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The Role of Play and Small-Group Work in Activity-Based Instruction

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George Hillocks has outlined a theory of instruction that stresses the active role of learners in developing their reading, writing, and language abilities. Hillocks (e.g., 1995; Hillocks, McCabe, and McCampbell 1971) emphasizes the *task* as the center of students' literacy instruction. This task might be writing extended definitions, writing arguments, reading ironic literature, reading a particular author's works, or engaging in some other performance that involves a distinct set of social practices, procedures, and forms.

To help students become more adept at these tasks, Hillocks' approach engages learners in a sequence of activities through which they gradually move from guided practice to individual performance. This approach has been described by some as "instructional scaffolding" (e.g., Bruner 1983). The teacher releases control of the process by having students work with increasing independence. Central to this process is a stage during which students collaborate in small groups on task-related work. Here they either develop or practice strategies that enable them to perform the given task on their own. This small-group stage provides students the opportunity to perform the task and its requirements in a setting that encourages experimentation and provides feedback from peers who are learning the same procedures and strategies. In most cases students ultimately go on to demonstrate their individual learning in a final assessment. Teachers who use instructional scaffolds of this sort assume that through the teacher's guidance and students' practice in small groups, students will learn the procedures they have practiced and experimented with during the small-group sessions and can now apply them in new situations.

This small-group phase is the subject of our inquiry in this chapter. Hillocks and his students have described the small-group phase in many publications (e.g., Hillocks 1975, 1995; Johannessen 1992; Johannessen, Kahn, and Walter 1982; Kahn, Walter, and Johannessen 1984; Lee 1993; Smagorinsky 1991, 2002; Smagorinsky and Gevinson 1989; Smagorinsky, McCann, and Kern 1987; Smith 1984, 1991). The beneficial effects of small-group work described in these publications have been expressed primarily in cognitive terms: that is, the task-based procedures that students learn during this phase of an instructional sequence and their ability to apply them in new learning tasks. In this chapter we focus on the benefits of the playful or experimental thinking and discussion that potentially take place in this sort of task-focused, small-group work. We describe how a set of activities designed for the high school classes of English teacher David Ragsdale included opportunities for playful exploration of a task's demands that contributed to students' development in two areas. One area is students' affective engagement with school learning, for which we rely on the work of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Reed Larson (1984) that investigates what they call *optimal experience*. The other area is the critical role of play or experimentation in learning, for which we draw on Lev Vygotsky's (1987) work in human development. We next outline each of these perspectives as they relate to a Hillocksian approach to the teaching of English, then describe events from David Ragsdale's class to illustrate how these factors contribute to multiple learning opportunities—for students and teachers—related to David's instruction.

Theoretical Framework

Affective Engagement with School Learning

In *Being Adolescent: Conflict and Growth in the Teenage Years*, Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) map the affective terrain of the adolescent. Educators will surely find the results of their study discouraging: School is among the least emotionally satisfying settings in which teenagers spend their lives. Schools, the authors find, "are essentially machines for providing negative feedback" (198). More specifically, "The classroom provides largely negative feedback. It is opposite from the situation with friends where a wide range of novel, random, and crazy actions may be reinforced. . . . the average student pays little attention to the goals of the classroom, and does so without enthusiasm or pleasure" (207). The typical student in the typical classroom, they find, is attentive to the teacher's instruction only about 40 percent of the time. Many a fine lecture, well-researched and thoughtfully prepared, has thus made little impression on the minds it is intended to enlighten.

Csikszentmihalyi and Larson are concerned that schools are so oblivious to teenagers' affective states that teachers teach in ways that students find neither useful nor stimulating. Students therefore rarely get into the *flow* of academic experiences. A flow experience is one in which people become so involved in what they're doing that they lose all track of time. A flow experience is potentially avail-

able through school learning, though was rarely found among the youngsters in Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's study. Rather, students found flow experiences during sports, arts, and other activities that they undertook voluntarily. On these occasions their levels of skill and the challenges provided by the activity produced a fine tension that resulted in complete engrossment.

