Reader's Theater: Engaging Students in Classroom Discussion

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Abstract:

***Objectives**:*

At the end of this teaching strategy, learners will be able to identify two healthy and two unhealthy lifestyle behaviors portrayed by Jim in the reader's theater (RT) script; discuss at least one behavior change strategy Jim could use to change an identified unhealthy behavior; analyze their feelings related to making healthy lifestyle choices; and engage in meaningful conversations about health behavior change with their peers.

***Target Audience**:* Middle- and High-school students.

Introduction

Reader's Theater (RT) is a scripted, formalized story-telling experience that began in the late 1940s as an option to offer greater accessibility to live theater for people.[1] In the 1960s, RT became popular in college theater departments and, eventually, spread to secondary English education. Upon graduation, these secondary English graduates with a teaching certificate brought RT scripts into high school English classes. From there, RT recently has been used to assess reading literacy among students in elementary and middle schools.

RT involves the oral presentation of a script by two or more readers about a particular topic.[2] For example, the script in this article, "Death by Chocolate," (Figure 1, which was written by the authors), deals with healthy lifestyle behavior choices. Many styles of RT exist, but nearly all share the following features:

- Narration serves as the framework of dramatic presentation.
- No sets.
- No full costumes. If used at all, costumes are neutral and uniform.
- No full memorization. Scripts are used openly in performance.

RT provides the opportunity for viewers to look into, and thoughtfully contemplate a story. The goal of RT is to stimulate thinking about the stories so that the cast and audience can engage in meaningful discussion.[2] The RT script is read aloud by students in the cast, i.e., the readers, to the classroom, i.e., the audience. The use of RT requires no acting ability on the part of the students in the cast. The script is merely read by student readers who are instructed not to look at each other during the reading. This oral dramatization weaves and connects the voices, thus creating an affective learning environment. Much like radio drama of old, audience members imagine the scenes taking place as the reader describes them. This process fosters students' ability to listen and empathize.[3]

Most scripts range from 10 to 20 minutes in length. RT may heighten the connection of learners to the characters as well as families and community situations mentioned in the script. RT also provides an opportunity for reflection and group discussion, which is important for those

students who are not likely to volunteer to participate in other classroom activities, such as role playing. Most students view RT as non-threatening.

RT has many uses and outcomes. Not only is RT a low cost teaching strategy, it has been found effective in several different academic disciplines to improve language arts. For example, teachers in English, social studies, medical and nursing schools have used RT effectively in the classroom.[3] Performing stories based on another culture is a great way for students to become interested in and familiar with that culture. Further, RT typically fosters a love of reading among students and provides a fun way to teach facts, history, social issues, ethics and/or health.

Objectives of Reader's Theater Activity

At the end of this teaching strategy, the learner will be able to:

1. identify two healthy and two unhealthy lifestyle behaviors.
2. discuss at least one behavior change strategy Jim could use to change an identified unhealthy behaviors.
3. analyze their feelings related to making healthy lifestyle choices.
4. engage in meaningful conversations with their peers about lifestyle behavior change.

Materials and Resources

- A copy of the RT script for each student reader. Although this project involves students in a health class, RT can be used in many subject areas. There are hundreds of RT scripts available for free on the internet. Two such sites are:
  http://readerstheatrelp.blogspot.com/2008/03/brief-history-of-readers-theatre.html
  http://www.scriptsforschools.com.
- 3 ringed binders for each student reader to use during the reading.
- A copy of the exercise and evaluation rubric from Table 2 for each student.

Target Audience

RT can be used at any level of education, but this article is focused on using scripts among students in a middle- or high-school health class.

Procedure

The teacher should make a copy of the script (Figure 1) for each character in the story and place this copy in the character's individual binder. To aid students reading their particular character, the teacher should highlight each character's speaking lines in his/her individual script. Next, the instructor should obtain student volunteers from the class to immediately read the script in front of the class. Or, the teacher may choose to give the scripts to student volunteers 1-2 days ahead of the reading date so they have time to review their parts prior to the class. The authors have successfully used both techniques. Also, if planning ahead, it is possible to ask student readers to wear the same colors on the day of the reading to allow them to blend together during the presentation. For the health script in this teaching strategy, 5 chairs (5 student readers/characters) and 1 high stool (1 student narrator) will be needed. The instructor should

place chairs for each character in a semi-circle in front of the classroom. The high stool should be placed in the middle of the semi-circle.

