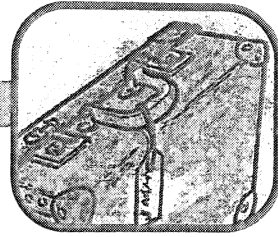


From TELLING OUR STORIES: CLASSROOM DRAMA in YRS 7-10

Learning Media, Wellington 1999

Tangiwai: A rail disaster and a story of heroism



Video: 39'03" – 53'45"

Frances Reed teaches year 7 and 8 students at Glendowie Primary School. The students were working at level 4, and Frances taught this unit over six weeks with the support of Lyn Shillingford.

Preparation

Learning outcomes

Frances's intended outcomes were for the students to:

- use a whole-group role play to examine and communicate ideas about the impact of the Tangiwai disaster on the people involved and about the concept of heroism (PK, DI, CI);
- use researched information to define the dramatic space and make artefacts for a drama (PK, DI);
- select and shape conventions to make a documentary-drama recording the disaster (PK, DI, CI).

The "big question"

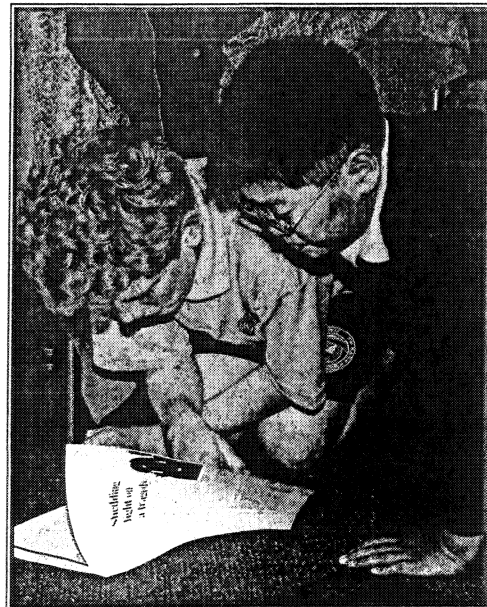
This unit allowed these students to unpack the notion of heroism. The central question was "What is a hero?" From this flowed other questions: "What is a heroic deed?" "Why do we need heroes?" "What sorts of people are heroes?" "Can ordinary people have heroic qualities?" "Can anyone be a hero given the right circumstances, or is it only within a few?" "How does the media treat people's heroic deeds?"

The source

The teachers introduced the students to information about the train disaster, including news clippings, *School Journal* stories, poetry, video clips from recent documentaries, and some textbook material.

Planning the overall direction

Lyn and Frances decided to explore the concept of heroism by focusing on Cyril Ellis, the hero of the Tangiwai disaster, through an extended whole-class role play.



Researching news clippings

The teaching sequence

Frances and Lyn introduced the drama through class discussion of what it is to be a hero. As the students talked, Frances listed their responses and questions. The students compiled a role on the wall for a hero and created freeze frames to represent their ideas. The teachers spent a long time building the students' belief in their roles as experienced film-makers. This role gave the students a sense of distance from the disaster that was reinforced when the film-makers then interviewed Cyril Ellis's sister rather than the hero. The interview served to embed their empathy for Ellis. The students went on to develop vignettes for the film and to create a storyboard showing how they could be linked together. In the final scene, Lyn, in role as the production manager, challenged the students to break their promise not to reveal the existence of a psychologist's report. The students argued from within their role that they could make good television without compromising Ellis's privacy.

Some key features exemplified

Establishing the pretext

Frances displayed images of heroes ranging from sports stars to firefighters. The students discussed what makes a hero and represented their concepts in group freeze frames. Each group spoke a sentence beginning "A hero is ..." and presented their freeze frame to the class, accompanied by gestures and movement.

Building belief

The students began developing material for the documentary. The teachers fostered their interest in the real people caught up in the disaster by asking questions such as "Who was on the train that night?" and "Who would have been affected by this event?" The class talked about all the people who would have been affected, both those on the train and those in the area. Working from the stories and information they had, they made cards to represent the people involved and put them on a map of the area. They also used the information supplied by the teachers to define the space and recreate the scene using chairs, paper, lengths of fabric, and classroom objects. Later, they pinned this up on the wall. By this time, they had found out about Cyril Ellis, the hero of the accident, who was later awarded the George Medal. Their interest in this figure expanded as the drama proceeded.

In role as researchers, the students developed their ideas about the passengers by making artefacts. In groups of three, they chose a card for one of them and created a profile showing their age, sex, occupation, marital status, reason for travelling, and who was to meet them. Then they made a paper cut-out of one piece of the traveller's luggage and wrote on it the contents of the bag, including things that indicated details about the person (for example, a Christmas gift for a grandchild).