The typical structure of the school day contributes to the low affect experienced by students. "[F]eeling happy and feeling active go together for teenagers," argue Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984, 97). Yet activity is by far the exception in school, especially in core academic classes such as English, where teachers are prone to monopolize discussions (Marshall, Smagorinsky, and Smith 1995). Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) report that

Classic academic subjects such as . . . English showed the lowest levels of intrinsic motivation, coupled with low affect and activation . . . [C]lasses that provide more concrete goals and require more than intellectual skills, such as industrial arts, physical education, and particularly music, were associated with more favorable motivation and with positive affect. These classes involve students in some form of physical and sensory participatory activity, whereas math, English, and languages are entirely cognitive. (206)

The idea that English classes are "entirely cognitive" describes the instructional norm. One of Hillocks' contributions, and a staple of much teaching in the progressive tradition, is his emphasis on student activity, particularly in collaborative settings. This focus violates the norm identified by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) in at least two ways. First, they argue that "It is when they are working toward a goal in a structured activity that [teenagers] feel best." (99). The type of small group work advocated by Hillocks, with its clear structure and concrete goals, meets this criterion well. Second, "intrinsic motivation is relatively high in informal activities like group work and discussions. This is also when students are most happy and active. Passive activities like listening to the teacher or to other students are much less pleasant" (206–207). The sort of group work advocated by Hillocks provides just this sort of informal, goal-directed, structured activity.

Csikszentmihalyi and Larson take pains to demonstrate that such activity is distinct from social situations in which teenagers simply hang out together. They find that "*it is in productive rather than leisure activities that concentration is highest*" (104; emphasis in original). Key to the activity, then, is that it is oriented toward the goal of producing something: an interpretation, a text, and so on. Potentially, a Hillocksian small-group activity has

- an overall structure that provides clear goals, a framework that contributes to high levels of affect among students;
- opportunities for informal work that contributes to students' levels of activity, motivation, and happiness;
- a need to produce something, a *goal* that elevates students' levels of concentration

The final dimension we wish to extract from Csikszentmihalyi and Larson is strongly related to the discussion we take up next, Vygotsky's notion of the importance of play in learning. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson find that students described enjoyable occasions with friends "in terms of 'being rowdy,' being loud, crazy, and wild" (1984, 167). They continue:

In some circumstances, yielding control may have a positive long-term effect. Dipboye . . . for instance, has argued that the deindividuation of collective excitement can renew one's sense of commitment to the social whole. In fact, numerous cultures provide structured occasions of group liminality—like the carnival, which was originally a religious orgy—precisely to serve this purpose The difference is that American adolescents enter this state without the assistance of cultural structures. Ritualized rowdiness has clear limits and specified outcomes. (171)

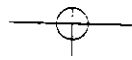
This "ritualized rowdiness" can be harnessed in the classroom in ways that do more than make students feel good. The deliberate creation of liminal structures—such as carnivalesque small groups whose tasks have clear goals and products—can also contribute to students' construction of socially acceptable boundaries. And, as we described, it can serve students' cognitive growth through the provision of opportunities for playful experimentation with ideas that extend students' potential for learning.

The Role of Play in Learning

Vygotsky (1987) argues that through focused play or experimentation, learners can extend their learning potential. In this view a person does not have a fixed intelligence but instead has a potential for learning that can be extended under the right conditions. A person has a *zone of proximal development*—that is, an individual learner's bounded "zone of . . . intellectual potential" (209) that is always being adjusted upward as one gains new knowledge and skills. The goal of a teacher, adult, or more capable peer should be to help learners do more—although not infinitely more—and solve more difficult tasks than they can independently.

In this sense a teacher's influence can be dramatic. Rather than simply presiding over students' biological development, teachers can accelerate development by providing appropriate guidance and support. Among the key factors in a learner's negotiation of this ZPD is the opportunity to play or experiment with ideas, an activity that can help push learning thresholds and create new juxtapositions of ideas. Play, then, can not only contribute to the affective dimensions of learning described by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, it can promote cognitive growth by allowing students to push and extend their cognitive boundaries.

The zone of proximal development can also be viewed more broadly as the social context in which such learning takes place. We believe that a playful ethos should permeate a learning environment so as to enable learners (including teachers) to experiment, make mistakes, try new ideas, and push the boundaries of their previous understanding. Doing so stretches learners' (and teachers-as-learners') thresholds for learning to generate the possibility for something fundamentally



new. Creating such an instructional context also opens the whole class to the possibilities afforded by new ways of thinking. These new ideas can include a teacher's experimentation with instructional ideas that in turn create playful opportunities for students to become more accomplished learners.

