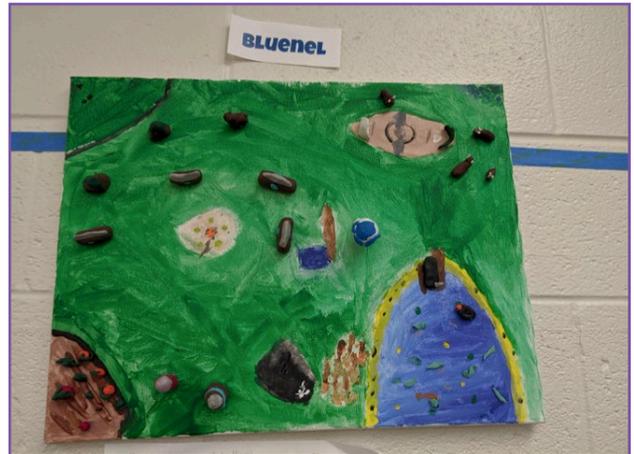


Figure 1. Visual art project for the island of Greenel.
Figure 2. Visual art project for the island of Brownel.

Figure 3. Visual art project for the island of Graynel.
Figure 4. Visual art project for the island of Bluemel.

Part 1: Building the Island

Students begin by sketching a map of their island and brainstorming both a form of government and an economy, making sure to account for the natural resources available on the island. The sketch is used to create a 3-dimensional rendering of their island using a canvas, paint, and clay sculptures hot glued into place. Their masterpieces help students begin to visualize the story and make connections to science and social studies through artistic representations of the island geography and environments. They also give students who may prefer visual art over reading and writing an opportunity to show their understanding using non-linguistic means.

The detail put into creating these canvases reveals students' thinking about infrastructure of a town, such as housing, culture, economy, and government, etc. Figures 1-4 show examples of islands that include huts, gathering

tents, tipis, individual rock houses, docks, shipping areas, agriculture, beaches for tourists, factories, and much more. Figure 1 specifically shows an island segmented into three distinct regions with one gathering hill for island meetings; one region is composed mostly of forest that is largely untouched by humans, the opposite region includes a beach and housing for tourists, and the middle contains crops and town buildings. In order to design a town, students must think critically about a variety of factors, applying the parameters set for them in the introductory story. Like the exposition in reading a story, building a visual representation of the islands helps students imagine the setting and develop a sense of ownership in the drama.

Part 2: Building Tension

Through the next set of activities, students develop the conflict and plot of their island stories. They perform skits

or write songs to represent their islands' cultural practices and values. Upon completion of the performances, students start to develop rumors about people on other islands based on differences in culture and way of life as detailed by the performances. Two groups of islanders face off to critique each other's island. The teacher could explain to students, "compare this to our rough understanding that there may be extraterrestrial life. They say that aliens want to eat us or they don't speak our language." Students are reminded that their critiques must be school appropriate and based on the context of the other group's presentations. The purpose is to build tension in the drama and to show the one-sided perspective of each group of islanders, which is disrupted in the next activity, "Perspective skits." Through this activity, students teach the imagined children of the island about historical interactions between islands. As students watch each others' skits, the perspectives of the other islands are revealed. They discover that each skit was, in fact, about the same event, just told from different perspectives (see Appendix A for story script examples).

Part 3: Closure

Finally, in the climactic moment of the story, a different natural disaster strikes each of the islands and the characters have to decide what to do. Based on the island's geography and natural resources the economy is dependent on, the teacher chooses the type of natural disaster. For example, an island with an emphasis on infrastructure might experience a tornado that would destroy businesses. From here, students have to decide how the story will conclude. Did they build a strong enough government or economy to overcome the power of mother nature and help everyone on their island survive? Will they have to bargain with the islanders across the ocean even though they have been enemies for years? While the story concludes differently every year based on how students answer these questions and find creative solutions, the Four Islands process reveals students' rich and creative learning across multiple content areas.

What Content Does This Process Drama Teach?

The Four Islands process drama addresses a wide range of topics through a variety of transferable skills. The central role of group work creates a rich context for students' to develop social skills for collaboration and conflict resolution. For example, the first conflict typically emerges when students create their visual representations using canvas and clay

sculptures. Each island is directed by the teacher to send half of their team to start the canvas and half of their team to start the clay. Often when they switch, they find that the canvas or the clay was different than what they had envisioned in the group planning stage. If necessary, I will step in to help them come to a resolution by having them take a look at the government structure they created and apply that system to their issue. Furthermore, to help build conflict-resolution skills, students are given an opportunity to reflect each day on how their group worked together and provide each other with suggestions for alternative resolutions when conflict arises. There is also ample opportunity for students to connect events happening on the islands to characters in books or events happening in the world today.