We hoped these could be used later when we came to producing a performance of this work. In the meantime, they would be placed on a working display with the cut-out luggage, character card, and a sign that decided whether this was to be a survivor or a victim. We set this up with a thought-track device as the passenger sits and thinks about a moment connected in some way to the artefact in his or her luggage.



from Lyn's journal

The teachers invited the students to take on the role of documentary makers who had been brought together to research a hero in New Zealand history. The students had to accept that the teachers would have a role in the drama, too.

Lyn went into role as a production manager for the documentary that was to feature the Tangiwai rail disaster. She took the attitude of a rather insensitive journalist, chasing stories for ratings: the production was to be low-budget, quick, and sensationalist rather than in-depth journalism. She addressed the students in role as the documentary research team who would provide the film crew with material for filming the documentary. She told them that they had been chosen because of their expertise in research and their past experience at getting to the truth of an issue. To build their belief in their roles, she asked them to recall a documentary they had worked on.



Just asking them to be experts and thinking of a past film they had worked on is only the starting point ... It does not give them expert status and doesn't help them own this documentary. There must be more tasks built in to help them feel like experts.



from Lyn's journal

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At times, when the students' focus waned, the teachers found they were reprimanding as teachers rather than organising as project managers. To strengthen the students' belief in themselves as expert film-makers and their sense of collegiality as a film crew, the teachers had to develop a collegial way of working that was like the way real-life documentary makers would work together. They helped the students to build belief in their roles by:

- using inclusive language such as "our" documentary;
- treating them as research experts and expecting them to take responsibility and make decisions – after all, experts would have a say in what would be shown in the documentary;
- watching for emerging leadership in the group and being willing to share power (for example, when setting up the interview room).

The teachers asked the students to work in pairs and to select one of the cards for any person linked to the event – a passenger, a family member of a victim, a rescuer, or someone who lived near the river. Knowing the story of Cyril Ellis, they had to decide on a connection that this person might have to him, think of a reason to communicate with him, and then write a letter or postcard to Cyril as if they were that person. These later become the letters that Cyril had bundled up and left with his sister, and so the class was also creating materials for later use in the drama. There were expressions of gratitude for Cyril's bravery and sad memories of those lost in the disaster.

The documentary making began to move along, with the students more deeply committed to their task and their roles. The teachers continued to carefully develop the students' belief in their roles and empathy for Cyril, preparing them for the moment when they would have to decide whether to make a stand on his behalf.

Cyril's sister sent the researchers a box of artefacts containing some letters, a school report, newspaper cuttings, a photograph, baby photographs, and a counsellor's report. The artefacts offered clues to a complex character profile for Cyril and held the seeds for the future conflict between the production manager and the research assistants as the students were drawn into the human dimension of Cyril and the personal cost of his actions. The researchers examined the artefacts and started to put together a character profile of Cyril. For homework, the teachers asked them to plan some clear, sensitive questions to ask Cyril's sister at the interview.

Enacting

When the students were fully engaged in their roles as documentary makers, the teachers added another layer to their drama: the meeting with Cyril Ellis's sister.

The production manager presented a letter from Cyril's sister saying that she was glad to have the opportunity to speak to the documentary researchers about her brother and to talk about his exploits. She was willing to help them speak to Cyril, but he was a very private man who did not seek attention. She did have a box of things they might like to look at before the interview.

Lyn then arrived in role as the sister, bringing some of Cyril's letters. She conveyed a loving concern for her brother, mentioning that he still had nightmares about the crash and those he could not save. She worked to win the researchers over by building up Cyril's deeds but also warned them that he did not want the events sensationalised. She also said they must not mention that he had seen a psychologist to help him deal with the trauma. He was frail and, like her, distrustful of media attention. They did not wish to be filmed but would agree to having actors stand in for them. Then she left, thanking them for their concern.

“ He was a quiet man, and he didn't want a fuss –
but, my goodness, yes, he was a hero. ”

Cyril Ellis's sister

Structuring

The class took increasing responsibility for shaping the drama, with a group of students defining the space for the meeting with Cyril Ellis's sister. This set up a long piece of dramatic role playing, which the students took very seriously and made authentic. They decided how they would arrange the interview, sorting out the seating, preparing the questions, and making a phone call to confirm the time.