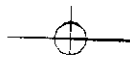
The Role of Play in Activity-Based Teaching and Learning

We would like to revisit a key facet of Hillocks approach, using Csikszentmihalyi and Larson and Vygotsky to illuminate how goal-directed, task-oriented small groups contribute to students' learning. For Hillocks, the small group often serves as an initial or intermediate stage in students' learning. In small groups students work inductively toward the development of strategies, or practice strategies first introduced by teachers, all as part of a learning process in which they ultimately perform on related tasks independently.

Hillocks has primarily described small-group work in terms of its cognitive benefits, particularly in terms of the strategies students learn for thinking about how to solve task-related problems. We would like to expand on that discussion. First, we see Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's views on affective engagement as relevant: Such small-group projects are among the most emotionally satisfying settings for students in school and, when oriented toward a clear product, contribute greatly to students' concentration on academic tasks. Given that these two factors are generally absent in students' experiences in school, small-group activities may potentially play a unique role in instructional planning. Second, we see both Csikszentmihalyi and Larson and Vygotsky emphasizing the importance of play—the rowdy, experimental transactions through which learners extend the boundaries of their own learning. Such opportunities are available in the liminal settings provided by small groups.

We next provide illustrations from the high school English class of David Ragsdale to show how the creation of a playful environment promotes the learning of students and teacher. David's account is a first-person narrative of a teaching experiment he conducted in his senior English class. David had taken several master's-level courses with Peter Smagorinsky at the University of Georgia and had been particularly impressed with activities designed by Hillocks and his students for teaching students task-related strategies for writing. David, who had experienced frustration in teaching writing in his first years in the profession, felt that these activities offered hope for engaging his students in schoolwork and improving their writing.

In terms of his classroom ethos, then, he took an experimental approach to his teaching. The activities themselves involved small-group, task-oriented procedures that had the potential to engage students in the sort of ritualized rowdiness prized by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson. Finally, David's account illustrates a reflective practitioner at work, making changes in his teaching and reflecting on them through the production of a written text. This act of formal reflection represents an additional experiment on David's part, one that cast him as a learner who, like his students, both developed and represented his thinking about what he'd learned through his instruction.



David's Teaching Narrative

Nestled in the heart of a university community, Clarke Central High School is the home of my research. Initially established in 1951 as a replacement for the original Athens High School, the present campus was home to the segregated White, area secondary school. Although a few African Americans were allowed to enroll, the school stayed "Whites only" until 1971, at which point it was renamed Clarke Central High School. Presently, the school's ethnic demographics reflect the broad diversity, not only of the community but of the state of Georgia as well. Current demographics show enrollments of 60 percent African American, 25 percent European American, 15 percent Latino. The school's minority populations have been growing steadily, while the school's European American student body has dwindled considerably in the last ten years.

Class Context

This unit has been tailored for one section of eleventh-grade Advanced College Preparatory American Literature/Composition (ACP). While the course nomenclature indicates that this class is advanced in nature, it is actually the median-level course offered in the English department, with American Literature/Composition Advanced College Preparatory/Gifted (ACP/GF) being the honors equivalent and American Literature/Composition College Preparatory (CP) as the lowest of the offered levels. Despite the "advanced" nature of the class, several of the students read below grade level, have limited access to books, and demonstrate low achievement on the traditional writing assessments imposed upon them.

Unlike the upper-level gifted classes (which have proclivities toward being almost exclusively White and upper-middle-class) and the lower-level CP class (which typically enrolls lower-income Black students), the ACP track has an interesting split. In my four years in the county, at each of the two high schools (one as a student teacher), ACP classes are nearly always 50 percent White and 50 percent Black. These students often come from extreme ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Students who drive brand new BMWs and SUVs are enrolled with students who rely on public transportation as their sole means of travel. An outsider might think that this distinction in affluence and outlook would cause problems in class, but the ACP level students typically engage in the most frank discussions of race and politics of any students in the building, regardless of academic track.