Visual and performing arts standards are explicitly taught through the project. Students learn the elements of visual art (e.g., texture, color, shape) and apply that learning when they practice painting and blending techniques to represent their island on canvas. They are also introduced to elements of theater (e.g., props, setting, script) and dance (e.g., levels, movement, energy,) when they are asked to perform skits or share the cultural practices and values of their island. Through arts integration, students meet objectives in both arts and other subject areas, like science and social studies (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). Teachers who have limited experience in teaching art can collaborate with visual or performing arts colleagues and community members.

Process drama allows teachers to easily adjust and adapt to cover other grade level standards. In this example, students demonstrated language arts skills such as visualization and an understanding of plot (e.g., rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion). They identified potential tensions through conflict and plot-building activities and wrote conclusions to their own stories. Process drama also integrates English language arts (ELA) and social studies standards. For example, when students produce a writing piece to describe their island's form of government, they also explain what resources are a part of their economy and compare the geography of each island. Depending on curriculum and grade-level standards, there are also opportunities to tie in science and math. For instance, students could calculate averages or plot out their land based on very specific area and perimeter constraints. Energy or erosion could also be easily tied in during island development or when disaster strikes. These examples suggest that process dramas lend themselves to integrating multiple content areas.

How Can Process Drama Be Used as Assessment?

According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) revised assessment principles, “Literacy is a social process, not a technical activity” and should “embrace several kinds of diversity...in learning styles, and in rates and routes of learning” (Yancey et. al, 2018). Process drama boldly meets both of those requirements by providing meaningful opportunities for students to reflect and assess their own learning throughout multiple formative assessments, such as written reflection, performances, art pieces, anecdotal notes, and collaborative problem-solving. Varying assessment styles provides an opportunity to triangulate data, thereby providing the teacher with a better overall picture of the learner.

The Four Islands project provides students with opportunities to apply their literacy knowledge in new ways which in turn allows the teacher to assess skills across multiple content areas. From this one project, I was able to evaluate students’ learning across content areas. For social studies, I assessed students’ ability to understand different geographies and natural resources as well as their artistic knowledge through their visual. I also assessed their understanding of different forms of government when they set up a decision-making process for their island. They were asked to create a written government document outlining the rules of the decision-making process and had to identify what type of government it most closely resembled in the world. When students had to prepare for negotiations after natural disaster struck their islands, I assessed their understanding of economy based on their written description of their island’s supply and demand.

The social studies assessments also bled over into literacy assessments. I evaluated how students wrote for an authentic purpose and audience; I also assessed their organization in writing. When students shared their essential agreements with the class in the form of a gallery walk, they were asked to make inferences about other islands’ values and beliefs. I assessed their ability to visualize by comparing their island drawings to the description I read to them. Finally, I used a checklist/clipboard to help me keep track of speaking and listening standards and a variety of other items that are included on my district’s progress report. It was easy to carry around with me and mark the progress of students as I observed and checked-in with each group.

With all the assessments for literacy and social studies, I did not feel as though I had the time to document individual arts-based assessments. I did, however, assess the whole group in the form of discussions or reflections. After each performance or gallery walk, I asked for at least three volunteers to share what elements of visual or performing arts they noticed. This not only reinforced that vocabulary for the students, but also gave me a general idea of the class’s understanding of aspects of visual and performing arts.

Differentiation

Another beauty of the process drama is that, if well-crafted, the students will unknowingly take on the work of differentiating instruction through means of student agency. Differentiating instruction to reach each student is important (Hawkins et. al, 2019). It is the act of accounting for all students’ unique backgrounds, learning styles, and interests. Differentiation attempts to meet students where they are at with instruction rather than trying to use a one size fits all strategy (Algozzine & Anderson, 2007). The difficulty for teachers lies in time required to plan and create a different lesson for each student. The beauty of process drama is that it provides every student with access and more often than not, gives them an opportunity to thrive where they may not be expected to otherwise. I watched two students, who struggle with reading, create magnificent skits that demonstrated their understanding of conflict and perspective. I also watched several students who normally don’t engage with social studies lessons participate and explain concepts such as resource use and economy.