After the scripts have been highlighted and presented to the readers and chairs/stool arranged, student volunteers read the scripts uninterrupted to the audience of students. After the script has been read, discussion questions are introduced (See Table 1 for questions and a key to facilitate discussion). Discussion questions are a part of most scripts. These questions may be used by the teacher or s/he may pose his/her own questions to generate students' thinking about issues and messages embedded in the script. From experience, it was noted that most students are eager to discuss some issue from the script and the conversation flows without prompting. A typical RT activity will last between 40 to 60 minutes, including reading and discussion time. This RT script can be used as part of a teaching module on behavior change. Before using the script in the classroom, the class should learn about healthy versus unhealthy lifestyle choices, health risks and behavior change methods, all of which are typically found in the students' health text. Then, the RT script can be read to encourage students to internalize their learning material and consider personal behavior changes.

Assessment Techniques

To assess students' application of behavior change knowledge, the exercise and evaluation rubric in Table 2 should be used. Students may be given time to work on their scripts in a future class(es) or this requirement may be an out-of-class assignment. The authors recommend 2 additional class periods for students to complete this assignment. Students should be given a copy of the grading rubric when given the original assignment to write a script.

References

1. Lohmann, George. (2008). *Readers' Theater for Literacy and Presentation*. Retrieved on February 5, 2010 from: http://readerstheatrelp.blogspot.com/2008/03/brief-history-of-readers-theatre.html.
2. Savitt, T. (Ed.). *Medical readers' theater, a guide and scripts.* Iowa City, University of Iowa Press; 2002.
3. Pardue, K. Introducing readers' theatre! A strategy to foster aesthetic knowing in Nursing. *Nurse Educator. 2004;*29 :58 -62.

Table 1: "Death by Chocolate" Discussion Questions and Key

Discussion Question	**Key**
What are Jim's unhealthy lifestyle behaviors? What are Jim's healthy lifestyle choices?	**Unhealthy lifestyle choices include**: High calorie, high fat diet Sedentary lifestyle High Stress levels Smoking cigarettes Working long hours Lack of sleep **Healthy Lifestyle Choices:** Talks to mother Talks with friends Talks with health education teacher Willing to participate in health risk assessment screening Has recommended weight for height
What do you think of Jim's behavior after his visit with the health educator? If you had been Jim, what would you have done?	Jim appears to be in denial. He was told he needed to change many behaviors. Thinking about changing several behaviors at once may be overwhelming. Jim's response is to deny he has any problems and orders high-fat, high-calorie foods. Jim should seriously think about changing his lifestyle behaviors. He could start by making small changes like modifying his diet for lunch – maybe order fruit instead of French fries with his burger.
What role does the dream play in Jim's health behaviors?	The conscious interpretation Jim made about his dream was that someone wanted to kill him. He focused his energies on trying to figure out who might want to kill him. Actually, the dream is Jim's subconscious telling him he needs to make lifestyle behavior changes to improve his health.
How do individuals make their lifestyle choices? How do they change lifestyle behaviors?	Most people make a conscious decision to be healthy so they can enjoy life and achieve high level wellness. Healthy decisions have to be made every day and, over time, become habit which helps the individual continue to make healthy choices. Experts recommend making a behavior change plan with short and long term objectives. Also, it helps to have a buddy going through the same process with you.
What decision do you think Jim will make and why?	**In favor of change:** Jim will decide to change his health behaviors because he realizes what his dream means and he knows his father died at a young age. Jim will not want to follow in his father's footsteps. **Against change:** Jim is too young to connect his current behavior with consequences in some far off future. He will continue to do what his peers do to keep their approval.

Table 2: Exercise Directions and Assessment Rubric for Student Reader's Theater Scripts
Exercise Directions: Divide students into groups of 5. Ask members in each group to decide on an unhealthy behavior they would like an imaginary friend to change. Then, have them write their own reader's theater script about a discussion they might have with their friend trying to persuade that friend to change his/her unhealthy behavior.
Assessment Rubric:

Criteria	3 Points	2 Points	0 Points
Student participates in group discussion (If done as an in-class assignment, base his/her grade on teacher observation. If this assignment is completed out of class, base the grade on the group report of each member's contributions to the script).	Responses show clear thinking and provide new information.	Responses add to what others have contributed.	Minimal input.
RT script provides a compelling, health enhancing message for behavior change.	Creative health message included in script.	Health message hard to understand.	No health message provided.
In the RT script, the reason for the needed behavior change for script character(s) is clearly presented	Reason for change identified in script.	Reason for change implied but not discussed.	No reasons for change discussed.
Content of RT script provides alternate behavior change methods that can be used.	At least 3 ways characters could change their behavior are discussed.	Two alternatives for behavior change.	One or no way(s) to change behavior.
RT script provides appropriate methods for character(s) to achieve behavior change.	Behavior change methods are appropriate to the character's situation and age.	Behavior change methods are generic and may not work for script character.	Behavior change methods suggested are not appropriate for accomplishing desired change.
Spelling, grammar and punctuation are correct.	No errors found.	A few errors found.	Many errors found.