I originally piloted my study during the fall semester with twenty-six students, then refined my research during the spring term with a new class of twenty-three students. Thirteen of these students are male and ten are female. Across racial lines, the class is predominantly White, with eight Black students, two Latino students, one Asian student, and eleven White students. The students are generally very genial with each other and in most cases have known each other since middle school or earlier.

Instructional Challenge

My goals are not just to cover set material in the curriculum but to engage students in learning that they will find challenging yet enjoyable. I've often found that veteran teachers in the school tend to overcompensate for the loss of yearlong instruction due to block scheduling by loading up students with numerous projects, reports, and exams without considering student interest or motivation. I'm not saying that the curriculum should be explicitly tailored for student enjoyment, but rather it should be attentive to their learning styles with activities that foster discussion, learning, reading, and writing while studying and appreciating American literature.

Instruction

The school district produces a yearly high school program of study. In this year's curriculum American Literature/Composition is described as covering "a variety of literary genres and multicultural writers in a chronological or thematic pattern." With this framework in mind, I set out to design a pair of units that would fall under the theme, "How do we define the American Dream?" The first text we used was the Arthur Miller play *The Crucible*. The second unit centered around Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men*. During the initial pilot in the fall, I taught both units. However, for this research I've focused my study on my students' response to *Twelve Angry Men*.

While I wanted the students to appreciate the literary merit of each work and how they related to our overarching question about the American Dream, I also wanted them to be able to engage in activities surrounding the plays that would provide them with goal-oriented collaborative work. The unit on *The Crucible* culminated in a comparison/contrast essay in which students explored the differences and similarities between the 1995 film version and the play we read as a class. The *Twelve Angry Men* unit's summative assessment was a group parody of the drama.

To introduce *Twelve Angry Men*, I had students form groups of three and gave them a survey to engage their interest in the subject matter at hand, particularly the failures of the judicial system to guarantee an unbiased trial of one's own peers (Figure 6-1). Discussion was heated as students rebelled against the notion of a bunch of strangers judging them for a wrongdoing. Soon after, we began reading the play and students assumed the roles of the twelve angry jurors, with me playing one as well. I provided students with a graphic organizer to help them access and record the knowledge they gained during the reading (Figure 6-2). Students listed the characters and described their backgrounds and appearance. They also recorded both their first and final impressions of each of the twelve jurors. This organizer of character traits would prove invaluable when the students moved on to the final assessment of the unit. Additionally, given that the play is so short, we watched both the 1960 and 1997 film versions to reinforce our ideas about the jurors. Once again, students used their graphic organizers to note their impressions of the twelve jurors and how their ideas about the jurors from the play compared to those in the film.

FIGURE 4-1 Survey

Part I. Survey

Directions: Please check the answer that best suits you in response to the following questions.

Do you believe in the American Dream? Yes ___ No ___

How do you define the American Dream? _____

Have you ever watched an arrest made on TV, in the movies, or in real life?
 Yes ___ No ___

Have you ever been arrested?
 Yes ___ No ___

Is it possible that the police can arrest the wrong suspect?
 Yes ___ No ___

What rights do you have upon arrest? Check all that apply
 Court appointed attorney ___ Right to remain silent ___ Right to a trial ___
 Right to be judged by a jury of your peers ___ Right to question authority ___

Which of these rights do you value most and why? _____

Is it possible that a jury may be biased?
 Yes ___ No ___

If so, what factors could bias a jury against or for a defendant? Check all that apply.
 Ethnicity of defendant ___ Economic background ___ Juror's own background ___
 Ethnicity of juror ___ Prior criminal background ___ Personal beliefs ___

Which of these factors could most affect a juror and why? _____

Are jurors ever wrong in their verdict? Yes ___ No ___

What happens when all the jurors can't come to a consensus? _____

Do you feel the legal system does a good job? Yes ___ No ___

Explain your answer to the question above: _____

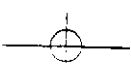
Reflective Teaching, Reflective Learning edited by McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, Smagorinsky, and Smith (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH); © 2005.



FIGURE 6-2 Twelve Angry Men Study

Twelve Angry Men Study				
CHARACTER CHART				
CHARACTER NAME	APPEARANCE/ AGE	CHARACTER'S HISTORY	YOUR FIRST IMPRESSION	WHAT DO YOU THINK NOW?

Reflective Teaching, Reflective Learning edited by McCann, Johannessen, Kahn, Smagorinsky, and Smith (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH); © 2005.