In a process drama, the teacher only provides the structure for the story to keep happening, the details are all up to the characters participating in the story. Students have the agency to take the drama where they want it to go. It also provides an opportunity for the teacher to add scaffolds as students need either on an individual, group, or whole class basis. Students will experience, and execute the process drama in a way that works for their learning style and that meets them exactly where they are at with knowledge and understanding. They will expand on the parts that are interesting to them and skip over things that aren’t as interesting while still meeting all the same standards. The element of student agency eliminates the guesswork on the teacher’s part that comes with traditional differentiated instruction.

How Can This Be Adapted to Work for Me?

This original process drama was developed by Bethany Nelson based on the book *Two Islands* by Ivan Gantshev (Nelson, 2011). I adapted it to fit Michigan's 5th grade social studies standards. With a little creativity, you, too can adapt the structure for your own classroom and curricular standards. Consider the following. How many kids will be participating? What are their ages? How large is each group? What materials and spaces are available? What standards or cross-curricular connections need to be included? How will students be assessed? Do students have multiple ways of showing their understanding?

The design process is almost as creative as the execution process: there isn't a right or wrong way. The activity should encourage students to be creative, get involved, and share their understanding in a variety of ways. Books such as O'Neill's (1995) *Framework for Process Drama* and Bowell and Heap's (2001) *Planning Process Drama* are great resources for teachers interested in getting started with process drama.

Process drama is a diverse form of assessment for educators to integrate standards from multiple content areas; it is an activity that students should enjoy as it is a creative outlet that invites multiple learning styles. This open-ended learning opportunity can be flexible enough to reach any student and teach any skills or standards all while allowing the teacher to assess and differentiate in creative ways.

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Author Biography



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Appendix A

Introductory Script Sample

Once upon a time, there were four islands: Greenel, Graynel, Brownel, and Bluenel. They sat in the middle of an ocean with a wide stretch of deep blue water between them. The very first people who arrived at the island of Greenel discovered a home of thick green forests that provide shade in the warm summers and a shelter to cold snow and wind in the winter. Their leaders said “since our island is here in the middle of a big ocean and it is only so big and no bigger, we must work together to make the most of it. If we are careful and wise, we will be happy and comfortable.” And throughout the years, that’s how it was in Greenel. Life was slow and simple and the people on the island were content.

Meanwhile, the very first people who arrived at the island of Graynel discovered a home of rough, tough mountains that nearly reached the sky. It was so cold at the top of these mountains that you couldn’t feel your toes but you could see for miles and miles. Elk, deer, and antelope roamed on the edge of the mountain between the trees. On the other side of the ocean, the people of Brownel climbed out of their boats onto dry sand that extended for miles. As they wandered through the warm sun, they stumbled upon flowers, cacti and rocks. They even spotted a Javelina and coyote off in the distance!

Meanwhile, a boat of explorers stumbled upon the land of Bluenel. They discovered a land of rolling hills and fertile soil...

Building Island Prompts

Your land is covered with dense healthy forests. All types of animals live in these forests - bears, deer, squirrels, birds, etc. In the summer it gets quite warm but in the winter it is very chilly. You will have to make a plan to stay warm. As you begin to design your island, think about the following.

- Where will you live in the summer? Winter? What will you use to build?
- What will you eat in the summer? Winter?
- How will you stay hydrated?
- How will you make a living?
- What will you do for entertainment in the summer? Winter?
- Will you keep the land as it is or work to put up factories in a city?
- How will the people on your island work together to make decisions? What form of government?

Natural Disaster Script Sample

News caster: We interrupt your regularly scheduled programming for some breaking news! Natural disasters have swept through the ocean containing the Four Islands. These disasters have brought hardship upon the citizens of Greenel, Graynel, Bluenel, and Brownel. Now here’s our field reporter on site in Greenel to tell us more about the disaster facing the island...

Field Reporter: Thank you. It seems a terrible thunderstorm just passed by Greenel. The winds knocked several trees down and lightning caught one tree on fire. The forest fire spread and ended up taking *% of the trees down, burning the habitats of many animals with it. Many of the citizens on Greenel are left with nowhere to live and nothing to eat. It will take years for the trees to grow back.

News caster: Thank you for your report. What news do you have from the island of Graynel?... Thank you. We’ll keep an eye on developments in Graynel....It sounds like each of the islands is facing a crisis of epic proportions. How will the citizens of the Four Islands survive these disasters? Stay tuned to your local station for more information. And now back to your regularly scheduled programming.