Figure 1: Reader's Theater Script "Death by Chocolate"

Setting: Modern, big city suburbia in the home of Jim and Janet Jones. Jim is 16 years old. He is a sophomore in high school. He used to play sports, but after being cut from the basketball team his freshman year, he eats a high calorie, high fat diet and rarely exercises.

Cast:
Narrator
Jim Jones
Jim's Mom
Mr. Atlas: health educator
Alex – good friend
Waitress

Narrator (excited): Jim Jones awakes from a very scary nightmare.

Jim (very agitated): Mom! Mom!! Wake UP! Someone is going to murder me. I just had a terrible dream and I got murdered.

Mom (out of breath from hurrying to her son's room): I'm sure it was just a dream. Are you all right now?

Jim: I'm okay but I'm still a little nervous. I think I'll go have a cigarette to help calm me down.

Mom (with disgust): How can you want a cigarette in the middle of the night? You shouldn't be smoking anyway. It's bad for your health. Just go back to sleep!

Narrator: Jim gets out of bed and goes into the living room to have a cigarette. He decides to have a snack too – some potato chips, dip and a coke since he's already up. After finishing his snack and smoking another cigarette, Jim feels calm enough to go back to bed. The next morning:

Mom: Jim, it's time to get up. It's already 7:30 AM and you will be late for school if you don't get moving. I've made a good healthy breakfast for you – oatmeal and fruit.

Jim: Alright, I'm coming. Don't get so excited – I can like get myself to school. I just never seem to like get enough sleep and it doesn't help having a nightmare wake me up in the middle of the night. What if someone like really is trying to murder me? Would anyone be that stupid? You're kidding me about the oatmeal, right?

Narrator: Jim's mom tries to comfort Jim and heads out for work. Jim downs a coke and dashes off to school.

Alex: Hey, Jim. You feel okay? You look nasty.

Jim: Well, you don't look that great to me either. I didn't get much sleep last night. I had a crazy dream like someone was trying to kill me.

Alex: Really? Who offed you? What'd they use?

Jim: I don't really remember the details at this point. I'm not really like nervous about it, but what if someone really is trying to kill me?

Alex: Don't be stupid; dreams aren't something to worry about. They don't come true – look at us, we aren't rich and famous with lots of sexy women hanging around us! I wouldn't worry about dying young if I was you.

Narrator: Despite Alex's advice, Jim keeps thinking about his dream. He just can't shake the thought that someone may be planning to murder him. He takes a nap after school until his Mom comes home from work and then he goes out with his friends. They hang out, eat pretzels and drink sodas, smoke cigarettes and listen to music. When Jim returns home, he goes to bed still wondering about why someone would want to kill him. The next day at school, Jim is scheduled to complete a health risk assessment assignment for his health class.

Mr. Woods: Good morning? I hope you all had a good night's sleep and a nutritious breakfast before coming to school.

Narrator: General snickering all around the classroom.

Mr. Woods: This morning, each of you will be completing a health risk assessment. As we've already discussed in class, HRAs are used to gather, analyze, and compare an individual's characteristics prognostic of health with those of a standard age group, thereby predicting the likelihood that a person may prematurely experience a health problem associated with higher than average death and disease rates. Completing the assessment will help you identify areas of concern about your health habits. Such things as the following are asked:"Do you eat a nutritious diet or a high fat diet?" "Do you get enough exercise each day?" "Are there health risks that you have as a result of your family health history?" "Do you wear a seatbelt?"

Narrator: While Mr. Woods is talking, Jim is thinking about his father. His father was only 50 when he died of a heart attack on Christmas Eve. Jim was only 12 years old. Jim's father had been a high powered executive who smoked, didn't exercise, and drank too much. Jim really misses his father.

Mr. Woods: After you have completed the assessment, you will pick one area where you can improve your health. Perhaps you drink too much pop or eat a lot of junk food.

Narrator: In one section of the health assessment, sleep habits were questioned. This reminds Jim of his dream. Jim raises his hand.

Jim: Mr. Woods, do you believe in dreams?

Mr. Woods: What do you mean?