As we worked on the play, I wanted to introduce the students to a different form of writing than they had previously done for me during the semester. By this time, students had done freewrites, journal entries on assigned topics, expository writing, and so on. Now I introduced parody writing to the class. I passed out a handout detailing the tenets of a parody, based on Smagorinsky (1991) (Figure 6-3). We discussed our interpretations of this genre of writing in small groups. Because I have my students at tables, as opposed to traditional desks in rows, students worked with their self-selected peers at their respective tables. Students reviewed the handout and began work on their assignment. Their volume was louder than usual, but they seemed to move into discussion of the parody very quickly.

Their first assignment was to analyze commercials for everyday products. For example, why is it that all pickup-truck commercials show a burly guy riding over rough terrain or hauling a prodigious load of freight when most trucks seldom go off-road? Conversely, students looked at why all beer commercials have gorgeous female models in them when many beer drinkers are perceived as being corpulent, pot-bellied men. As a group, they decided on a product they wanted to make fun of and began work on a skit.

Students were given class time during three days to produce their three-to-five-minute skit, and I visited with each of the groups to touch base. One idea that stood out was doing a parody of the hair growth product Rogaine. As opposed to promoting hair growth, the group decided to create "Nogaine," a hair removal system for hippies. Their premise was that with one dose of Nogaine a "tree-hugging hippy is instantly transformed into a Wall Street businessman." Another group decided upon a parody of Gatorade. Rather than replenishing an athlete's energy, their product, "Pimpade" replenished a "player's game" thus enabling him to talk to and pick up ladies. Yet another idea was a play on the Mastercard advertising campaign, "Shirt, \$25. Jeans, \$70. Movie tickets, \$15. First date, Priceless. For everything else, there's Mastercard." My students' take on the idea was a man catching his fiancée cheating on him and his sweet revenge as "Priceless."

My closest involvement came with one group of students who wanted to parody a serious newscast. This particular group was among the least diverse, with four members, three of whom were male and one female. Because the group all had differing schedules, (it included two baseball players and a student with a full time job), accommodating group time outside class had become extremely difficult. The students had agreed to meet before school the day before the production was to be screened in front of the class, but two of the four students couldn't make it. During class group time, the kids opted to meet after school that day to film and to finalize their script. I offered my classroom and agreed to videotape their performance.

After school, the males were all present, but due to job obligations, the young woman was unable to attend. As I watched the guys rehearse and hash out their ideas, they asked me to help with the script. I watched as the students, all of whom were C+/B- performers at that point in the semester, engaged in rich discussions of what would be funny and how to film the scene. Without my prompting, they again analyzed the set routines of news anchors and brainstormed ways of twisting that dialogue into a funny and compelling scene. They also discussed the sequence

FIGURE 6-3 Parody

Parody

A parody is a literary form in which a writer makes fun of a particular author or type of writing by exaggerating its features. You may be familiar with other types of artists who use parody for humorous effects. In the film, *This Is Spinal Tap!*, a group of comedians performs an extended parody of a rock-and-roll band, while the film's director does a parody of documentary films.

The musician Weird Al Yankovic has grown successful by doing parodies of popular songs. The television show *Mad TV* usually includes parodies of commercials or famous people for a humorous effect. The following procedures will help you produce effective parodies.

Part I: Presenting a Parody

Prewriting: Small-Group

1. Advertisements for particular types of products tend to follow a formula. For instance, pick-up truck ads tend to feature tough-looking men driving along rough terrain as their vehicles absorb every bump and bounce while zooming onward. The music tends to be loud and aggressive, and often the vehicle is described as being far better than a particular competitor's.

In a group of three to five students, do one of the following:

(A) Think of a product that many different companies advertise according to the same general formula (such as the formula for pick-up truck ads). What do the ads for all of these companies have in common?