*I'm getting a glass of water because that's what they have
in real interview rooms.*

Student



Presenting a plan for the documentary

Following the interview, the teachers knew that the students wanted to recreate some moments of drama themselves. The production assistant asked them to work in groups to create vignettes for the documentary to show first to her and then to the production manager, who would decide whether to approve their plan. The researchers were to produce "the sorts of scenes that could be done by actors for the documentary". They had to draw up a storyboard, plan the sequence for the scenes, and assemble their material. Frances reminded them that the concept of the film was to look deeper at the person of Cyril, not just take

a stereotypical view of a hero. She urged them to think as film-makers and to consider how to use the sister's comments. They read the letters the sister had left, looking for ideas.

The vignettes showed moments in the lives of people linked to Cyril and the tragedy. They included a family group hearing the news while preparing Christmas dinner (for which the students wrote and taped a radio broadcast), Cyril talking to a counsellor about his memories, and a glimpse of the chaos of the crash. The storyboard was a useful tool for the students to order and sequence their work.

Finally, the production assistant asked the researchers to present their work to the production manager. Using guided depiction, the researchers guided her through the scenes they suggested would be useful. The production assistant watched and said she hoped the manager herself would be satisfied.

A letter arrived from the production manager saying that she had heard about the psychologist's report and demanding that they use it. The researchers decided that they could not go back on their agreement with Cyril's sister and that they would have to confront her. Suddenly, the manager arrived, and the researchers overheard a heated interaction between her and the production assistant (the convention of overheard conversation). The manager was keen to film the documentary but wanted to pull in high audience ratings. She deliberately adopted an attitude of insensitivity – she wanted Cyril to be on the film and was determined to have a sensational story.



The climax of the drama

This last teacher-in-role episode was the climax of the drama. As a ratings-driven production manager, Lyn goaded the class into defending their angle for the film. She pushed them to reveal all the facts they had learned about Cyril, no matter what the sister had said. She even threatened that the documentary might not go ahead. Her real intention, of course, was to get the students to use all the sympathy they had developed for Cyril and his sister in an argued defence of their position. They argued forcefully to depict Cyril in the way they had promised his sister – with respect. The manager heard them out and finally agreed to accept their plan.

Framing

Lyn and Frances deepened the students' learning by framing the drama a long way from the central action of the disaster itself.



The whole idea behind providing a frame through which we can view and experience the train disaster is to distance the students from the raw emotions such tragedies bring. Children do not have the highly developed skills of actors to demonstrate tragic events ... It would quite possibly lead to, at best, superficial "ham" acting or, at worst, disruptive, insensitive behaviour as students hide their embarrassment behind bravado and humour. Rather than recreate the disaster and "act it out", we took a more distanced angle and came at the event through the role of a documentary crew creating a TV special on New Zealand heroes. The documentary researchers were briefed to find a story behind the event that would sell TV. We knew that television and film researchers would be cool enough to hook the children in. We meant to encourage the feeling of research work by means of the production assistant's and the production manager's expectations. We did look at the blood and gore of the event initially from a rather callous viewpoint as people wanting to make exciting TV. The production manager manipulated this viewpoint.

We recreated a model of the disaster area, and as we explained "as if" we were researchers, we became more involved with the event itself. Heathcote calls this "talking into meaning". As we talked, pictures began to form in our minds, and we became more committed to the drama — yet we had the responsibilities of the documentary makers to frame our endeavours. This role gave a purpose and a particular lens to examine the event that protected us from superficial responses. At this stage, the next layer of tension unfolded. Our views were challenged as we deliberately placed into the drama characters representing those who had experienced the real suffering and were not motivated to tell their story just to sell TV, in fact, they were against the idea.

This injection of a crude tension immediately created a conflict of interests. It demanded that the teacher in role as Cyril Ellis's sister win over the children's sympathy. The children were thus swayed towards siding with the role of Cyril Ellis against the callous portrayal of the production manager, who deliberately became even more ratings driven.

The second-in-command status of the assistant's role became very important at this point. She became the researchers' ally, supporting the children as they tried to argue against the production manager's attitude. Their argument, of course, would pull together all they had learnt about heroes and the consequences of such acts. The drama could well reach a conclusion here. Alternatively, it could be carried on towards creating a "draft" print of how they would like to present a documentary that honoured the true nature of Ellis and his family.

Lyn Shillingford

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Issues and possibilities

Managing this unit with one teacher

Frances and Lyn were very fortunate to be able to work with two teachers in role. However, it is possible to conduct this unit with one person. Notice that the students readily accepted the switching of roles and that the roles were announced in advance on each occasion. Doing several roles alone, you may need to send some inventive emails or tape a message to be left on an answerphone and have the students listen and respond to the information. The angry production manager at the end could be conveyed in that way.