Jim: Well, I had this dream that I was going to be murdered. It was so real, man, that I think it might have been like trying to tell me something. You know, like telling the future or something.

Mr. Woods: (smiling) I don't think your dream is anything to worry about. Had you watched TV with violence or a murder plot that night?

Jim: Of course I did! Like I always watch CSI on Mondays.

Mr. Woods: OK, let's get back to the health risk assessment for now. If you want to talk further, Jim, see me after class. To start analyzing our assessments, let's look at nutrition. Would anyone like to share what they've eaten in the last 24 hours?

Narrator: Jim, feeling better about his dream, volunteers to share his recent dietary intake.

Jim (thinking): Let's see…I had a coke for breakfast. I snagged a couple of Slim Jims for lunch. I went out to the local diner with my mom for dinner. I ordered some chicken fried steak, potatoes and gravy and some greens. As I was going home, we stopped at the local carry out and got some of my favorite ice cream. It's called "Death by Chocolate." It's awesome: what a way to go (smiling)! When I got home, I watched the basketball game. I ate a huge bowl of ice cream before I went to bed. Oh, and on my way home from school, I picked up a bag of cheese doodles and a Mountain Dew,® which I had before heading out to dinner.

Mr. Woods: It seems you don't eat a lot of fruits and vegetables in your diet. You should have 3-4 servings of fruit and 5 servings of vegetables every day.

Jim (slightly annoyed): Hey, like I had mashed potatoes and greens – they're vegetables.

Narrator: Jim completes his health risk assessment. He is surprised by the results. He needs to improve his diet, quit smoking and start exercising more. According to the assessment, he has multiple risk factors for heart disease.

Mr. Woods: For our next class, I would like for each of you to pick one heath habit to improve. In class, we will discuss how to write a contract for change. Then, it will be up to each of you to try to change that behavior.

Narrator: On his way home from school, Jim stops at Taco Olay® to get a chicken burrito. Jim is glad to see his favorite waitress is serving him today.

Waitress: The usual, Jim?

Jim: Yeah, why not. In my health class today I learned I have a terrible diet and I need to eat better. But, what the heck – I'm young and healthy. Did I tell you about my dream?

Waitress: What dream?

Jim: I had this dream that someone was going to murder me. Do you like think dreams can tell the future?

Waitress: I don't know. Maybe. I've had that dream where you feel like you're falling but you wake up before you hit the ground? You know what they say about that dream? If you hit the ground, you will die. Was your dream like that?

Jim: No. It wasn't like that. I better order. I'm in a hurry to get home and watch the basketball game on TV.

Narrator: Jim finishes his large coke, and super sized burrito. Three days later…

Mom: You're not eating your dinner tonight. Is something wrong? I spent a lot of time fixing those stuffed pork chops, scalloped corn and homemade rolls.

Jim: Mom, stop ragging on me and get off my back. I haven't felt right since I had that dream. Like, I keep looking around thinking someone might be following me. And, now I've had to deal with Mr. Woods at school making me feel guilty about my diet.

Mom: Really? What does he want you to change?

Jim: Like forget about it. It's no big deal, just another hassle.

Mom: You've got to get over that dream. Now eat your supper and you will feel better.

Narrator: That night Jim curls up on the couch to watch a basketball game. He is eating a large bowl of "Death by Chocolate" ice cream. Later that night, Jim starts to experience chest pain. He calls out to his Mom.

Jim (loudly): Hey, Mom. Are you awake? I'm not feeling so good.

Mom (sleepily): Just a minute. What's the matter? Can it wait until morning?

Jim: Yeah, maybe. I just have this like funny feeling in my chest. I don't know what's going on. Just like forget it and go back to bed.

Mom: (now worried): I think we should go to the emergency room to get you checked out.

Narrator: Jim, thinking about his father, decides that his mom could be right.

Jim: Okay, okay, like I'll go. Just stop nagging me!

Narrator: His mom drives Jim to the emergency room. During the trip to the hospital, he starts to sweat. Before the medical staff can get him hooked up to the equipment, Jim says, "I'm

having trouble breathing," and passes out. Jim stops breathing and his heart stops. The medical staff is not able to save him despite all their efforts. Even though he is dead, Jim can see his mom crying.

Just then, Jim wakes up on the couch. He had fallen asleep while watching the game. Jim says to himself…

Jim: What a dream! I died of a heart attack, just like my father! Maybe I am slowly "murdering" myself by my crummy health habits. I guess I like need to make a decision. Either I try to live a healthy lifestyle or I forget about it and stop worrying about it. Hmm…..