

# From Page to Stage: Lord of the Flies

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RAMA IS A WORD THAT OFTEN SENDS WAVES OF PANIC THROUGH AN English teacher. Chaos, noise, and unstructured pandemonium are some of the fears that spring to mind. Yes, drama can be an important part of an English curriculum, but how to implement it in a way that will enrich language, rather than promote anarchy? How to structure it? How to assess it? How can an English teacher be proficient in all areas of an ever-widening English curriculum? The answer is, the teacher does not need to struggle in splendid isolation, but can tap into the expertise of colleagues. This has been successfully done at the International School of Helsinki (ISH), Finland, with close collaboration between the drama and English departments.

During the 1999-2000 school year, the drama and English departments of ISH completed several joint projects. The projects not only were enriching and beneficial to students, but were also rewarding for the teachers involved. We decided to formalize our ad hoc cooperative efforts throughout the year and do a project together from start to finish. We selected grade 10 English—a class of nine highly motivated, imaginative and responsible students—and William Golding's famous novel *Lord of the Flies*.

*Lord of the Flies* was chosen for several reasons. First, it was one of the available class texts at the school. Second, the plot easily converts to a drama that students will love—a chance to dress up, paint their faces, run around yelling out chants, and wave sticks in the air! Furthermore, there is flexibility in the number of characters needed. Finally, it has a very high interest level for all students. In the story, a group of English school boys are evacuated by plane during the Second World War. The plane crashes on an uninhabited island somewhere in the Pacific. In the novel, Golding explores the gradual disintegration of order amongst the boys once the restraining force of civilization has been removed.

### Preparation

As the two teachers involved in the project, Helen, from the English department, and Tuomas, from the drama department, we had several extended meetings to discuss possible drama assignments, using the novel as a springboard. We wanted to structure the project so that it would test the students' ability to identify the main themes of the novel and present them in another format and genre. The student actors would be offered a forum to develop their movement, acting, voice, and speech skills, enabling them to transfer their ideas and insights into a performance. We wanted to give the students creative freedom and a sense of ownership of their work. Also, it was important to structure our available time well, so that we could work around the constraints of schedules. We decided to narrow the project down to writing and performing an abridged version of Golding's beautiful fable.

Behind the school there is a rocky area near the car park that looks a bit like an island. The drama would be performed outside on the

rocks, in an open space, with no fixed stage or setting. The "island" allowed for drama that was unexpected, unconventional, and not boring. It provided an opportunity for creating precisely the acting area suited for a promenade performance in which the moving audience would define the acting area.

We prepared the following outline with clear parameters to guide the class through all the stages of the dramatization project.

#### Introduction

This is a group project for 8 to 12 students. You are to write an abridged dramatic version of the novel *Lord of the Flies*, then perform it. This project will assess your ability to identify the main themes of the story and to present and develop them in another format and genre. It will also reflect your understanding of plot, setting, and character.

Steps to follow:

#### 1. Reading

Keep a reading journal as you read the novel. For each chapter, make notes on plot, theme, character, and setting. This will prove invaluable later on, in deciding which scenes to include in the script.

#### 2. Elements of the novel.

##### A. Plot

Which scenes from the novel are essential for the abridged version?

##### B. Theme

What are the main ideas or issues and how will you convey them?

##### C. Character

Which characters will be included in the script? How do these characters change through the novel? How will you show this visually in the drama?

##### D. Setting

Which parts of the island will be used for each scene? How will you convey these different locations on the stage?

#### 3. Writing

Subdivide your group into pairs. Each pair will be allocated different scenes, for which they are responsible for writing a script.

#### 4. Discussion

Once the scripts are written, each pair will present their part of the scene to the rest of the group. Check that the styles of writing are not too different and there is a cohesive feel to the final complete script.

Ensure that the four elements of the novel are adequately covered. Allocate roles and read through the script. Check that the time length is appropriate. Discuss ways of conveying on stage a sense of character and setting.

#### 5. Rehearse

Appoint one group member who has a smaller part to be the director. After several rehearsals, be ready to show your teacher what you have done so far. This will provide you with an opportunity to get feedback and suggestions. Incorporate these suggestions into your additional rehearsals, including a dress rehearsal on the stage.

#### 6. Performance

You will be assessed on the script and on your performance. Ensure that your teacher has a copy of the complete script before the performance.

Our next step was to actually present the idea for a drama performance to the class. Students were given class time to read the novel, then we had a pizza night and showed Peter Brook's film *Lord of the Flies*. We explained our ideas for the performance to the class, whetting their appetite with possible approaches. The response from the students was overwhelmingly positive. As anticipated, they were hooked by the idea and enthusiastically rose to the challenge. Helen would be responsible for helping the students write the script, and Tuomas would be responsible for helping them with the performance.

Helen did several lessons on how to abridge a text. In groups, students were given a fairy tale to present in a tableau form that included all of the important parts of the story. After each presentation, the class discussed whether the scenes chosen were essential, and whether they had a clear beginning, middle, and end. Students progressed from tableau to dialogue, and from fairy tale to novel.