Or

(B) Think of a particular product for which all the ads tend to follow the product's own formula, such as the promotions for certain beverages. Identify the characteristics that the ads in the series have in common. Some areas to look for include the following:

- A particular sequence of events
- Types of characters (including animals)
- Type of music
- Setting
- Type of image conveyed (sensitive, humorous, tough, etc.)
- Benefits or advantages of product

2. After you have characterized the ad, work with your small group to prepare a parody of the type of ad you have studied. In order to prepare an effective parody, you should take a characteristic and exaggerate it so that it is funny. For instance, the tough-looking man in the pickup-truck ad might rip off a car fender and scratch his back with it before getting in his pickup, the truck might fall to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, and keep going, and so on. Take several characteristics of the ad you have chosen and brainstorm ways in which to exaggerate them for a humorous effect.
3. Produce a parody for the class based on your work in steps 1 and 2. You may either perform the parody live before the class or videotape it.

in which all newscasts are broadcast. Additionally, they assessed the way in which newscasters looked and talked. In doing so they were conducting the sort of genre analysis outlined in the parody assignment. I offered some suggestions on how to do on the scene reporting and was tapped to play a correspondent for Clarke Central News Network (CCNN).

At the end of the discussion, they decided to start off the skit with the two anchormen, thinking they were off camera swapping jokes and then proceed to a live broadcast of the news. After a short broadcast, the anchors would exchange heated words and one anchorman would leave the studio in anger. At this point, a belligerent cameraman would attack him. In embarrassment, the remaining anchor would cut directly to the on-the-scene reporter, who would broadcast the capture of Bigfoot and then interview a bystander.

The boys rearranged the room to resemble a studio as best they could and I offered my blazer and tie to the anchors. We rehearsed the scene and went over our tentative scripts, which were written on the spot with each group member offering feedback and ideas until we were ready to film. All the while, the mood was light and humorous and at times rowdy. Yet, the boys were goal oriented and directed toward producing a quality product. I watched, with great interest, as the guys reviewed their idea against their assignment handout, which outlined their task, and were satisfied they were producing a parody.

The filming went very well after some rough starts, including the angry anchorman being pelted in the head with a rubber ball by the belligerent cameraman and falling into a storage locker, unrehearsed and downright scary because the student was dizzy for about five minutes. During my bit as CCNN correspondent Rick Sanders, we incorporated a school resource officer to help apprehend the runaway Bigfoot. I then interviewed the officer and still-dazed anchorman, now a typical high school student, on his thoughts about the capture. After filming, we reviewed the tape and were amazed at how well the product lived up to expectations and just how funny it really was.

Since they had three class days to produce their three-to-five-minute skit, some groups opted to tape-record their parodies at home or on campus, which seemed to be vastly more successful, and some groups performed their parodies live. After viewing the skits, many of which the class found incredibly funny, we began to analyze what we'd seen. Because the groups were self-selected, some of the groups of friends ended up doing more socializing than skit producing, and it reflected in their performance. Group members ranked each other on the following categories: accomplishment of task, individual enthusiasm, commitment to product, contributions, attendance, and intangibles. Despite being in a group of friends, the students evaluated each other fairly and recorded their shortcomings frankly and honestly. Groups also assessed the performance of their peers, evaluating the humor of the skit, how well it related to the product it was a parody of, and overall production values.

As we concluded our study of the play and film versions of *Twelve Angry Men*, groups went over their list of characters, impressions, and the differences between the film and play. At this point I had students stay in their parody groups, as they had almost universally gelled. Our task now was for each student to produce a parody of the very

serious and dark play. I provided the students with a handout (based on Smagorinsky 1991) that built on the prior work they'd completed as a group (Figure 6-4).

Because the second task mirrored the first, the groups set to work relatively quickly, evaluating what could be made funny about the play. I circulated among the groups, spending about ten minutes with each, to help brainstorm and to facilitate discussion. While in groups, the students often read and reread the play to each other, finding key dramatic scenes in which they felt they could inject humor. Ideas that came up were twelve irate dogs, with each character represented by a distinct breed of dog portraying the individual's personality, that is, angry juror number 3 was a rottweiler and the stable and thoughtful number 8 was a sheepdog. Other ideas were twelve angry cheerleaders, as well as twelve "sassy" kindergartners.

It was enjoyable to see the banter among the students in deciding what was funny and what wasn't. At various points, students got a bit wild but were able to censor each other and to keep their ideas focused. Again, I gave students class time during the course of a week to work on their drafts and to offer peer counseling. Likewise, I continued to monitor and facilitate discussion and peer interaction. The students shared their rough draft of the parody during a peer read-around and editing session.