After brainstorming sessions, the students developed a list of which scenes and characters needed to be included in an abridged version of Golding's work. At first they listed 15 events, but after revising, the list was narrowed to eight scenes. Initially, students were hesitant to rearrange the plot sequence or to exercise artistic license, because they appreciated the delicate structure of the book. However, they

made the transition successfully from a novel to be read to a script to be spoken. The class was divided into groups, with each group allocated certain scenes to write. The students wrote two drafts of their scenes and received feedback on them. The complete script with all the scenes written by the groups was read, and further revisions were made as needed. This final script was graded by Helen. (See appendix 1 for a selection from the student-written script.)

#### Practice

When it came to allocating parts, everyone knew exactly which role they wanted to play, and fortunately, everyone wanted a different character. Characters did not need to be male, because, as we explained to the students, it is the function rather than the gender of the character that is important in Golding's work. As a practical matter, however, the gender of several characters in the novel needed to be changed, because there were girls in the class, but no female characters in the novel. The characters of Simon, Percival, and Eric became Simone, Percivilia, and Erica. This supported Golding's thesis that all possibilities are latent in every person. A student with a supporting role offered to take on the responsibility of director, and our role as teachers was kept to that of facilitators.

The student ensemble determined where each scene would take place and what props needed to be made. In keeping with the scope of an abridged version, students had to exercise economy in choosing and simplifying props, trusting the audience to fill in the gaps. These props would serve the actors' performances and enhance the audience's imagination. The props used were a pig's head, poles, spears, rocks, a conch, spectacles, and fabric for the "beast from the air." The art department became involved in building the props, creating yet another cross-curricular link in the school.

The first stage of the rehearsals required the students to identify with the characters, discuss their situations and objectives, and analyze the play even further. Then formal rehearsals began. The level of student enthusiasm could be seen in their desire to have weekend rehearsals and in the ever-expanding size of the audience they wanted!

The acting area required the students to develop voice projection skills. Tuomas used articulation exercises to improve the students' ability to formulate and communicate thoughts clearly, and to interact with their fellow thespians and the audience in a seemingly effortless manner. The rehearsals on the rocky "island" were practical, including speech and text work as well as movement on stage.

### Performance

The students' performance was outstanding. They threw themselves wholeheartedly into their roles. What was most impressive was their ability to sense the mood of the audience and to ad lib accordingly. The script took on a life of its own. The students were able to effectively play off each other and perform as a cohesive team. Their sense of enthusiasm and enjoyment was infectious, adding to the pleasure of the audience.

The student actors were given the challenge and freedom to explore their interpretation of the text. One outstanding student approached his role through movement and behaviour. Another student amazed many of his teachers and classmates with his stellar performance. This was an unexpected surprise, because the student is usually very quiet and not an obvious star or extrovert. This formerly shy student had discovered his role through voice and speech.

The audience numbered about fifty, including many parents. Our advertising around the school had been effective, creating interest and enthusiasm among students from other classes. This was due in part to the impact of the poster, which was designed and produced by our students. Many in the audience commented on the high quality of the students' performance, the interactive approach, and the ideal setting of the rocks. In retrospect, however, it would have been better to have had several performances with smaller audiences.

This success reinforces our belief that drama enhances the English classroom. Many students, when sitting behind a desk in a formal class environment, have untapped potential, but often they are fearful of taking risks and lack confidence. Given the opportunity to work on a team project, these students can shine. Observing our students reach this level of creative and artistic potential was the most rewarding aspect of the project.

### Conclusion

To answer the questions posed at the start of this article, one way to effectively integrate drama into the curriculum is through team teaching. By combining our expertise in teaching English and teaching drama, we had much more to bring to our students. International schools receive students with varying levels of English proficiency, and drama can help them in many ways. Drama activities give students an opportunity to express their ideas and personality with confidence, to take risks and explore new roles. Ensemble work allows students to build relationships of trust and friendship. The students had to carefully consider the text in order to write a script, thus enriching their language skills.

We gave clear guidelines at all stages of the project. This provided a sense of security and an intellectually safe place for students to work and express themselves. Clear criteria were set for assessing the performance (see appendix 2), making it easier for us as teachers to agree on the grades together. We did not focus exclusively on the final production, but evaluated the whole process. We considered how students had grown through the rehearsals and how well they interacted with each other. Because of their positive attitude, eagerness to learn, level of commitment, and inherent talents, they all received high grades.

*Lord of the Flies* made a successful transition from page to stage. The student actors had an experience that will stay with them. They found the strength and confidence to open up, both to themselves and to each other. Similarly, we gained a great deal, not only from working in partnership as teachers, but also from being part of the student team. We found that we were learners as much as teachers. Our students taught us that, given the opportunity, they could shine. But they did more than shine, they exceeded our expectations. ✎

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➡ 49