The peer read-around was very interesting to witness. While not every student had a rough draft to hand in, all the students seemed universally interested in the work of their peers. The reading session and subsequent conference elicited a great deal of laughter; however, not all the students were comfortable with the feedback they'd received from their peers and sought my advice. I conferred with a number of them and attempted to allay their misgivings. Because I wanted them to feel ownership of the parodies, I tried to keep my ideas to a minimum and tease out what problems and insecurities the students had about their own work.

Two days after the editing session, the students completed their final drafts and handed them in to me for assessment. Likewise, they brought a copy for their peers to reread. At this time I combined groups, with the six small groups merged into three larger groups to represent the "twelve angry people" that the students would portray in the next step of our assignment. Each student in the new larger groups read the work of his or her groupmates, and they then voted upon which was the funniest parody to produce for the class, either live or via video.

Although the new groupings produced interesting dynamics—students with seemingly nothing in common in groups of seven or eight, with a tangible goal in front of them and a test grade awaiting their scripts and performances—they got to work. Additionally, since some groups had little prior knowledge of each other, my role as a facilitator was more important, because I had to spend time trying to tease out students' ideas and keep them talking with each other.

Since we ran long during the performances of the skits, many of the students weren't able to perform during class time. Rather than leaving at the sound of the bell, almost to a single student, they all asked to be allowed to see the final performances and to carry out their own. While it wasn't fun signing twenty late passes, I was overwhelmed by the group's enthusiasm and by the humorous skits based on a terribly grave play.

FIGURE 6-4 Part II: Writing a Parody

Part II: Writing a Parody

Prewriting: Small-Group

- Next you will produce a written parody. In a small group of three to five students, review the play we've just covered, *Twelve Angry Men*. Look in particular for common features, including the following:
 - Point of view
 - Sentence structure
 - Diction
 - Types of details
 - Phrasing and figures of speech/dialect
 - Attitudes
 - Style
- Work with your small group to identify aspects of the writer's characteristics that you can exaggerate for a parody, and brainstorm for ways in which to exaggerate them.
- With your group, think of humorous topics for your parody. As you know, Rose's play is steeped in conflict and tension. You might rewrite the play in the style of children on a playground. Or you could retell one of the conflicts in the style of *The National Enquirer*. The possibilities for incongruous match-ups such as these are endless.

Producing a Draft

Write a parody based on the ideas you generated with the help of your small group.

Revision: Small-Group

After you have written a draft of your parody, get back in your small group to share your writing. Proofread the parodies of your group members, pointing out passages that you feel are strong and suggesting ways to improve the writing, particularly with regard to the writer's exaggeration of the author's or narrator's particular characteristics. Make comments in the margins of the draft wherever you feel they would be helpful, and write a summary evaluation at the end of each draft you read. Feel free to discuss the parody with the writer and other members of the group.

Revision: Individual

Using the comments of your group members, produce a new draft of your parody. This will be handed in to me for assessment.

Presentation: Group

You will also provide a copy of your final draft for your group members to read. As with our last parody, you and your group will act out a rendition of your parody for the class.

Reflection

In reflecting on the two units, I noted that the students had engaged with a pair of traditional texts, written over forty years ago, in unorthodox units. Rather than just taking a multiple-choice Scantron test as many had been accustomed to doing, they actually had to create their own meaning for the texts. Through discussion in both large and small groups, students identified themes, conflicts, character motivation, and other traditional academic considerations in ways that had been unfamiliar to them—that is—in collaborative small groups. Rather than trying to stifle their group talk, I encouraged them to find meaning in the playful banter and jokes they made in discussion.

I also learned that I don't always have to be teacher-centered to make sure kids achieve my goals for the unit. While I observed their conversations and discussions, they raised points that I hadn't anticipated and that shed light on obscure aspects of the texts. It is incredibly hard for kids to stay focused on any task for ninety minutes. Likewise, lecture-driven instruction is effective at best for about fifteen minutes. But when given the leeway to find meaning through playful experimentation with serious texts, the students pushed the boundaries of what they thought they knew and how they thought they could learn the information. As one student told me during the parodies, "We do some crazy stuff in this class." Crazy? I don't know about that, but we certainly got some rich dialogue and products as a result of the ritualized rowdiness of their small group activities.

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